

London – abortion capital of Ireland

Ireland's abortion laws force thousands of women to travel to England every year for the procedure. **Rebecca Taylor** investigates the support network that has developed around this lonely journey

It is easy to forget that in another part of the UK, just a short plane ride from London, a woman can face life imprisonment if she decides to end her pregnancy. Every year, around 1,500 women from Northern Ireland travel to England for abortions. Another 5,000 are estimated to come from the Republic of Ireland. Laws in both places deem the procedure illegal: in the south, the doctor faces life imprisonment; in the north, the penalty extends to the woman involved. It's estimated that around 180,000 such women have 'crossed the water' to London for the operation over the last four decades. They are usually alone, sometimes at a late stage of pregnancy and desperately in need of the support that their governments refuse to provide.

Now an underground network has been established in London to help them. 'Why, in the twenty-first century, in the Western world, is there still a country where it is against the law to end your pregnancy?' asks Mara Clarke, founder of the Abortion Support Network (ASN), a group of around 25 volunteers which was set up last November to help provide accommodation, information, money and transport to Irish women arriving in the capital for abortions.

While frequent, low-cost flights mean most women are able to come and go on the same day of their operation, for those who undertake late or complicated terminations, or for those who just want a sympathetic ear, accommodation offered by ASN members can provide a welcome respite.

'Anna was in an abusive relationship where the partner was attacking her and her child,' says Clarke, describing the 37 year old from the Republic who was the first woman to be helped by the ASN in December, when she stayed overnight at a volunteer's flat before having the abortion at a London clinic. 'She had just moved home to escape the abuse, but hadn't found any work. Then she found out she was pregnant; she felt there was no way she could go ahead with the pregnancy.' The group was able to help with £200 towards the costs of the £600 procedure. 'She was so relieved to have someone to talk to. She had felt totally isolated and alone in Ireland,' says Clarke.

'Our aim is to provide an empathetic, safe space,' says Clarke. Anonymity is crucial: 'We don't need to know their last names and we don't use ours.' In Ireland, a pregnancy can be terminated legally in only one situation: in order to save the life of the pregnant woman. Otherwise abortion is banned, even for pregnancies resulting from rape or incest, or in cases of foetal abnormality.

The ASN takes its cue from The Irish Women's Abortion Support Group (IWASG), which offered similar assistance here from the early 1980s to 2000. In her recent book, 'Ireland's Hidden Diaspora: The "Abortion Trail" and the Making of a London-Irish Underground', Ann Rossiter describes how the activities of the IWASG were shrouded in secrecy. In some cases, women would travel in disguise from Ireland in case they bumped into family or friends at the airport. In one instance in the 1980s, Rossiter records how an IWASG member came to the aid of two Irish women at Heathrow Airport who were being held by the security services under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. It had to be explained that they were on their way to an abortion clinic rather than to blow up London.



Northern Irish pro-choice campaigners in London

'I see women who are in a state of crisis, sometimes suicidal'

While this is one problem the new network is unlikely to have to contend with, there are many other barriers to women making the journey. 'Raising the money is the number one issue for many women,' says Clarke, 'and we are likely to see an increase in calls as it's even more of a factor at this time of year.' Unlike other types of medical procedure, abortion is not available free on the NHS to Northern Irish women. At Marie Stopes International, which carries out abortions for a large number of Irish women at its various London centres, the cost begins at £430 and rises to £1,665 for an operation after 19 weeks. And this is before flights, travel and possible childcare expenses for children at home are taken into account. 'The recession means that more women are seeking abortions,' says Clarke, 'especially older women who already have children. But it

also makes it harder to pay for them. I've heard of cases where women have turned to prostitution to fund abortions, and it could be happening again.'

These Irish women, dubbed 'abortion tourists' by UK tabloids, face enormous impediments. 'Abortion carries a huge stigma,' says Rosie Toner, a counsellor with the Irish Family Planning Association in Dublin. 'I see women who are in a state of crisis, sometimes suicidal. What are they going to tell their family and friends, or boss? How can they get money? If they have children, who will look after them? Many make the trip alone and in secret. They are very isolated.' Her centre is picketed by anti-abortion campaigners daily.

'There's often a high degree of deception involved in making the trip,' says Janet Pearce, lead nurse at Marie Stopes International's 24-hour advice line. 'Lots of Irish women make their bookings in the middle of the night. They are afraid of being overheard.'

Some of those who cannot muster the courage or resources to come to London are turning to an increasingly worrying alternative. The abortion drug RU486, also known as mifepristone, allows women to induce an abortion chemically, up to the ninth week of pregnancy. Sale of the drug is illegal in Ireland, but some women have bought the £60 pills on the internet, as they cannot afford to travel to mainland Britain for surgery. Now there are fears misuse of the pill could cause complications.

'The online products are not always what they say they are, and anecdotally we hear that women are taking it later than nine weeks,' says Gabrielle Malone, director of the Dublin-based Reproductive Choices, an arm of Marie Stopes International. 'I've also seen women who have used concoctions from herbal-medicine shops. They come to see me and say, "Do you think I'm all right?" Dear God, no, I don't!'

But there is a glimmer of hope. Last December, three Irish women began a challenge to Ireland's abortion laws in the European Court of Human Rights, arguing that the abortion ban has violated their human rights. A decision is expected towards the end of 2010, and if the court finds in their favour, it could be one small step to legalising abortion in Ireland. For women such as Anna, who make that journey 'over the water', that day cannot come soon enough.

Some names have been changed.

To contact the ASN call 07897 611593 or visit www.abortionsupport.org.uk.

'Ireland's Hidden Diaspora' by Ann Rossiter is available from www.word-power.co.uk at £8.