



Orla Barry talks to Mara Clark, founder of a new group in Britain that provides financial and practical support to Irish women seeking an abortion, about a subject that is still taboo in this country



Mara Clark has set up a support group for Irish women who have abortions. Picture: Andrew Dunsmore

Delivering support to women in a crisis

"I've been called a murderer more times than I can remember." The young American woman lets out a bemused laugh and shakes her head. "It goes with the territory." We're sitting in the urbane London apartment of Mara Clark, the founder of the Abortion Support Network, a new group in Britain that provides financial and practical support to Irish women seeking an abortion. Above our heads is a disarming photo of a curly haired little girl, Mara's three-year-old daughter. Clark is a surprising face for an organisation that will find itself drawn into the bitter debate on Ireland's abortion problem. Illinois-born, of Republican roots, Clark's activism was borne, not of personal experience but from reading an account of underprivileged American women travelling to New York City to have late-term abortions. "These women were desperate, they would save and save to be able to afford an abortion and by the time they had the money collected, they would be late term and the cost would have gone up. Many would sleep in their cars overnight before heading in secret to the clinic the next day," she said. The 37-year-old is outraged women have to undergo such hardship in order to have a termination. Her candid views will infuriate anti-abortion activists but Clark is unflinching by the storm she is likely to provoke. In her years in the US she has experienced numerous personal attacks and vitriolic abuse, but given that a doctor who carried out late-term abortions was murdered at close range in a Kansas church, she's probably right to think things won't get as ugly here. The establishment of a new Abortion Support Network in London for Irish women is attributed to the economic recession rather than an increase in numbers accessing abortion, or changing attitudes towards abortion. Between 1980 and 2000, the Irish Women's Abortion Support Group provided a similar service. As the economy improved, demand for services fell. Now queries about cost have become more frequent and more desperate. The Calthorpe Clinic in Birmingham finds it is negotiating prices with Irish clients more frequently. I visited the Birmingham clinic early on a Monday afternoon. Although the centre is situated in an old country style house, well in off the road, the taxi driver needs no directions. It seems he has taken many Irish women on this emotionally fraught journey through the outskirts of the city. The clinic could be a small professionally run hotel or guesthouse. The waiting room is bathed in warm light, deep brown leather sofas crowd around the stylish table furniture. There's no clinical smell or indication of what happens upstairs. I assume the intention is to calm client nerves. Carolyn Phillips, and Moira Wilson, clinic manager and nurse manager respectively, burst into the empty waiting room full of cheer. Moira is the sort of bustling nurse,

brimful of personal anecdotes and lively humour, you would love to wake up to after a worrying surgical procedure. Carolyn is the amiable, calm face of the clinic. Birmingham seems to draw Irish women in greater numbers than London and many Irish women who end up here will be patients at Calthorpe. But on the day I arrive, they have no Irish clients. "On Saturday we had seven Irish women, today none at all," says Moira. However there are obvious reasons for this. "On Monday we only conduct medical abortions and most Irish women opt for a surgical procedure." The medical abortion can only be conducted in the early weeks of a pregnancy. Irish women usually take longer to decide to opt for an abortion, when the medical option is no longer viable. Saturday's Irish clients ranged in age from 18 to 44, belying the stereotype of the young foolish teenager who got carried away. "We had a woman over recently who was on her eighth pregnancy," says Wilson. "She was deeply religious and very troubled about what she was about to do. But she said she just couldn't have another child. When she woke up after the abortion, she sort of smiled and said 'if I knew it would be this easy, I wouldn't have taken so long to come here.'" Irish women do change their minds at the last minute and it is something the clinic is mindful of. "We tell them to go away and think about it. If they were living down the road, they wouldn't think twice about taking some extra time to come to a decision like this." The majority who travel, however, are determined. Rhonda Donaghey had an abortion in a clinic in Liverpool. "I travelled by boat. It seems like such a traditional thing to do but it made sense because I had friends living nearby who could meet me off the boat and bring me to the clinic." The Dublin-born woman was in her mid-30s, an age when many women are starting to fret about having children. "It wasn't the right time for me, emotionally, psychologically or financially. I was in a rebound relationship and I just couldn't go ahead with the pregnancy. I was absolutely determined I was making the right decision, absolutely determined." Rhonda was totally taken aback when she discovered she was pregnant. "I used to work in a clinic giving out contraceptive advice to young women for God's sake. It shows it can happen anyone." What about the man's role in this? "I decided not to tell him, it was my decision." Rhonda, who is one of the exceptionally few Irish women to admit publicly to having an abortion, believes the man now knows. "Will you ever talk to him about it, I ask. "No, I don't think I will ever find myself in that position," says Rhonda shaking her head definitely. Back in Birmingham, I ask Carolyn Phillips the same question. Does the male partner deserve to know? I'm surprised by her reply. "No, it's got to be the woman's choice. Only she knows what her circumstances are. I

think for some men it would end the relationship. We've got to leave women make the decision." The response raises a natural question. If you don't expect him to have a say when you end a pregnancy, how can you demand his input on continuing with the birth? The women I meet however are generally in agreement. Woman's body, woman's choice. The defiance bothers me. A second Irish woman I speak to who had an abortion in Birmingham also declined to tell the male partner. "I knew he would become very dramatic about the decision and when eventually he found out months later, that's exactly how he behaved, dramatically." Mara Clark is slightly more circumspect. She has spent the previous day on a 45-minute call to a woman's boyfriend, giving him details to share with his partner. "I can't say if unilaterally a man should have a say in the decision. I do know that a lot of men in domestic violence situations will use a pregnancy to control the woman."

DOMESTIC violence, aside though, should a man have a say? Mara gives as clear an answer as I'm likely to get. "It's a decision that a woman makes with herself, with advice from a healthcare provider and where appropriate with influence from her partner and her God."



Rhonda Donaghey: Had an abortion in a clinic in Liverpool. Picture: Nick Bradshaw



Pro-Life Campaign medical adviser, Dr Berry Kiely.

A pro-life campaigner presents me with a different view. Dr Berry Kiely, medical adviser to the Pro Life Campaign believes men's voices should be heard. "We have to work at recognising the view of both parents in a child's life." Perhaps unsurprisingly I spot only one man in a waiting room of women at the Birmingham clinic. Dr Kiely is relatively measured in her view of the new Abortion Support Network. While not condemning the work it is setting out

to do, she wishes support groups would help women to feel they have a choice other than abortion. "Many women opt for abortion because they feel trapped," says Dr Kiely, who cites a series of studies which conclude that a woman's decision to have a termination is not due to choice but because she feels she has no other option. "So many women regret having abortions," she says. I ask if she believes a woman when she says having an abortion was absolutely the right decision for her. Dr Kiely says she has no reason to disbelieve her. However she cites another study that links abortion with mental health problems as well as an increased risk of suicide. Getting women to speak about abortion has been a struggle. Certainly of all the people I contact, only two are prepared to speak on the record about their experience. Dr Kiely says she understands the culture of secrecy surrounding the issue. "It's a decision most people feel unhappy about," she says. "I suspect lots of women, deep down, know that this is my child. How can you speak openly about that?" Ann Rossiter is furious that there is any secrecy about the issue at all. In her 60s, the Limerick-born woman should be sick to the back teeth of talking about abortion. At a time when the subject would never make it into a newspaper feature, Rossiter was speaking out about it. Unlike Mara Clark, her experience is driven by personal trauma. At the age of 19, Ann had a back street abortion in London. It was before 1967, when it was legalised in Britain. The procedure was a botched job, resulting in heavy haemorrhaging and an emergency rush to hospital. There the 19-year-old Irish woman faced not professional medical care but a disapproving doctor and the police. "The doctor seemed to think the letter of the law was more important than his medical duties and called the police." Ann was pressed to give the name of the abortionist, which she refused to do. The doctor refused to administer any pain medication before switching the teenager to a ward of elderly women who had been informed of her condition. Her nurse, an Irish woman from her home town, berated her for her stupidity. "Even though I lost an enormous amount of blood, I couldn't stand it any longer. I climbed out of the bed the next morning and I left. I walked home because I didn't even have the taxi-fare," she said. Ann's personal experience turned to anger at the legislative system and soon after she began to campaign for the rights of women to be able to access legal abortion. Now 30 years later, Rossiter has unexpectedly turned her experience into a different cultural forum — comedy. Shortly before we meet, she has been invited by the Edinburgh Fringe Festival to stage a one-woman show, Making a Holy Show of Myself. "How else do you get people to talk about this issue?" she says. I counter that abortion

might not be a very funny subject. Ann lets out a whooping laugh. She has a glorious laugh which peals out of her at the most unexpected moments. "Listen here to me darling, I've got years of experience of dealing with weird situations where I've had to be careful with what I say. Now that the support group has been disbanded, I can let rip." She roars laughing again. We are sitting in the sitting room of her cosy London home. Every so often, her husband will pop his head in and see if Ann is OK, or wants something to eat. He must have seen many Irish women sitting in this room opening their hearts to this gregarious Limerick woman, as she gave them a bed for the night. I suspect some of her former colleagues in the Irish Women's Abortion Support Group might be less than pleased with her honest manner but it's refreshing to hear a less strident take on the issue. Ann has taken her stand-up show around Ireland and Britain. Whatever about Edinburgh audiences, what has been the Irish response? "Oh, mostly glacial," said Ann, bursting into infectious laughter again. It takes some strength to stand in front of a silent audience and talk jokingly about abortion. To do so in small towns in Ireland must be daunting. "Oh yes, you can see in their eyes, they are thinking, would she ever just go away and die. But I'm not going anywhere, not just yet." I ask about her family. "Oh we talk about anything except what I'm actually doing. They know I'm doing these gigs in Ireland but they say nothing. So I say nothing back." Life Pregnancy Care Services, a pro-life group, has noted an increase in demand for post-abortion counselling in recent years. The numbers of crisis pregnancies the agency is dealing with has fallen. Chief executive Ann Kennedy is uncertain if this reflects a genuine fall in numbers or perhaps that women are not choosing pro-life services. The group became involved in post-abortion counselling because, according to Kennedy, women were looking for it. She is also reserved about the emergence of the new Abortion Support Network. "Anything that supports women during a crisis pregnancy is a good thing," says Kennedy. Then she quickly adds, "that is, someone who helps them come to a decision that is meaningful for themselves and in the interests of the unborn child." Campaigners like Ann Rossiter believe groups that support women having abortions can also unwittingly prop up the culture of silence around the issue. An overriding need to maintain confidentiality for the sake of the client means the facts are often lost. **T**HIS, Rossiter believes, plays right into the hands of the Irish Government who is more than happy to stay silent too. She attributes the fear of speaking out to a number of usual culprits, "the Catholic Church, colonialism, the Famine perhaps". Peculiarly Rossiter also asserts that Irish mothers may be to blame. "Irish daughters are terrified of disappointing their mothers, more so than in any other culture I've lived among. Irish daughters will tell their friends, their sisters, their aunts but rarely their mothers about their abortions. Irish mothers need to start opening up to their daughters about their sexual lives. I had a great relationship with my mother but one thing we never discussed was my abortion." Mara Clark also finds the silence frustrating and she's accustomed to loud, angry protesters. "One day at the clinic in New York, I faced a line of people, all dressed up in their Sunday best, bibles in hand, praying. On each corner, they had positioned a contingent of Franciscan friars, with their grey wool robes, shaved heads and sandals. "Anyone who came out of the clinic would be chased down the block and abuse would be hurled at them." "At that point, I thought to myself I know I am righteous because I am the one who is holding this woman's hand in her hour of need." In the States, Clark witnessed receptionists at clinics being targeted and an abortion doctor's dry cleaners being informed of the work he did. I ask Dr Berry Kiely of the Pro-Life Campaign if she could see Irish protesters heading to London to protest at Clark's new Support Network. "It's not a road I would go down. Our movement has never been about public protests or displaying pictures of aborted foetuses. "We don't want people to just get emotional about the issue, but rather make them reflect on it some more. I respect those who do decide to protest like this though," she adds. I wonder how worried Mara Clark is about protests from Irish campaigners or pro-life activists in London. "I console myself with the fact that not so many people carry handguns here. "I also think most of the protesters will be from Ireland and I'm hoping it will be too much of a pain in the neck for them to get on a plane and come over." Clark laughs — "at least I hope".