



Liberating Women in Ireland.

Segment title: The journey to bodily autonomy: How policy change has affected the experiences of abortion seekers from Ireland and Northern Ireland

Fiona and Abigail are here for the facts – I'm here to add flavour.

Background to ASN

Since 2009

Set up similar to NNAF in the US

Abortion fund – “I can't afford an abortion” should not be the only reason someone becomes a parent.

Do not campaign – we are the plaster/band aid while campaigning orgs are the cure.

From a handful of volunteers and a bucket of change to 2 paid staff, 90 volunteers and more than 4500 clients helped. We are almost entirely funded by donations from private individuals.

We provide three main things: 1. Information on the least expensive way to afford abortion and travel, and on the two reputable providers of safe but illegal early medical abortion pills. 2. Funding towards the cost of abortion and travel. 3. When needed, accommodation in volunteer homes.

Our clients

Due to the nature of the work we do, we don't hear from the “usual” person in Ireland, Northern Ireland (or the Isle of Man) seeking an abortion. Most people have a support network, a credit card, people who can watch their children or loan them some money.

We hear from the people who are most negatively impacted by Ireland's law, those forced by circumstance to call a group of strangers in England and ask for money.

ASN often hears from women who tick several of the “at risk” boxes. Women who are pregnant as result of rape. Women with serious mental health issues. Women

with medical conditions. Women in or escaping abusive relationships. Homeless women. Women with addiction issues.

Our clients have ranged in age from a woman of 53 to a girl of 12. Many of them do not have the passport required by Ryan Air and some do not have any photo ID at all. Some have money, but don't have access to factual information – have you tried googling "abortion" from an Irish IP address? Go ahead. Try it. Others think an abortion will cost a thousand euro or more (which it can but doesn't have to) and by the time they've spent weeks raising funds, the price of the abortion has gone up.

Many people, even informed, pro choice people, think that, while criminalising abortion is bad, it is no great hardship for people to "just travel." Because Ryan Air is cheap, and England is just a few miles away, right?

For our clients, it's not that simple.

The dozens of bits of information you need to get unpregnant in Ireland mount up quickly and add a huge amount of stress to what is already a difficult place to be in – pregnant in a country with no abortion. This often drives people into a tailspin of despair. The number of women who tell us they were considering suicide before finding our website or phone number is nothing short of horrifying.

Here are some of the clients who have contacted us:

A woman in a refuge worried she'd lose her space in a hostel if she travelled for an abortion

A woman who lived in a small village where everyone knew everyone and she didn't want anyone to find out, so it was tough to find a babysitter or any reason to be away

A woman who was trying to regain custody of her kids, so was trying to arrange the abortion around the days she was allowed visitation

A woman who had a panic attack at the airport – literally could not get on the plane – and had to book new flights for herself and a support person on another day.

A woman who could only travel when her abusive partner was at a stag do

A number of cases where the client had children with severe care needs, or a husband or family member with severe care needs who couldn't be left alone or with a normal minder

A client with gender dysmorphia who wasn't sure if we would help him or if the clinics would treat him. He almost didn't contact us and was considering doing something dangerous.

A woman who had just started a job after months of unemployment and was really worried about having to take a time off during her probation period

A number of women who had their ID documents stolen or destroyed by abusive partners

That's just a sample. There's other logistical issues to consider.

If you live outside Cork, Dublin, Belfast or Derry, your ability to travel is made more difficult by a lack of daily service between the island of Ireland and England. For instance, if you live in Galway, your closest airport is Dublin, which is a three hour bus (if there is no traffic).

The cheapest airline, Ryan Air, insists on a passport, which not all people have. Other airlines, that accept alternative forms of ID, are more expensive. And somehow our clients never need to fly at times when fares are cheap.

In fact, there are factors that can make flights very expensive, such as football games or school holidays, or unavailable, like high winds, snow storms, and Icelandic volcanoes.

Refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, and international students may need visas to travel.

Members of the Irish traveller community and other at risk groups, such as the homeless, may have trouble accessing services.

AND NOW?

But wait – I hear you all saying. Abortion is now free for those in NI who travel, and didn't Ireland just legalise abortion? Well, the answers to those two questions are YES, but, and NO.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Let's go with the yes, but first. In Northern Ireland, many women don't know about the programme, announced in July 2017 but officially put into place in March 2018. There has been no promotion of it from the NI Department of Health, and we still receive calls from people who do not know it exists.

When the scheme first started, but before there was a Central Booking System in place, there were a number of hiccups in provision, especially with out of clinic provision for those with health issues.

Now, as with then, many women are not able to travel, due to domestic abuse situations, caring responsibilities, or other reasons. We've also seen that women with physical health complications have had to fly to English hospitals twice – once for a

consultation and again for the treatment. Not everyone can leave the country once, let alone twice.

So while free provision in England is great, it, like ASN, is only a plaster to what is really needed, which is free, safe, legal abortion IN Northern Ireland.

THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

The Republic of Ireland did not, as many people believe, just vote to legalise abortion. Repealing the 8th Amendment – which happened after a brilliant and beautiful campaign – simply clears the way for the Irish government to create an abortion law. And because of court challenges and other hold ups, the result of the referendum hasn't been certified yet. As of yesterday, we were still waiting for the President of Ireland to sign off on it. Once that happens, the elected officials of Ireland will need to create an abortion law and figure out how to provide in country services.

Not to rain on anyone's parade, but it took Ireland 22 years to legislate for abortion to save a woman's life, and the resulting law, the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act, is the piece of garbage abortion law Ireland has in the interim. The "PLDPA" supposedly allows abortion in cases where pregnancy will make a woman die, including from suicide. In practice, this has led to a teenage refugee pregnant from rape delayed in getting an abortion until the foetus was viable, and given a c-section (Or the Miss Y case), and two ASN clients who tried to kill themselves twice while trying to prove they were suicidal, both get told they were not suicidal enough to get abortions in Ireland.

While I am optimistic that legislation will pass more quickly this time around, I am very concerned about the optimism shown by some Irish politicians and others, who seem to think Ireland will have country-wide provision by January 2019. As the abortion fund helping those who can't get abortion in Ireland, we always look for both the worst case scenario, as well as for those who are likely to fall through cracks and still need to travel for provision.

For right now, nothing has changed for those in Ireland who need abortions. Time will tell what will change, and I am waiting for the answers to a number of questions:

What will the legislation allow?

Who will provide abortion?

How many will conscientiously object?

In a country with no national health service, how much will abortion cost?

Will they keep the proposed 72 hour “reflection” period? If they do, will that mean three appointments – one for consultation, and then two for medication? I believe the current cost of a GP appointment in Ireland is about €70

What will happen to people who present at 11w5d and are put over the time limit by the wait period?

Will provision extend to those who are migrants, Irish Travellers, refugees, and asylum seekers?

What will happen in the cases where the EMA protocol is unsuccessful? Most GP surgeries do not have ultrasounds, and it’s difficult to obtain scans for women who have wanted pregnancies so will this mean women are told to wait 4-5 weeks to take a test?

Will those in RoI who decide to take EMA online instead of “out” themselves – as many in NI currently to - still risk criminal prosecution?

How many GPs will refuse to provide abortions due to conscientious objection?

And on and on our list of question goes.

We also expect that 600 to 700 women will still need to travel for post 12 week care each year. And basically, we are waiting and seeing what happens. From an ASN perspective – which is to follow Murphy’s law of “what can go wrong, will” or even PT Barnum’s law of “Murphy was an optimist” – we are keeping an eye on the worst case scenarios.

We worry that the continued insistence that there will be provision across Ireland come January will lead to those who discover unwanted pregnancies in October, November and December to wait for treatment, and then be forced to travel to England for a more expensive, second trimester procedure at a time when English clinics are historically busy.

We worry that so many doctors will opt out of abortion provision under a conscientious objection clause that women in more rural parts of Ireland will need to commute long distances via to attend up to three appointments to receive care. If abortion is not free, it may well be easier and less expensive for those women to travel to England for one day treatment.

We worry that the most vulnerable clients – migrants, refugees, women in or escaping abusive relationships, minors, Irish Travellers, and others – will fall through the cracks of provision in Ireland.

We worry that the stigma around abortion will take a very long time to dissipate and that many women and pregnant people will be unwilling to go to their family doctor – who may well be a friend of the family, or otherwise close to them in their personal lives – to discuss abortion.

We worry – but we are also optimistic problem solvers. We have to be, or we wouldn't have gotten into abortion funding in the first place.

As an abortion fund we won't be drawing any conclusions until our phone stops ringing quite so often due to in-country provision. At that point and only at that point will we be able to wrap up or moderate our activities – and possibly explore expansion to other jurisdictions. For now, the only conclusion is the one we already know – that the criminalisation of abortion has always and will always most adversely impact the poor.

While we continue to bask in the glory of the repealing of the 8th Amendment, and support our friends who are pushing for law reform in Northern Ireland, we will also be here, ready for any changes in provision, and adapting our organisation to be as helpful as possible to those who need to travel from Ireland and Northern Ireland for abortion.

