

TROUBLING IRELAND

**Abortion in Ireland:
Ignoring Reality**
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The death of Savita Halappanavar forced us, once again, to face up to the brutal reality of Ireland's restrictive abortion laws.

At the inquiry into Savita's death, doctor's admitted because her life was not in immediate danger, fearful of prosecution under Ireland's backward abortion laws, they refused her repeated requests for an abortion. Several days later when her life was at risk and she was legally entitled to one, it was too late to act and she died. This is the reality of abortion law in Ireland. Irish women are left at the mercy of ridiculous and dangerous legal distinctions that allow abortions only when there is a "real and substantial" risk to the life of the pregnant woman.

The recent "Protection of Life During Pregnancy" bill passed by the Dáil does little to protect women. Indeed, one of the most notable features and terrifying features of the Dáil debate was that the majority of Irish politicians were more interested in maintaining Ireland's ban on abortion and reassuring the Catholic Church than they were in protecting women's lives and well-being.

Abortion became illegal in Ireland under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act. One hundred and fifty years later, it is still illegal. Today, Ireland still has some of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world, with abortion being illegal in all circumstances except where there is a threat to the life of the pregnant woman. Yet, abortion is as much a fact of life as it is in Britain, the United States or any European country where it is legal. In the last thirty years more than 147,000 Irish women have travelled abroad for access to safe abortion.

Over the course of those same three decades the debate on Irish abortion has been conducted in a highly dysfunctional manner. For the most part, women who have had abortions remain invisible; their actions concealed under a veil of hypocrisy and political cowardice, so that the myth of an abortion-free Ireland can be maintained. It is assumed, as a matter of course, that the abortion debate is different here, that it is too sensitive, too controversial for Irish sensibilities. On the limited number of occasions when abortion is acknowledged the terms under which the debate is managed are extraordinarily limited. For many years the discussion was conducted in abstract, ethical and philosophical terms, which is one of the reasons why the 1992 X case was so important; why Praveen Halapanavar is to be commended for, in the midst of his grief, bringing the tragic death of his wife to public attention

Savita and Ms. X changed the nature of the debate by clarifying precisely the argument on which the whole debate about abortion rests. Do you think the rights of the woman, her life, her hopes, her well-being should be considered paramount? Or, do you think that a foetus, still invisible to the naked eye, should have rights that supersede those of the woman? In February 1992 and again in November 2012 Irish people were forced to answer those questions and overwhelmingly they sided with the woman. Thousands of people took to streets demanding that politicians act and make abortion legal in Ireland where a woman's life was a risk.

In the past 20 years there has been huge societal shift in attitudes towards abortion, so that today opinion polls and research consistently show wide support for access to abortion services within Ireland. Something politicians continue to ignore. Despite these levels of support the Irish electorate has never been given the opportunity to make abortion less restrictive or, indeed, to offer legal abortion.

Far too often public debate continues to focus on the extreme cases - where a woman's life or health is at risk or where a woman is a victim of rape or incest. Even pro-choice advocates seem more comfortable on this terrain, as somehow abortion is more justifiable in these cases because it is not really the woman's fault that she is faced with this decision.

However, reality again is very different. The vast majority of the 147,000 Irish women who had abortions in the last three decades did not decide to do so because their life was at risk, nor were they suicidal, nor had they been raped. They choose abortions for thousands of different and sometimes complicated reasons. They made a decision. Sometimes it was a difficult choice, sometimes it wasn't, but it was their decision to make. Instead of respecting and facilitating that choice the Irish State denies them their autonomy, brands them criminals, and forces them into exile.

There is nothing more fundamental for a human being than autonomy over her or his own body; it is essential to what it means to be a free, rational human being. If Irish women are denied the fundamental freedom to make rational, informed and ethical decisions about their own lives, their own bodies, their own personhood, then all the other freedoms that we have fought for and continue to fight for don't really amount to very much at all.

We have waited more than three decades for real action on abortion. How much longer must we wait for women to be afforded control over their own body and respect and acknowledgement for the decisions that they make?