

# **ABORTION IRELAND**

a report by Sinn Fein's Department of Women's Affairs.

October 1981

ABORTION

IRELAND

Report of the Joint Committee on the Drafting of the Constitution of the State

1937

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AN ESTIMATED 10,000 Irish women will have had abortions during 1981. It is precise because thousands of Irish women do travel to Britain every year that a recent E.E.C. report called for national legislation to remove the need for such lonely and desperate journeys. It is time this Movement faced up to this issue.

Sinn Fein's policy document 'Women in the New Ireland' states: "*There is a need to face up to the problem of abortion no matter what individual opinions are. We do not judge women who have had abortions but recognise that it is an indictment of society that so many women should feel the need to avail of abortion. We are opposed to the attitudes and pressures in society that impel women to have abortions. We are totally opposed to abortion.*"

The Sinn Fein ard fheis of November 1980 directed the Department of Women's Affairs to investigate the alternatives to abortion.

In this brief report we have tried to present as many facts as possible on the circumstances behind abortion as an option for women and those who campaign against abortion.

## SECTION ONE: THE FACTS

### (a) The law on abortion

Act of 1861 covering the twenty-six counties

Acts of 1861 and 1945 covering the six counties

Within the twenty-six counties exceptions are made if a woman's life is in danger. Other limited circumstances are serious medical/psychiatric problems, sub-normal mind, measles risk of handicap etc. Although this is available under the National Health Service delays are prohibitive and most women go to private clinics in England.

Both in the six and twenty-six counties, anyone who aids a woman to have an abortion is also liable to life imprisonment. A person who buys instruments or medicines for the intention of aiding an abortion is liable to two to five years in prison.

### (b) Abortion statistics in the twenty-six counties.

#### Area

75% from  
23% outside Dublin  
2% not stated

#### Occupation

30% Clerical  
15% Housewives  
12% Professionals  
15% Manual  
4% Unemployed  
10% Nurses  
5% Sales

#### Marital Status

75% Single  
14% Married  
9% Separated  
1% Divorced  
1% Widowed

#### Age

Under 17 5%  
18-21 27%  
22-27 31%  
28-34 13%  
35-39 10%  
over 39 3%  
not stated 11%

<b>Family</b>	
Children	32%
No children	61%
Did not state	7%

<b>Previous abortions</b>	
	3%

<b>Contraception</b>	
No-previous use	37%
Had used pill	26%
Pill & condom	3%
I.U.D.	1%
Cap	2%
Condom	13%
Withdrawal	3%
Natural	10%
Did not state	2%

<b>Reasons for abortions</b>	
Parents	24%
Too young	13%
Too old	2%
Finance	17%
Other children	2%
Health of foetus	1%
Cannot cope	14%
No relationship with father	11%
Don't want children	11%
Own health	4%

### (c) Family planning law -- twenty-six counties

Under the Health (Family Planning) Act, 1979, all contraceptives (medical and non-medical) must be prescribed by a doctor and purchased from a registered pharmacist. Medical Card holders cannot obtain contraceptives using their cards.

Under a 'conscience clause' doctors are not obliged to prescribe contraceptives nor are pharmacists obliged to stock them.

Family planning clinics operate under licence from the Minister for Health and again a doctor must prescribe and a pharmacist supply all contraceptives.

Abortifacients are banned.

The importation of contraceptives is controlled by licence from the Minister for Health.

The Minister may, out of public money, provide grants for research into natural family planning methods.

### Availability of contraceptives -- twenty-six counties

A minority of pharmacists stock contraceptives and many doctors refuse to prescribe them. In rural areas thousands of women have to travel long distances to obtain supplies when their local doctor/pharmacist refuses to prescribe/supply them. The expense involved would entail a visit to the doctor, the items on prescription, the prescription fee and travel costs.

There are only 9 family planning clinics throughout the twenty-six counties -- 6 in Dublin, 1 in Cork, 1 in Limerick and 1 in Galway. The clinics are opposed to the new Health Act and have continued to sell non-medical contraceptives over the counter thus cutting out the time and expense of a visit to the doctor and the cost of a prescription.

However, those who do need medical advice have to pay dearly for it even at the clinics which are privately run and receive no state aid.

### (a) State provisions for single mother and child -- twenty-six counties

The Social Welfare Allowance is £34.80 for a mother with one child. The Children's Allowance is £6 per month.

Fuel Vouchers are provided if the mother is not living in a flat and these amount to £60 approximately for the six months between October and April.

Shoe vouchers -- approximately 17p each -- are also provided, one for the mother and one for the child per month.

Milk is provided by the local Health Board -- five packets of baby food for the first six months and one pint of milk per day after that until the child is four years old. If the mother is breastfeeding she receives one pint per day for herself and one for the child.

Depending on the mood of the local Social Welfare Officer a cot/single bed, sheets and blankets may be provided.

It can take a single mother many months to find out what she is entitled to as she is sent back and forth between the Social Welfare Office and the Health Board who part with information very reluctantly.

**(f) Family planning law – six counties**

The NHS Reorganisation Act came into effect on 1 April 1974. Clause 4 transfers powers for family planning provision from the local authorities to the Secretary of State for Social Services and provides for a free family planning service within the National Health Service. From 1 April 1974, the NHS (Family Planning) Act 1967 (empowering local authorities to provide contraception services) and the NHS (Family Planning) Amendment Act 1972 (empowering local authorities to provide a free vasectomy service) were repealed.

The age of sexual consent is 17 in the six counties, one year higher than in Britain. The Offences Against the Person Act 1861, and the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, are the basis of the North's laws on sex and the latter fixes penalties of a maximum of two years' imprisonment for a man who has had sexual intercourse with a girl between 14 and 17 and life for sex with a girl under 14. There is no defence of apparent consent or misplaced belief as in English law.

The age of majority is 18 and medical age of consent is 16, however family planning clinics will deal with anyone 16 and over, regardless of marital status or sex. The situation regarding under-16s is the same as that applying in England. Doctors must use their clinical judgement about giving treatment but should not breach a patient's confidence. However it is unlikely that a girl under 16 would be treated without her parents' consent.

**(g) Abortion statistics – six counties**

<b>Marital Status</b>			<b>Contraceptive method normally used</b>	
Single	67.2%		Sheath	17.9%
Married	22.0%		Pill	20.3%
Widowed	1.3%		Coil	0.6%
Divorced	2.1%		Safe Period	0.5%
Separated	7.4%		Withdrawal	0.3%
<b>Social Classes</b>			Chemical	0.4%
Unemployed	1.7%		Cap	0.9%
Pupil/Student	10.0%		None	55.1%
Housewife	15.9%		Combination	0.9%
Social Class 1	4.2%		None – first	
“ “ 2	12.2%		occasion of	
“ “ 3	35.9%		intercourse	2.1%
“ “ 3 Manual	6.7%		Not Known	1.0%
“ “ 4	11.1%			
“ “ 5	1.6%			
Not Known	0.7%			
<b>Age</b>			<b>Stage of pregnancy at interview</b>	
Less than 16	2.0%		10 weeks and under	69.1%
16–19	22.0%		11 – 14 weeks	23.9%
20–24	35.0%		15 – 18 weeks	5.2%
25–29	13.7%		19 – 22 weeks	1.8%
30–34	11.0%			
35–39	8.9%			
40–44	6.0%			
45	0.2%			
Not Known	1.2%			

## SECTION TWO: ORGANISATIONS PRO/ANTI-ABORTION

### (a) Women's Right to Choose Group

Their demands are:

- The destigmatisation of illegitimacy in Irish family law.
- The provision of better housing and welfare conditions for one parent families and particularly for single mothers and their children.
- The decriminalisation of abortion and the introduction of free, legal and safe conditions for this medical procedure in Ireland.

They have a group only in Dublin at present but they intend setting up branches nationwide.

They see abortion as the fourth viable option to a pregnant woman after the choices of keeping the child, fostering it or having it adopted.

Their commitment is to ensure that women's lives are controlled by women themselves. They believe that every child should be a wanted child and not a burden or a point of resentment.

One of their main arguments is that at the moment it is mostly men who are the priests, lawyers, doctors and politicians who proclaim on the rights and wrongs of what women should do about their bodies, their sexuality and their capacity to reproduce. They see this as an attack on male power rather than an attack on men.

### (b) Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC)

They are a large organisation with branches throughout the country. They are backed by the Catholic church and money is no problem.

They are originally an English organisation and they led the anti-abortion campaign there. Many of their leading members campaigned for years in Ireland against contraceptives being made available here. They believe abortion to be wrong on both moral and religious grounds and they include people from all walks of life.

Unfortunately, they attract a great many reactionary types who would be extremely conservative on most social issues. Our research failed to find any of them involved with organisations who aid pregnant women nor have they protested at the limitations of the Health Act whereby Medical Card holders — those least well off — have to pay for contraceptives.

### (c) Irish Pregnancy Counselling Centre (IPCC)

Set up by the Women's Right to Choose Group. They describe themselves as a non-budget organisation who employ qualified counsellors to provide information on all the choices available to a pregnant woman.

They see approximately 47 women per week, 35 of whom opt for abortion. Those who decide to continue with their pregnancy are referred to CHERISH or ALLY — organisations who care for single mothers.

They do not make arrangements for abortions but they will provide the address of a good clinic in England and details of the costs involved.

At present they have an office only in Dublin. Two members of the Women's Department attended a day school there on abortion. Also in attendance were two women from CHERISH and two from SPUC.

The counsellors there explained how they try to find out what a pregnant woman really wants to do rather than what she feels circumstances are forcing her to do. If the woman decides on abortion the various techniques of the operation are described to her plus the travel and cost involved.

Most of the family planning clinics refer women considering abortion to IPCC.

**Note:** Many members of IPCC see abortion as an easy option rather than a last resort or at least this is how it seemed to the representatives from the Women's Department attending the day school. It was also noted that the creche provided was very badly organised.

## **SECTION THREE: ORGANISATIONS WHO CARE FOR SINGLE MOTHERS**

### **(a) Cherish**

Is a small organisation run by single parents for single parents. They have a motivation which is unique in a social work agency.

They employ two qualified social workers, 75% of whose salary is paid by the government. However, this amounts to only 18% of their total annual budget. They themselves pay two office workers. In fact, they say that most of their time is given to fund raising and they have not time to campaign for better conditions.

The services they provide include the provision of basic essentials such as cots, prams, clothes, furniture, cooking facilities, advice on benefits available from Social Welfare and Health Boards.

Accommodation is a great problem and accounts for one in seven enquiries to Cherish. In answering this problem, Cherish call for government controlled rents and security of tenure and also urge the government to introduce a comprehensive housing policy, standardising procedures for all applicants, including single parents in all local authorities.

They express concern about the number of women who have abortions in England and they note a significant increase in the number of people contacting them with abortion queries.

Cherish see about 300 new women every year and about 500 whom they have seen before. They answer approximately two to three thousand telephone enquiries per year.

### **(b) Cura**

This organisation is a telephone referral service. After listening to the caller Cura advises and gives counselling. They handle approximately 4000 calls per annum.

There are eight referral centres throughout the country. These are located in: Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Waterford, Kilkenny, Sligo, Belfast and Derry.

Cura is pro-life and totally anti-abortion. They are financed by the Catholic church. Cura refers callers to organisations like Cherish, Ally, adoption agencies etc...

## **IN CONCLUSION**

The reasoning behind this report is to show that abortion is an issue in Ireland and will not end with a solitary sentence in a policy document.

Any one of these statistics could be your wife, your sister or your daughter.

We believe that those who are "totally opposed" to abortion and those who see it as a tragedy and an indictment against society must work to improve conditions for and attitudes towards pregnant women.

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