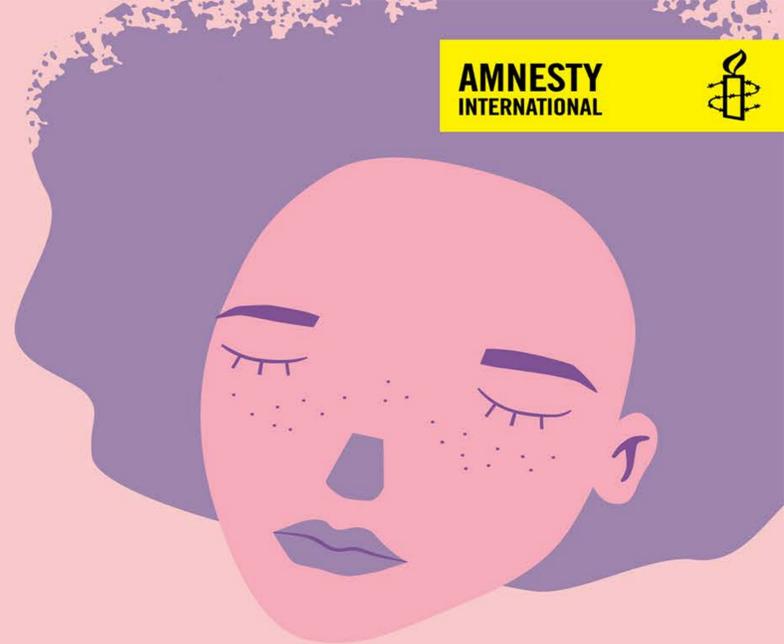




IT'S TIME VOTE YES



It's Time to Talk - KEY ISSUE 1

THE IMPACT OF TRAVEL

This series of papers sets out some key issues and human rights arguments in discussions around the proposed repeal of the Eighth Amendment to the Irish Constitution.

"The Eighth Amendment does not stop abortions. At least 10 women and girls travel from Ireland every day to access abortion services in other countries. This is unacceptable in itself. But often overlooked is that these journeys add to women's suffering, anxiety and distress. Having to travel can bring enormous financial, emotional and physical costs to them and their families. It can make women have abortions later than is medically safest. So having to travel harms women's physical and mental health."

Because of the Eighth Amendment, abortion services may not be provided in Ireland for any reason other than where a woman or girl's life is at risk from her pregnancy. **The Eighth Amendment** does not actually stop abortions though. It instead **forces at least 10 women and girls¹ to travel overseas for abortion services every day.²**

Also, in 1992, people voted in another referendum to give pregnant women and girls freedom in the Constitution to have abortions outside Ireland. The result today is that Ireland's Constitution is profoundly contradictory: it grants women and girls a constitutional freedom to travel abroad to do something that is a serious criminal offence carrying a possible 14-year prison term if done in Ireland.

So Ireland in effect outsources to other countries the healthcare it should be providing to women here. But the Eighth Amendment causes further harm by forcing them to travel.

In June 2016, in the **first case taken by a woman to the UN** challenging Ireland's abortion ban, the State was found to have violated her human rights. The UN Human Rights Committee found that Amanda Mellet was subjected to "intense physical and mental suffering", exacerbated by having to travel abroad to another country "at personal expense and separated from the support of her family, and to return while not fully recovered". **This violated her rights to be free from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and to privacy and equality.³** The Government accepted these findings.

Much of what Amanda Mellet had to endure is the experience of countless thousands other women and girls. **Travelling to access abortion services can have significant health consequences.** Some women - for cost or other reasons - must travel home before they have fully recovered. Women report sitting in airports and on planes still experiencing severe cramps and bleeding. It also disrupts women's continuity of care with their doctors in Ireland.

¹ While here we refer to women and girls, Amnesty International recognises that not everyone who requires access to abortion services identifies as female. We advocate for the sexual and reproductive rights of all people. People of all genders and none will benefit from a repeal of the Eighth Amendment.

² Many women and girls cannot afford to travel; others are not able – like women with disabilities, or migrant women - so thousands take illegal abortion pills in Ireland in secret, without proper medical support. Some women and girls do remain pregnant against their will.

Because of the Eighth Amendment, **medical professionals in Ireland are prohibited under the Abortion Information Act 1995 from providing referrals for women or transferring medical files** to abortion service providers in other countries. It would be a criminal offence if they broke this law.

This not only makes it hard to get information about how to access abortion care overseas; it can have very serious consequences for women with other complex health care needs, including those whose health is at grave risk from the pregnancy itself.

Travel adds to the sense of isolation women feel. **The stigma surrounding having to travel for abortion services, compounded by this being a serious crime at home, can also negatively impact the mental health of those who travel.** Women report feeling like a criminal.

Women and girls can also be **fearful of obtaining post-abortion care** in Ireland, because of the stigma around abortion or their fear of being reported to the police. This is despite Irish medical guidelines being clear that doctors can and must provide post-abortion care.

Women forced to travel to terminate pregnancies involving fatal foetal anomalies face additional distress from being denied the same healthcare and support available to women who decide to continue these non-viable pregnancies. In Amanda Mellet's case, the UN decided this was discrimination, in violation of Ireland's international human rights obligations. They also may face having to leave their babies' remains behind, have them delivered to Ireland by courier, or find a way bring them home themselves.

The complicated logistics of travelling to another country for an abortion can be extremely challenging, on top of what can already be a complex decision to have a termination. Added to this is the secrecy with which many women must arrange these journeys, due to the stigma, fear and shame many feel.

Pregnancy counsellors are heavily restricted by the 1995 Act in what support they can give women. They are **prohibited from making arrangements for or accompanying women.** So a woman must herself identify a health facility abroad. She must herself try to get an appointment on a date she is able to travel, and that meets her medical and financial restrictions. She may then need to arrange for her medical records to be sent to the facility. Women often must organise their travel for a specific timeframe; if they arrive at the facility too early or late, they may not be treated.

She - and her travel partner, if she has one – may need to arrange time off work. She may need to renew her passport, to think of an excuse to give family and work colleague for her absence, to arrange childcare. Some face additional difficulties in travelling, such as women with disabilities or asylum seekers.

This can also be hugely expensive, adding to women's distress. Unlike where people are sent overseas by the state for healthcare, such as under the National Treatment Purchase Fund, women must pay. Their health insurance does not cover them.

The average cost of travelling to the UK for first-trimester abortion services is about €1,000, including clinic fees, flights and accommodation.⁴ It is much higher in fatal foetal anomaly situations: the treatment is up to €1500, and the stay can last four to five days.⁵ This financial impact can be particularly crippling for women from socio-economically marginalised groups.

All of these obstacles can lead to delays in women finally accessing services. Abortions is a very safe medical procedure; but the later the abortion the more invasive it is. So this is a further risk to their health. Where a woman is accessing an abortion because of a health condition (only if her life is at risk can she have the pregnancy terminated in Ireland), delays can be even more serious.

So forcing women and girls to travel to access healthcare to which they have a human right, exacerbates the shame, secrecy and stigma around abortion. It increases women's physical and psychological suffering.

If the Eighth Amendment were removed, and the government were free to introduce the law it has proposed, the vast majority of women and girls travelling overseas for abortion services would be cared for at home instead.

⁴ IFPA, Psychological, Physical and Financial Costs of Travel, www.ifpa.ie/Hot-Topics/Abortion/Costs-Of-Travel

⁵ IFPA, as above.