



SEXUALITY, INFORMATION
REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH & RIGHTS

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The IFPA welcomes the ruling of the UN Human Rights Committee. The denial of abortion services in Ireland seriously harms women's health. The UN's ruling recognises this and echoes what the IFPA hears every day: obliging women and girls to leave the state for abortion services is cruel, inhuman and degrading. Women in Ireland have the right to the highest standard of reproductive healthcare, including abortion, and Ireland's laws must be reformed to guarantee this right.

The IFPA's national counselling service provides free, non-directive counselling to women, girls and couples who experience an unplanned pregnancy, or a pregnancy which becomes a crisis. Last year, we provided over 3,600 counselling services.

Since 1980, more than 166,000 women and girls have travelled from Ireland to another state to access abortion services. Each of these women experienced all of the financial, physical and emotional burdens involved in travelling for healthcare services that are criminalised in Ireland. And we know that not all women can access abortion outside of Ireland, often due to cost, travel restrictions or ill-health.

Our clients are from all walks of life and choose abortion for many reasons, including foetal anomaly, health and well-being. But what they all have in common is the denial of safe and legal abortion services in Ireland.

The decision to have an abortion is not one that women take lightly. Once a woman has decided that abortion is the right decision for her, the entire burden of accessing an abortion falls on her. She has to organise a referral to a health service in another country. She has to navigate the practicalities of travelling. She has to cover the costs of everything herself—regardless of her financial situation and her legal status.

The vast majority of IFPA clients who access abortion do so in the first trimester. However, some women are in the care of maternity services when they receive a diagnosis of foetal anomaly, or of risk to their health as a result of pregnancy.

The decision to end a pregnancy is most appropriately discussed between a woman and a healthcare professional. Yet in the context of Irish law, which criminalises women who have abortions and health professionals who assist them, there are no clear guidelines or protocols for health professionals as to their positive duty of care. Women who opt for abortion in the case of health risk or foetal anomaly experience an abrupt cessation of care and abandonment by the Irish health service.

This is simply not good enough. But even putting clearer pathways and protocols and guidelines in place within the current law would not be good enough.

Many of our clients are obliged by Irish law to leave their country to have an abortion. This deprives them of dignity, exposes them to stigma, and is degrading. Our clients express frustration, anger and disbelief that they must travel to avail of a medical procedure that they believe should be available in their own country.

Because it is criminalised, Irish law locates abortion outside mainstream healthcare and stands in the way of women exercising their considered, conscientious choices about their pregnancy.

While the law does not stop women from travelling for abortion, not all women can travel. The IFPA knows from its services that it is the most marginalised women who face the most challenges to travelling for abortion - women who are young, women who are poor or on low income, women with care responsibilities, women who have travel restrictions, women who experience domestic violence. This is discrimination.

The Human Rights Committee has examined the case of one woman, in one set of circumstances. We welcome this ruling, we commend Amanda Mellet and James Burke for taking this case to the UN and we urge the Government to comply.

The vast majority of our clients opt for abortion in a wide range of circumstances. And discrimination and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment are the reality of these women's experiences, whatever the circumstances of the pregnancy.

It is the State and the State's abortion laws that subject women to this treatment.

And it is the State that must reform the law to ensure that women can access abortion services in Ireland, with dignity and respect.