

Ireland's abortion problem: new report lays bare the horrifying truth

A new in-depth Amnesty International study reveals at least 4,000 women are forced to leave Ireland for abortions each year, with many resorting to dangerous DIY options. Radhika Sanghani reports



Anger and shame: Irish women protest following the death of Savita Halappanavar Photo: AFP/Getty Images

By Radhika Sanghani

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Every day, around 10 Irish women travel to England for an abortion. Their reasons for terminating their pregnancies all vary – but their reason for travelling does not.

All of them are unable to have legal abortions in the Republic of Ireland – one of the few European countries that bans women from terminating pregnancies even in cases of rape, severe or fatal foetal impairment or a risk to their health – which is their human right under international law.

The only time a woman can legally have an abortion in Ireland is if her life is at risk.

This in itself is a new law that was introduced in 2013 after the tragic death of Savita Halappanavar.

The 31-year-old dentist was miscarrying, and was left in hospital for days as doctors decided to “wait and see what would happen naturally.” When a spontaneous miscarriage hadn’t occurred, instead of inducing labour, doctors waited for the foetal heartbeat to stop.

Savita had maternal infection, and a day later was diagnosed with Sepsis. Doctors discussed ending the pregnancy but didn’t – even though the baby would not have survived and international best practice suggested terminating the pregnancy. She later died.



Savita Halappanavar died after being refused a termination of her pregnancy at a hospital in Galway (AFP/GETTY)

Her death was responsible for changing the law to help women whose lives are at risk from pregnancy – previously Ireland still used an 1867 law that outlawed it with a maximum penalty of life imprisonment - but a new Amnesty International report entitled: ‘She is not a criminal: The impact of Ireland’s abortion law’ shows that this definition is still seriously problematic.

Under the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act (PLDPA), doctors can only allow an abortion if there is an immediate risk to a woman’s life – but not her health.

“When women get sick, we can’t intervene until her life is at risk, and then we have to hope we save her in time,” explains Dr Rhona Mahony, master of Ireland’s National Maternity Hospital.

'I had a dead embryo in my womb for months'

For one woman, Lupe, it meant taking matters into her own hands. She went to hospital with heavy bleeding and was told her embryo was dead. Doctors refused to give her an abortion,

telling her that she had to carry the baby for the full nine months, and then deliver a stillborn.

“The embryo stopped growing when it was four or five weeks,” she told researchers for the Amnesty report which was compiled over eight months, soon after the PLDPA came into power. “That means I had had a dead embryo inside my womb for more than two months... During that time I was feeling really scared since it had become clear to me that, if any complication raised, these people would let me die, just as they did with Savita.

“I didn’t feel safe at all... I was feeling really scared because it became clear to me, that if any complication was raised, these people would let me die.”



Doctors want women to deliver stillborns instead of having abortions (ALAMY)

In the end, she returned back to her native home of Spain to have an abortion. A number of women have been in similar situations. Grainne, who was carrying an anencephalic pregnancy, a fatal condition where a significant portion of the foetus’ brain fails to develop, also had an abortion after being told her baby wouldn’t survive.

“How cruel would it be to make me go through this. My baby could live nine months; it could be born and live for a couple of minutes. That would put me through a full pregnancy, I would have the breast milk, I would have everybody asking me how long are you gone? How could they think that would not affect someone mentally? I could never have gone through that, I just couldn’t.”

Rape survivors aren't allowed abortions

Another major area of concern is rape. Women have been impregnated through rape are still obliged to deliver their baby – no matter how traumatic that could be for them.

Clíona Saidléar, acting executive director of the Rape Crisis Network of Ireland, says: “The prohibition [on abortion] in Ireland makes it difficult, because there is no choice, and adds to the trauma. It shows a lack of compassion to survivors of rape.”

Ireland's abortion Bill will not make things any easier for women

Why a DUP coalition would be dangerous for women

She explains that it's typically young women who are more likely to become pregnant after rape as they're often not taking contraception such as the pill, and don't always know how to get emergency contraception.

It means that girls barely in their teens could be forced to have a child at a serious risk to their mental health.

One shocking case shows just how damaging this law can be. A young woman known as Ms Y was kidnapped, beaten and raped repeatedly by a paramilitary organisation in her home country. She escaped and came to Ireland as an asylum seekers but was refused an abortion even though her pregnancy was a result of rape.

She was unable to travel to the UK due to a lack of visa and money. She needed around £1,000 but was receiving around £15 a week as an asylum-seeker. Even though she was noted to have “strong death wish”, she was not given any psychological help.



Pregnant rape survivors are not permitted abortions (GETTY - photo posed by model)

Ms Y attempted to go to the UK, but was arrested and detained for up to eight hours. She was taken back to hospital in Ireland where she told professionals: “I will kill myself if I cannot get rid of this baby... I don’t want it inside me. I don’t want to discuss it. I don’t want to know about it. I want it out. I cannot continue with this pregnancy.”

She was promised a termination to try and dissuade her from a hunger strike but it was repeatedly postponed until her baby was eventually delivered by C-section. Her lawyer said: “In my opinion, Ms Y was given no choice. I believe that she did not fully understand what was going on. How could she?”

Women save hundreds to travel for abortions

At least 4,000 women and girls – typically in their 20s – are forced to travel outside of Ireland for an abortion at considerable physical, mental and financial cost each year, according to Amnesty's calculations. It can mean women stop eating, paying bills, turn to loan sharks or pawn brokers to pay for their abortions.

Kally, the Unit Manager of the BPAS Merseyside Clinic in Liverpool spoke about a woman who recently came to their clinic for an appointment but who could not receive a termination because she had travelled too early in her pregnancy.

“Literally the tears were dropping off her face and there’s nothing you can do in that situation.

That frustrates me that she has to go all the way back to [Cork] and she is still pregnant, she's got no support and she was covert, she didn't tell anybody she was coming and so that makes me feel... quite angry and quite distraught."



Women can feel isolated and stigmatised (ALAMY - photo posed by model)

For those that do manage to have an abortion in England, the aftercare can be a struggle. Emma Kitson ended up returning to Ireland in torture, and was eventually diagnosed with an incomplete abortion. Being so far from the abortion clinic in England, she was forced to deal with it on the phone. Many women are terrified to see their GPs for aftercare out of fear of being reported to the police.

'I considered throwing myself under a truck'

Yet these women are still the luckier ones as they managed to have a safe abortion. Other women who lack the funds turn to the internet and dangerous remedies to have home-made abortions. Sandra attempted to induce an abortion through Chinese herbs she'd found online, before turning to Women on Web – a website that helps women obtain pills necessary for a medication abortion.

For as little as £50, women can buy medication after having an online medical consultation with a licensed doctor. For Sandra, this meant she could order them online, travel to Belfast to collect them and then smuggle them back home. "I got my period again about a week and a half ago and I am very happy," she says.

If she'd been caught, she could have been liable to 14 years' imprisonment. Other women are so terrified they consider suicide, or self-harm.

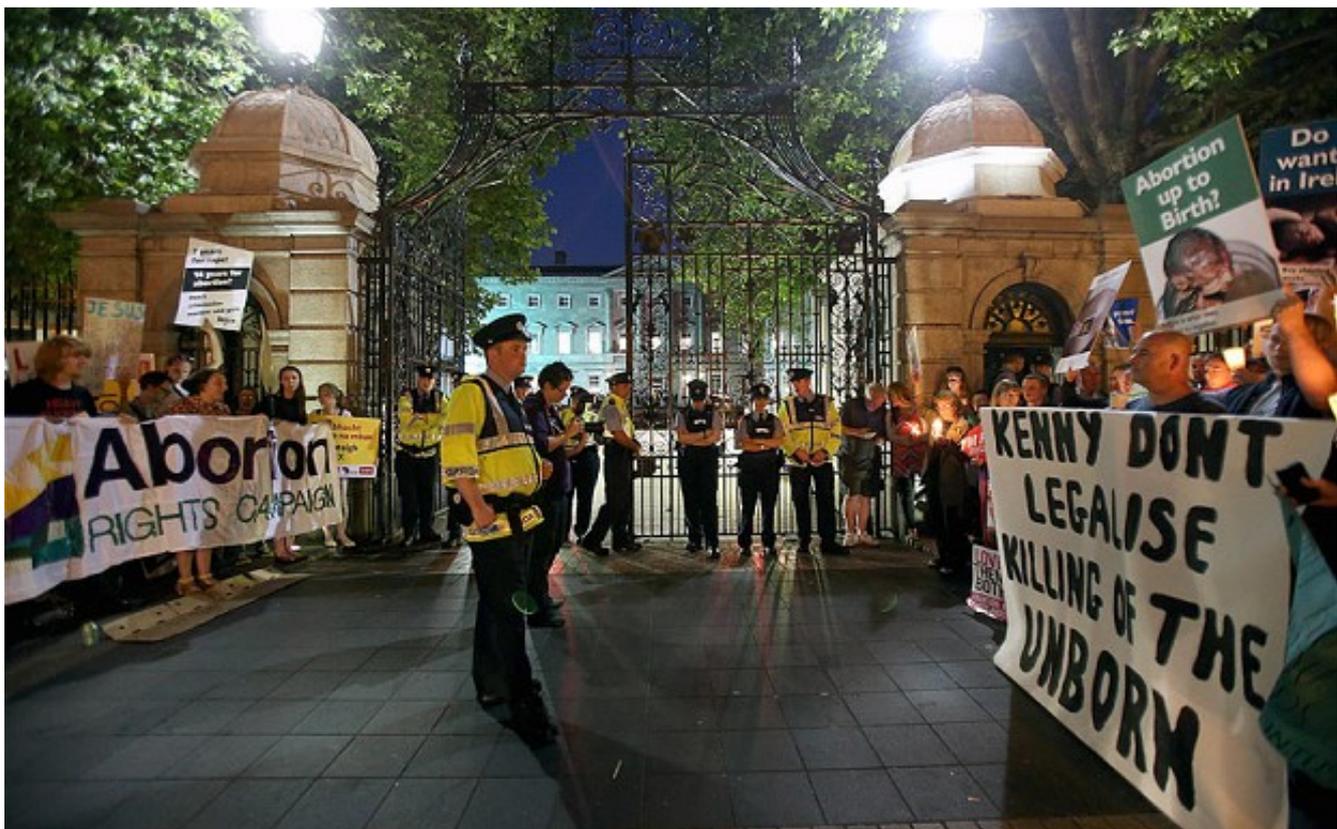
"I remember walking around thinking I'll just throw myself in front of a truck," says one woman known as AF. "That'll solve that problem." In the end her sister helped her to fund an abortion abroad, but she says if it wasn't for that: "I don't doubt I would have tried something."

This shocking reality of what thousands of Irish women and girls suffer each year is why Amnesty International is now calling for abortion to be decriminalised.

Joan Burton, Ireland's deputy prime minister has said an abortion referendum will be part of the Labour manifesto - though she did not respond to our request for comment. Fine Gael has said the party will campaign for a No vote in the proposed referendum, though "members who have a conscientious difficulty with this decision will not be required to participate in the campaign and will be free to express their views."

Abortion must be decriminalised

Amnesty International's report says: "Ireland's abortion regime violates the fundamental human rights of women and girls, including their rights to life, health, equality, non-discrimination, privacy, information and freedom from torture and other ill-treatment.



Crows in Dublin protest existing abortion laws (PA)

"Finally forced to reckon with the devastating consequences of its restrictive and opaque

abortion law in recent years, Ireland's new abortion law falls significantly short of its human rights obligations. By criminalising abortion on all but one narrow ground, Ireland forces women who seek abortions to travel – in their thousands – to other countries to obtain a routine and essential medical procedure.

“Showing complete disregard for those who cannot travel, Ireland forces these women and girls to continue with an unwanted or dangerous pregnancy or resort to unsafe abortion. This reality has resulted in unnecessary suffering for thousands of women, girls and their families.”

Amnesty is urging Ireland to change its law so women and girls can have abortions – at least in cases of rape, severe foetal impairment or a risk to their health. The group's secretary general Salil Shetty said: “The recent **Marriage Equality referendum** showed a country that prides itself on being an open and inclusive society, but all is not well in the Republic of Ireland. (There have been three referendums on the legalising of abortion - all of them have failed).

“The human rights of women and girls are violated on a daily basis because of a constitution that treats them like child-bearing vessels.”

She, and thousands of Irish women, are calling for this maltreatment to stop once and for all.

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