

Using Evidence to Inform Abortion Policy Change in Ireland

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The Eighth Amendment to the Irish Constitution: 1983

Article 40.3.3

The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right.

Self-management explicitly illegal

The criminal code allows for a sentence of up to **14 years in prison** for a person convicted of “procuring a miscarriage”

Abortion access by traveling



Forced 2 leave Ireland, [@EndaKennyTD](#)
joined by more Irish in waiting room,waiting
for our loved ones [#twowomentravel](#)



We are nearly home. Thanks to everyone for
unreal support - with one glaring exception.
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Medication abortion via online telemedicine



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I need an abortion with pills

Do you have an unwanted pregnancy? This online medical abortion service helps women get a safe abortion with pills. [Read more »](#)



I had an abortion

Every year 42 million women have an abortion. Show your face, share your story, donate your money and help women around the world get access to safe abortions. [Read more »](#)

Citizens' Assembly calls for Ireland to legalise abortion without restriction

April 23 2017



Judge Mary Laffoy vowed to include dissenting views in her report

A special committee set up to deliberate on Ireland's abortion regime has made a

“The chairwoman of the Citizens' Assembly which recommended liberalising rules on the termination of pregnancy has **urged politicians to examine the increasing use of abortion pills.**”

Key Policy Questions

- **How common is it?**

How many people self-manage using online telemedicine every year and which societal groups do they represent?

- **Is it safe?**

What proportion of women report complications and which complications do they report?

- **Does it work?**

What proportion of women report successfully ending their pregnancies?

- **Is it acceptable?**

Why do women choose this pathway and what kinds of experiences do they have?

Politics Meets Policy: The Oireachtas Committee on the Eighth Amendment

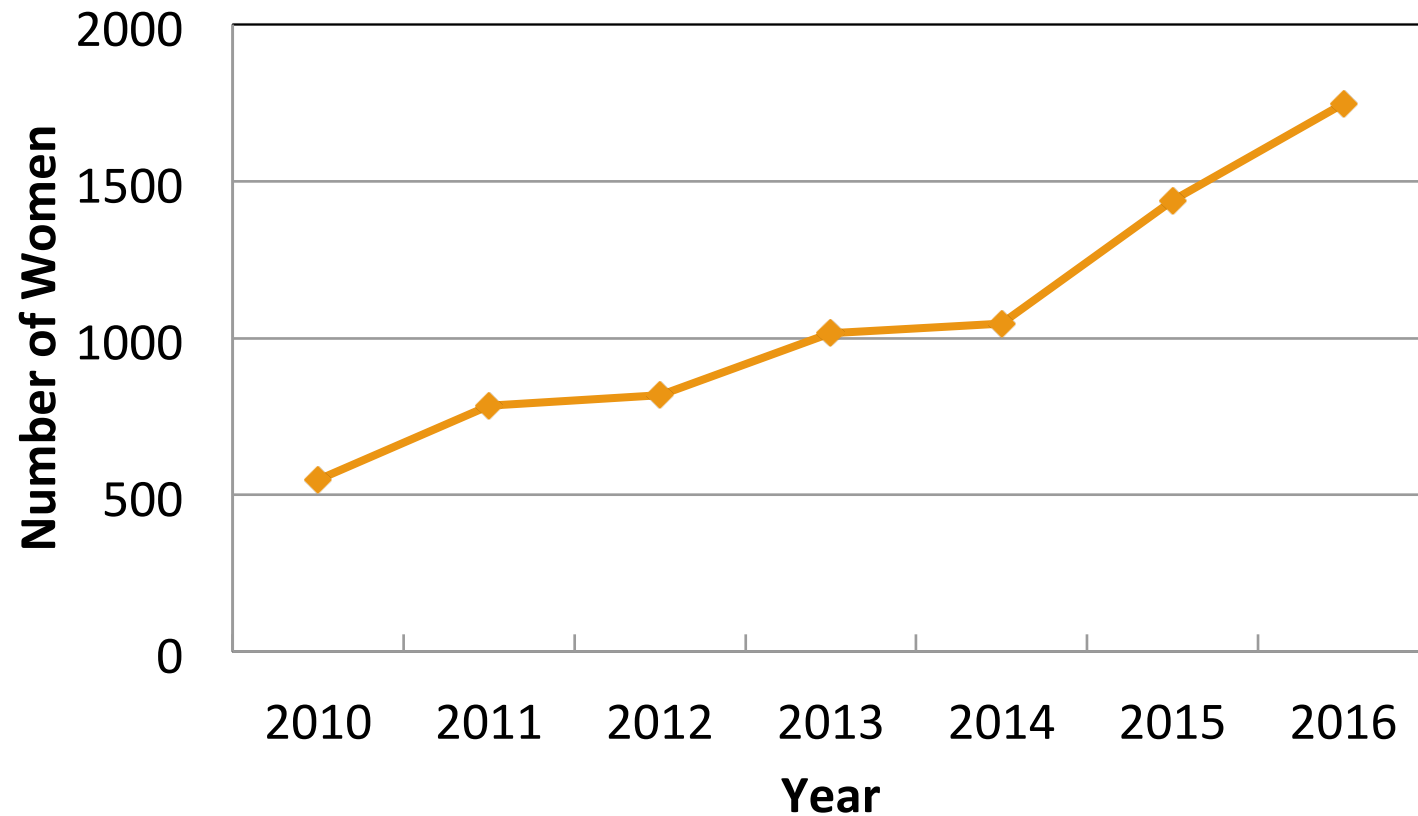


Methods

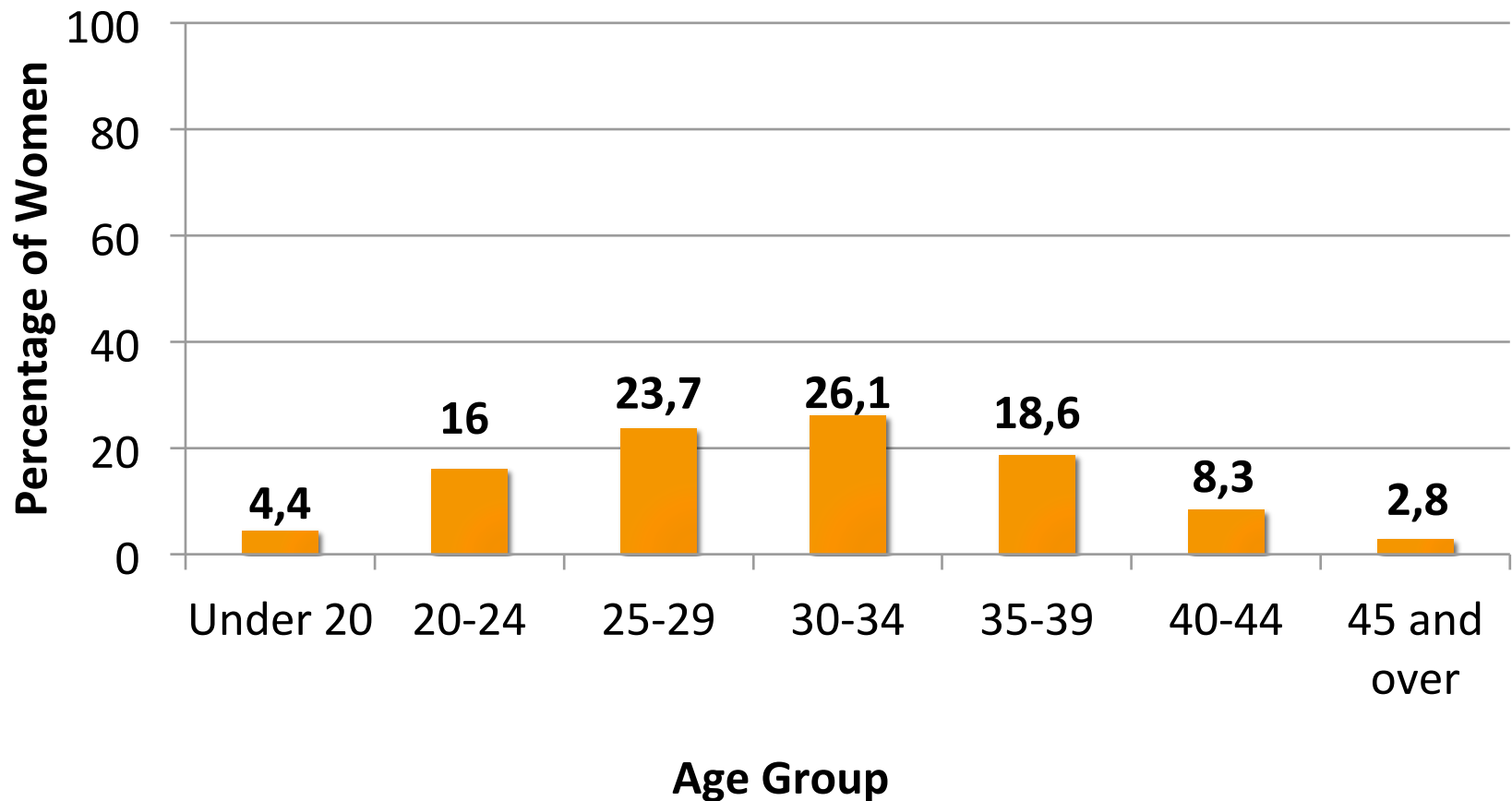
- Five years of data on requests to Women on Web, 2010-2016, n=7,398
- Three year of data on outcomes of medication abortions provided by Women on Web, 2010-2012, n=1,000 (Follow-up rate of 72%)
- In-depth interviews with women who completed medication abortions using online telemedicine (n=38)

How common is
self-managed
abortion in Ireland?

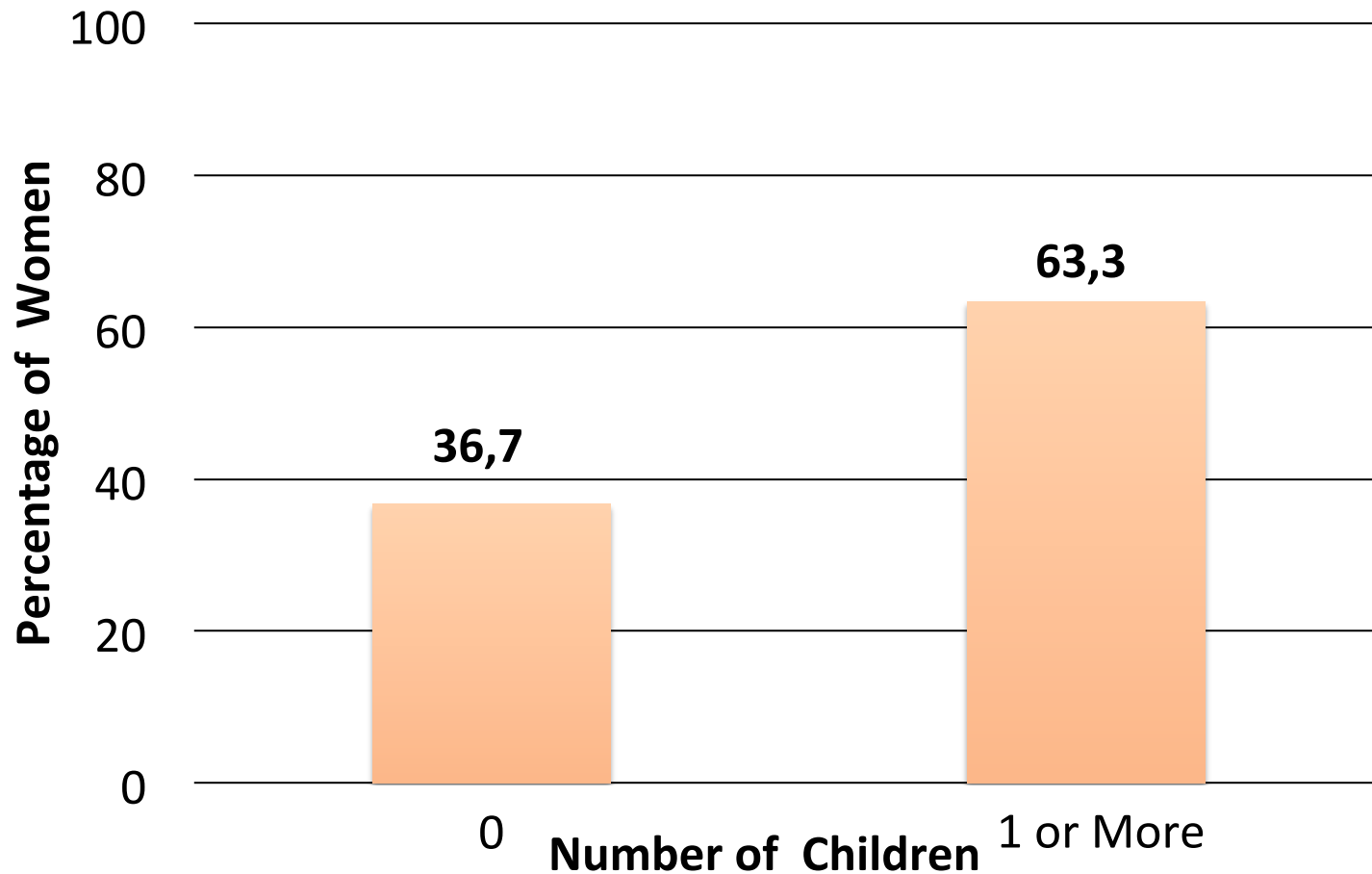
Requests to Women on Web from women in Ireland and Northern Ireland 2010-2016



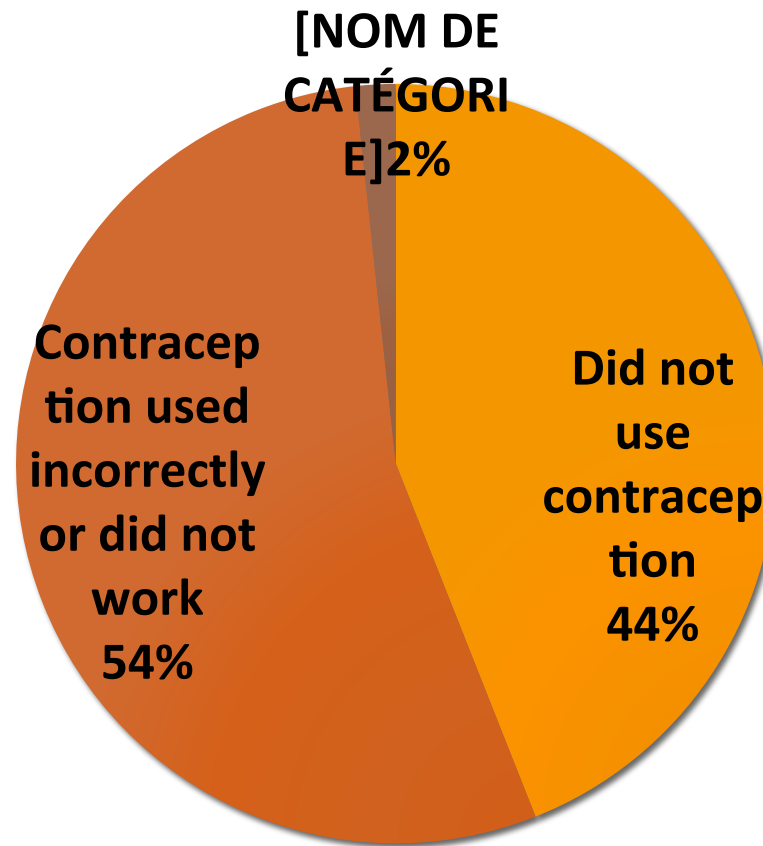
Who uses abortion pills?



Who uses abortion pills?



Who uses abortion pills?



Is self-managed
abortion
effective?

What are the outcomes of medication abortion using online telemedicine?

| Abortion Outcome | Percent (Frequency) | | |
|--|----------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| | All gestations (n=1000) | < 7 weeks (n=781) | 7 - 9 weeks (n=219) |
| Successful Medication Abortion | | | |
| No longer pregnant and no surgical intervention to end pregnancy | 94.7 (947) | 95.4 (745) | 92.2 (202) |
| Successfully Ended Pregnancy | | | |
| No longer pregnant | 99.2 (992) | 99.1 (774) | 99.5 (218) |

Is self-managed
abortion safe?

Is medication abortion using online telemedicine safe?

| Reported Complication | Percent (Frequency) | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| | All gestations (n=1000) | < 7 weeks (n=781) | 7 - 9 weeks (n=219) |
| Total adverse events | 3.1 (31) | 2.7 (21) | 4.6 (10) |
| Antibiotics | 2.6 (26) | 2.4 (19) | 3.2 (7) |
| Blood transfusion | 0.7 (7) | 0.5 (4) | 1.4 (3) |
| Death | None reported | -- | -- |

Is medication abortion using online telemedicine safe?

9% experienced symptoms of a potential complication

| Medical Care Seeking | Percent (Frequency) | | |
|--|--------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| | All gestations (n=92) | < 7 weeks (n=62) | 7 - 9 weeks (n=30) |
| Sought medical care for symptoms of potential complication | 94.6 (87) | 93.5 (58) | 96.7 (29) |

95% sought medical attention as advised after experiencing symptoms of a potential complication

Is self-managed
abortion acceptable
to those who use it?

Why do Irish women self-manage?

- Cost
- Distance
- Childcare or work commitments
- Unable to get away from partner or family
- Stigma

Irish women self-manage because of cost

“We didn’t have enough money at the time to go across to England. Travel would have been a grand and half and I don’t think I even had 80 Euros for the passport at the time. **So, the pill would have been cheaper than the actual passport**, never mind the grand and a half to go over there.”

-- Lauren, 22 years old, used pills at home

Why do Irish women self-manage?

- Preference for home environment
- Perception of greater autonomy
- Convenience
- Desire to avoid traveling abroad

Irish women self-manage because of perceived autonomy

“There's something appealing about the online process and being at home. I didn't really feel like I wanted anybody helping me, or comforting me, particularly someone I didn't know, you know. The idea of actually being able to kind of **be on your own, and just get it done was appealing to me.**”

-- Shannon, 29 years old, used pills at home

Irish women self-manage to avoid travel

“I chose the online option because I didn’t want to travel again. It’s horrific. **The actual travelling last time was the most traumatic bit of the entire thing.** The worst part was when I got to the airport and had to wait five hours to get a plane home when I really needed be in bed and resting. I was sitting there bleeding and it was really tough. **I felt like a criminal.** But even when I got home **the real sense of shame doesn’t leave.** I had problems looking people in the eye because an experience like that basically says: **we don’t care about you enough in this country, you should leave.**”

--Emma, 24 years old, traveled to England and used pills at home

What is the experience of self-management?

- While self-management has good outcomes and people may prefer it over travel, its criminalization creates a climate of fear and isolation.
- Many would like to seek support and non-emergency follow-up care but are afraid of judgement and prosecution.

The law terrorizes women

“There was a possibility that **I could go to prison for this**. That’s horrific. I should have been able to walk into my GPs and explain the situation and have them prescribe medication for me to go home and take and then check up the following week. Instead, I had the horrible, horrible stress of **‘what if someone finds out?’**”

--Tanya, 28 years old, used pills at home

The law prevents women from seeking advice from local doctors

“God no, I couldn’t talk to any doctors about it, because I was just so scared. You hear these horror stories of women getting arrested and imprisoned. So I was completely alone. I did go in when I found I was at first pregnant but I obviously never told them any of my intentions. And their reaction was just like, ‘Great, you're pregnant, we'll put you in for your 12-week scan.’ But I couldn’t say anything because you don't know how they're going to react.”

--Adele, 29-year old mother of 4, used pills at home

The law compromises the doctor-patient relationship

“I felt completely unsupported by my country, by my health system ... **I shouldn't have to lie if I need medical assistance.** I should be able to go to my health practitioner and tell them what's wrong with me and have them help me because I'm sick or I'm bleeding too much or whatever might be the problem. **At the most vulnerable stage,** I shouldn't be having to wonder ‘**in what way will I lie?**’.”

--Stacey, 37-year old mother of 2, used pills at home

The law isolates women

“I was so grateful that I was able to get help and do my abortion online. **But it was so lonely. I felt completely isolated** from the people around me and it would have made all the difference to have a friendly face and supportive voice to go to.”

-- Alex, 34 years old, mother of three, used pills at home

What happened when
politicians heard about
self-management in
Ireland?

Women buying illegal pills swayed abortion decision

Ellen Coyne

December 14 2017, 12:01am,
The Times

Politics



For the politicians who changed their mind, one of the most compelling pieces of evidence was the number of Irish women who are taking illegal abortion pills bought online. The committee heard that the use of pills bought online had tripled since 2010, when 548 women in Ireland contacted one website. Last year the figure was 1,748.

Committee recommends legalising unrestricted terminations up to 12 weeks

Updated / Wednesday, 13 Dec 2017 22:22



What next?

- Draft legislation to provide abortion up to 12 weeks with no restrictions on reason
 - Waiting periods
 - Cost
 - Location
 - Providers

- Northern Ireland
 - Westminster
 - Stormont
 - Evidence?

Providing abortion for free in GB is not enough

“Even though the procedure is covered now for Northern Irish women in England, **there’s other factors as well**. It would have been a whole host of lies: “Why are you getting up so early? Where are you going? Why will you not be back until late? Where have you been?” I speak to lots of people in my family two or three times a day, and to have no contact with them would have made them suspicious.”

--Sonya, 40 years old, used pills at home

Self-management is often preferred over travel, but women fear prosecution

"There would be such a traumatic side to having to travel instead of being in the comfort of your own home. **But I was absolutely frightened.** I never slept for weeks tracing that parcel. Oh my god, it was a scary time, and I probably never settled for even a week after receiving it, because I was so scared that the police were going to land on my door ... I just thought, my god, is this really what it could actually come to? Where you can get an hour's flight, and not get into any trouble. **But you get it sent to your home and you could be arrested...**"

--Pearl, 36 years old, used pills at home

Unwarranted customs delays adversely affect mental and physical health

“My first packet got seized and **I went into a state of panic** ... I rung up customs and asked them did they know where my package was because it was taking weeks. The person on the phone asked me if I knew that [misoprostol] was a class A drug... **he compared it to heroin**. He actually said to me “it’s in the same class as heroin”.”

--Ruth, 18 years old, used pills at home

Lack of legal clarity causes mistrust of the NI healthcare system

“I knew that I wanted to have an abortion, but I didn’t know how to go about it... But you can’t go to your doctor because if you say that you’re going to order pills, **they have to report it and you can’t go and see them afterwards either if you need help.**”

--Samantha, 20 years old, used pills at home

Acknowledgments

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