

Irish women report relief and gratitude after using abortion pills

Women in Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, where abortion is illegal, respond favourably to kits sent in the post, study finds

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Women in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland who have obtained abortion pills online in defiance of the law overwhelmingly express gratitude and relief that they were able to end an unwanted pregnancy, a new study shows.

Their only regret, according to a paper published in the British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, is that they are having to do something that is illegal in their country. They express anger and disappointment that they could not access a safe, legal abortion and felt they were treated as second-class citizens.

“Abortion is a huge decision for some women to make. It’s shameful that we are met with brick walls and judgment in our own country,” said one.

Abortion is illegal in both countries but since 2006, the Netherlands-based organisation Women on Web has been offering medical consultations online and dispatching in the post the two pills - mifepristone and misoprostol - that will terminate a pregnancy within the first 10 weeks.

The organisation offers the service around the world and has seen a sharp increase in women seeking help from countries in Latin America, where abortion is also illegal, after the link was made between Zika virus infection in pregnancy and brain damage in babies.

Packages shipped to Ireland are stopped, so women travel to Northern Ireland to collect them instead. It is not illegal to buy or sell the drugs, but it is to use them to bring about an abortion.

In April, a woman in Northern Ireland who took the pills and was reported to the police by her two flatmates was given a three-month suspended sentence by Belfast crown court. The case sparked protests and demonstrations of solidarity from other women who announced they too had resorted to the abortion pills and challenged police to arrest them.

Women with an unwanted pregnancy in Ireland previously had to travel to the UK if they wanted to have an abortion. Between 1970 and 2015, 180,797 women from Ireland and 61,211 women from Northern Ireland made the journey. Many still do rather than break the

01,511 women from northern Ireland made the journey. Many still do rather than break the law by bringing about an abortion at home.

But the study, carried out by Abigail Aiken and her colleagues at the University of Texas at Austin, found that many of the women who went online for help could not afford to travel or to take time off work or the costs of childcare.

“These barriers create a stark health inequity: women with financial and social resources can access offshore termination of pregnancy, while women who lack such resources cannot,” says the paper.

The study found that 5,650 women sought help from the site between 2010 and 2015. Most (85%) were between 20 and 30 years old and were mothers (63%).

The most common reason for choosing to terminate pregnancy (reported by 62% of women) was not being able to cope with a child at that point in their lives. Nearly half - 44% - cited having no money to provide for a child, and 23% felt their family was already complete. Nearly a third - 30% - felt they were too young to have a child or wanted to finish their education.

Almost all - 97% - said they felt accessing and using the medication at home was the right thing for them and 98% said they would recommend it to other women in a similar situation. The most common feeling they reported after completing the procedure was relief (70%), followed by satisfaction (36%). Over a quarter - 26.8% - said they were happy and 22% said they were pleased. The vast majority - 94% - expressed gratitude that they could go online and obtain the pills.

“There is a very negative perception of a home abortion,” said Aiken, an Irish-born assistant professor at the US university. “People regard it as desperate and a last resort. But women say it is very helpful for their health, wellbeing and autonomy. The only negative thing is that they have to do it outside of the law.”

The website asks women to make a donation to its costs, suggesting €70 to €90. Over a third - 35% - said they found it difficult to find the money. Nearly a quarter (24%) said they did not get enough emotional support from family and friends.

One of the women surveyed told the researchers: “There is no way I could have afforded to travel to England, pay for the procedure, stay in a hotel, and have someone there to support me. Thanks to this service, I was able to have a safe abortion in an environment where I felt comfortable and with my partner there to support me. Thank you for enabling women to have control over their own bodies.”

Others said that without access to home abortion, they would have considered suicide. “I can’t thank you enough - you have saved my life,” said one. “I would have had to resort to desperate measures. You will never understand how grateful I am.”

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