

# **Ag aimsiú an fhírinne (finding the truth)**



*image 1*

## **How women in Ireland constructed their knowledge on abortion in a pre-legalised state.**

**Min Moussoulides**

**5962722**

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**Supervisor: Dr. Domitilla Olivieri**

**Second Reader: Dr. Eva Midden**

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## **Abstract**

How women form their knowledge about abortion in Ireland was researched, through 6 interviews of mothers and daughter using semi-structured interviews' based on feminist research methods. The outcomes of the interviews were analysed in an Irish context, considering previous Irish feminist scholars' work and in the context of Irish political and social history. How women found information was shown to have changed over time. Feminist activism and civic feminism played a huge role. Over time the movement for change in the laws about access to abortion grew stronger, as a result of civic feminism and better access to information. The movement was successful in changing Irish law by public vote.

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## **Introduction**

It was in late January, 2018, that Leo Varadkar, Ireland's Taoiseach<sup>1</sup>, announced that the Irish government would be holding a referendum later in the year, on whether or not the Irish people would remove the 8th amendment from the Constitution. This controversial and religiously motivated amendment, introduced in 1983 by popular vote, gives equal right to life to an unborn child and the mother, effectively criminalizing abortions in almost all instances. When I heard the news, I was sitting in the Amsterdam offices of Women On Waves (a Dutch non-governmental organisation) that campaigns for reproductive justice for women around the world. I was researching what moments had led to the Irish government's decision to allow an opportunity to REPEAL<sup>2</sup> the 8th amendment. This allowed me the chance to engage with in-depth analysis of the roles of both anti and pro-choice positions in Irish culture. Being Irish myself, I understood the importance of this referendum, and the enormity of this moment in Irish history. Estimates suggest 170,000 women have traveled to the UK to access abortion (Irish Times, 2018). Most remain silent about this experience, For the first time, the Irish public was being forced into critical thinking about the how the 8th amendment was affecting people's lives.

I had an abortion in my early 20s. My story is different to others, I had my abortion in Ireland due to having an ectopic pregnancy. I was treated so poorly while I was in the care of the maternity hospital. They gave me the termination in the chapel on the labour ward, gave me no information about what had just happened to me. The hospital did not provide me with painkillers or information on the medication I had taken, they also failed to warn me that I would still have a miscarriage. It took 2 weeks from when I first entered the hospital system with suspected ectopic pregnancy until my abortion. They sent me home while monitoring my blood. I was in a state of semi-pregnancy and in awful pain, I never understood why it took so long for them to give me the termination I needed.

My research included government documents where I discovered that my experience was because of the 8th amendment. Although ectopic pregnancies are non-viable, there is still a 'viable' foetus, and doctors cannot intervene until the foetus stops developing on its own. This putting my future fertility and life at risk due to possible complications from an untreated ectopic pregnancy.

Before the ectopic pregnancy diagnosis, I was actively seeking knowledge on the possibility of accessing an abortion. I was met with judgment and ignorance from official people with that information. My supports were friends and family, some of whom had already traveled for an abortion. Only on reflecting on this experience, in light of the REPEAL movement, did I

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<sup>1</sup> Taoiseach is the Irish word for Prime Minister

<sup>2</sup> REPEAL meaning repealing the 8th amendment movement

understand, how disempowered I was in this situation because this is a normalised position for women in Ireland when it comes to any form of maternal care.

This reflection on my own experience provided me with the research question for this thesis: how women in Ireland constructed their knowledges on abortion in a pre-legalized state. By this, I mean where women find the information on how to access an abortion, but also, on a more culturally complex level, how these knowledges affect the possibility of accessing an abortion.

All women have a different experience when it comes to learning about abortion, but we all develop our knowledges under the same system of oppression. For this reason, I will conduct interviews as my main method of enquiry, as this will offer me a broader sense of how other women constructed their knowledges. As information on abortion is restricted from public discourse, it often falls onto the mother to guide her daughter on this journey to learning about abortion. This is not to say that mothers always provide correct information, as many people's mothers are anti-choice. I will mention here that for the purpose of this thesis I will be referring to those who can get pregnant as women<sup>3</sup>. The 8th amendment affects trans men and non-binary people also and their voices are often erased from the debate, but for this context I will be using women. I will mostly referring to women who are Irish citizens, as if you are a refugee with restricted travel or lack of language there are a completely different set of barriers to accessing abortions.

As Ireland has been changing and evolving at a fast speed, particularly over the past 30 years, I want to include a broad spectrum of ages to cover the process. When deciding what age range, I wanted to include an age range of women who voted in the 1983 referendum right through to someone who will be voting for the first time ever. This means I will be interviewing mothers and daughters aged between 20-70.

Ireland is unique in that the universal ban on abortion was voted in by the people in recent years. There is a certain type of ideology that produces an outcome like this; an ideology of control of women's bodies and in particular the way motherhood and female sexuality has been treated. In order to give a full understand to this, I will only be using the theory created by Irish feminist scholars and articles by Irish writers all of whom are women. This way the thesis will be a snapshot of Irish life, based on Irish feminist theory.

Ultimately, I want to capture a moment in Irish history where women are reflecting on the past. For all these years, women have just accepted the barrier to accessing abortion and worked around it. Resigned to traveling to England as an option. In this moment in history, the blinkers have come off, and we can see that we have been working in a unfeasible system of how we access abortions. In order to best capture this moment I will fly home and interview the women in the week of the referendum to repeal the 8th amendment to the Constitution.

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<sup>3</sup> To read more on how we could have the REPEAL movement more inclusive I recommend Leslie Sherlock *Towards a Reproductive Justice Model in Ireland*

Each chapter will explore the different layers of knowledge formation and how women negotiate the barriers to information. In chapter one I will contextualise Ireland covering history, politics and religion, womanhood/motherhood and abortion. Next I will introduce the Irish feminist thinkers, and the role of civic feminism has played in knowledge formation. Then I will explain my methodology, explaining how I picked my interviewees and how I recorded the information. Next I will explore how I will using feminist research approach to the interviews. In chapter two I will introduce my interviewees and explore how they negotiate everyday institutions such as family and education, in relation to forming their knowledges on abortion. In chapter three I will explore where women look in make networks in the search for information. Here I will explore the roles of both official and unofficial avenues of enquiry. In chapter four I will examine the role of the REPEAL movement in broadening the knowledges of the nation and shattering the barriers to the truth.



## Chapter One

### Context, Irish Feminist Thinkers and Methodology

#### **Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the reader to the foundations of this thesis. Here, I will be contextualizing Ireland, and the contributing factors regarding knowledge formation about abortion.

I will explore the historical, political and religious contexts that have restricted the freedom of women. I will place womanhood and motherhood into this context, which is the root of the mass abuse experienced by women in Ireland. I will discuss abortion in an Irish context, describing what has been the discourse up to the present day and what decisions made in the past have led to an unworkable system, which repeatedly fails women. I will demonstrate this history of abortion in the form of a timeline.

I will define the main concepts that I will use. Irish feminism is the lens through which I will explore the role of women in Irish culture, focusing on the founding contemporary feminist theory and what it has contributed to the abortion debate. Next I will explore civic feminism, and the major role advocacy has played in access to knowledge, while also directly benefiting women in need of support. I will explain the roots of knowledge formation, as set out by feminist thinking on how Irish women have learned about abortion, meaning the way knowledge is built up over time. Then I will set out my research method. I will explain how I used a feminist research approach and created semi-structured interviews and how I conducted the interviews and gathered my findings. I will also outline the benefits of this style of research.

#### **1.1 Historical context**

The Republic of Ireland (henceforth Ireland) is a relatively new country, consisting of 26 of the 32 counties on the island of Ireland, having gained freedom from direct British rule in 1922 as the Irish Free State and then gaining full independence as the Republic of Ireland in 1937. Prior to this, Ireland experienced 800 years of British occupation.

Freedom for Ireland was won after *Cogadh na Saoirse*<sup>4</sup>, (January 1919 – July 1921). The signing of the Anglo – Irish Treaty<sup>5</sup> created the Irish Free State. The Irish people were divided over the terms of the agreement<sup>6</sup>, mainly the retention of 6 counties under British rule. This led to *Cogadh Cathartha na hÉireann*,<sup>7</sup> (June 1922 – May 1923). Irish republicans felt the signing was a betrayal to the Irish Republic while the Irish nationalists accepted the terms of the treaty. I

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<sup>4</sup> The Irish War of Independence

<sup>5</sup>The Anglo – Irish treaty refers to the Articles of Agreement for a Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland

<sup>6</sup> The agreement being Ireland would be completely independent from Great Britain but would remain within the British Empire.

<sup>7</sup> The Irish Civil War

bring attention to this point because each side formed a political party; *Fianna Fáil* (the republicans) and *Fine Gael* (the nationalists). These two parties would go on to be the two major political parties in Dáil Éireann<sup>8</sup> and control Irish politics and discourse right up to present day.

## **1.2 Political Context**

“In other countries a week may be a long time in politics; in Ireland a decade is but a moment.”  
(Molloy 1986, cited by Barry 1988. P317)

In Ireland, progress towards an emancipated country, with equality at its core, could be described as stagnant, until quite recently. The political leaders after the creation of the Irish Free State were the militants and rebels themselves, suddenly thrown into positions of creating the newly independent country from scratch. Social reform was almost impossible if not in line with the conservative policies of the two main political parties, *Fianna Fáil* and *Fine Gael*, policies that were in turn in line with the Catholic Church, policies and leadership that led to incarceration, abuse and torture of countless women and children.

## **1.3 Religious Context**

It is impossible to contextualize life in Ireland without explaining the importance of the role of the Catholic Church. The majority of Irish people have been Roman Catholics since before the foundation of the state, with a move towards secularism appearing only recently. The percentage of people describing themselves as Catholic fell from 84% in 2011 to 78% in 2016 (Central Statistics Office) . The numbers of practising Catholics, those who attend services has fallen from 91% to 30% over the period from 1972 to 2011.

Catholicism establishing itself as the dominant force through its authority in public institutions. The newly independent state did not have the resources to fund state institutions, so the government formed what Irish feminist scholar, Dr Ursula Barry described as a “*marriage of convenience*” (1988, p. 138) with the Church. Barry explains this as a “a critical alliance in a state which has never felt secure or stable” (1988, p. 138). The Catholic Church took a leading role in the running of healthcare, education and the voluntary, social and community services. With these sectors under their control, the church had the power to put Catholic teaching at the core of Irish lives, particularly regarding the role and control of women.

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<sup>8</sup> Irish national parliament

The Church also dominated the social sphere, as the location for major life events such as marriages, funerals, christening, communions, confirmations.<sup>9</sup> With Irish families being so large (a product of being a Catholic country) and the mandatory Sunday church attendance (which included a sermon on religious matters including national, local and personal matters), people were continuously exposed to the Church's ideologies. These teachings focussed on the formation of the family and the role of women. The local priest was the first point of contact for problems in personal lives, both in the form of open conversation and through the process of confession.<sup>10</sup> The church had the final say over all aspects of Irish life, and so making an active commitment to their strict moral teaching was integral part of Irish existence, both inside and outside the walls of the *séipéal*.<sup>11</sup> The control of women's lives and body became a focal point for the Catholic Church through restricting birth control and abortion.

#### **1.4 Womanhood and Motherhood**

“Travel just a branch or less down the average Irish family tree, and you’ll find these repeated patterns: the systemic imprisonment, punishment and forced exile of our own women: the illegal child trafficking, the abuse and torture” (Mullally, 2018, p. 3).

Under the Irish Free State’s first constitution in 1922, women in Ireland were granted the vote, Ireland being one of the first countries to do so (Quesney, 2015). So how did it happen that for the next 100 years women would be subject to unspeakable cruelty and control? Parallel to obtaining democratic freedom, women’s roles were prescribed for them in other ways. The family was enshrined in the constitution as “a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights’, and “confined women’s economic, social and political role within particular parameter in the home” (Quesney, 2015 p. 129) This meant that women's existence was not valid outside of the family structure. Women’s roles were further undermined by the implementation of oppressive Catholic social policies, alongside the Church’s powerful political platform which could “bolster a narrow and rigid ideology concerning women: compulsory motherhood, guilt ridden sexuality, opposition to birth control, self-sacrifice, and economic dependence” (Barry, 1988, p. 318). The Church's obsession with the control of women presented itself as protecting the family unit and Catholic morals. To put this into perspective, find below a short timeline of historical milestones of attempted emancipatory politics in Ireland that were opposed by the Church.

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<sup>9</sup> Christening happens generally at around 6 months old, communion happens around 7 years old and confirmations happening at 13 are the three commitment ceremonies you make to the Catholic Church as you grow up in this faith.

<sup>10</sup> Confession is a mandatory aspect of Catholicism, where a person goes and confesses to the priest all the sins they’ve committed from small to major crimes. In return the priest will dole out a punishment, normally in form of repeating prayers.

<sup>11</sup> The Irish word for church

## **Progress the church opposed.**

- 1944 - The sale of tampons
- 1970 – Women allowed to study at Trinity College Dublin
- 1973 – Married women being allowed to work in the civil service
- 1986 – Couples allowed to divorce – This referendum failed
- 1993 – The successful decriminalization of homosexuality
- 1995 – Second divorce referendum - Passed
- 2010 – The introduction of civil partnership for same sex couples
- 2013 – Legislation allowing for abortion if women's life is at risk
- 2015 – Equal marriage - Referendum to allow same sex couples to marry
- 2018 – REPEAL THE 8<sup>th</sup> AMENDMENT

Motherhood was placed in a prized position in Catholic discourse, and the state institutions operated to insure women remained pregnant. Mother and Baby homes and Magdalene Laundries<sup>12</sup> became the notorious settings for “fallen women.”<sup>13</sup> The babies were put up for adoption, institutionalized, illegally trafficked to America, used for medical testing or killed. Over the past few years, many stories have emerged about the treatment of the women and children in these institutions, exposing unimaginable mental, physical and sexual abuse. The Tuam babies<sup>14</sup> story gained much attention in Ireland and gave the nation a wakeup call to the Irish female reality.

Alongside the Church and state instilling stigma and shame,<sup>15</sup> other factors influenced the female experience in Ireland. The culture of secrecy has led to intense self-policing: the fear of someone finding out something that could hurt your image kept people in line. Heteronormative power structures, both in public and private life, left women in Ireland with no option other than to conform with Catholic ideologies. Women’s place in society was pushed to the margin, their

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<sup>12</sup> Institution where ‘problem’ women were sent to work. They were prisoners, doing backbreaking work for no pay. These women experienced the ultimate cruelty. The last one closed in 1995, for further information I would recommend this article

<<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/magdalene-laundries-i-often-wondered-why-were-they-so-cruel-1.3521600>>

<sup>13</sup> Fallen women refers to women who have become pregnant out of marriage.

<sup>14</sup> Tuam Babies. In the grounds of a mother and baby home in Tuam the remains of 800 babies were found in an unmarked mass grave. These babies were in the care of the Church after being separated from their mothers at birth. To read more I recommend this article

<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/03/mass-grave-of-babies-and-children-found-at-tuam-orphanage-in-ireland>>

<sup>15</sup> Shame is a massive aspect of womanhood in Ireland, to read more about shame and institutionalizing of women in Ireland I would recommend Clara Fischer’s article *Gender, nation and the politics of shame: Magdalene laundries and the Initiation of feminine transgression in modern Ireland*

fate left in the hands of husbands and fathers. Barry describes Ireland as having a textbook case of “feminization of poverty” (Barry, 1988, p. 318) that comes from “severely depressed economic conditions and anti-women legislation.....large families; inadequate health services; dependence on welfare; violence in the home and on the streets; care of the ill and the elderly; constant wrangling with state agencies; the tragedy of seeing reared children taking the emigrant boat/plane; stretching hopeless pay-packets in too many directions; and all the time responsible for keeping the show on the road.” (Barry, 1988, p. 318) The expectation of womanhood in Ireland was that of inevitable self-sacrificing motherhood. All women were living in the shadows of grotesque structural misogyny that is so much a part of the fibre of Irish existence that you forget about it, until you don’t...

### **1.5 Abortion**

“The Silence surrounding abortion has been deafening” (Smyth, 2015, p. 11)

For over 150 years, abortion has been illegal in Ireland. Upon independence, not unlike other countries that have been colonized by the British, Ireland took on their occupiers' law, in adopting the British 1861 Offences Against the Person Act. This laid out the death penalty for ‘post-quickening’ (the moment fetal movement is felt) abortions. But, unlike every other country in Europe (bar Malta) where access to abortion became gradually available through health care policies and emancipatory ideology, Ireland remained in the dark ages regarding reproductive rights. This is due to the Catholic Church's power and influence over the government and the population, in creating an anti-choice<sup>16</sup> society. Between government bodies teaching and operating with a firm anti-choice position, and the politicians opposed to any form of change, the topic of abortion was completely removed from Irish public debate. Irish feminist scholar Smyth states “the very word ‘abortion’ is unspeakable, shunned as too shocking, shameful, stark- and true...it has been banished from the discursive hubs of our society, including academe, the media and the Dail and effectively paraphrased out of conceptual discourse” (Smyth, 2015, p. 10).

Yet abortion is a reality in Ireland. The silence on the national level has just moved abortions into the realms of secrecy. A complete lack of education on the subject, paired with the deep stigma and shame surrounding abortion, means that those who seek them rarely share their experience. “We have to fight so hard here, I don’t think the kind of space from which analysis can emerge has been created yet” (Barry, citing Murphy, 1988, p. 321)

Despite the national denial, abortion happens and has been happening for a long time. When the UK decriminalized abortion in 1967, it became the main destination for Irish women wishing to end pregnancies. An average of 12 women per day travel to obtain abortions in the UK. It is conservatively estimated that over 170,000 women have made this journey (Q&A how many

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<sup>16</sup> *Anti-choice is another way of say pro-life. The name given to the people who disagree with abortions*

women and girls travel to the UK for abortions, 2018). Liverpool was the main destination for the Irish, due to a large second generation population there. I have heard from people who have travelled over for a termination, that there are so many Irish accents in the abortion clinics that they unofficially named it ‘the emerald suite.’

The ultimate commitment the Irish made to their anti-choice position was the 1983 referendum to include a constitutional ban on abortion. In a campaign that was dominated by Catholic ideology, clergy members, foreign funding, and misinformation, the 8th amendment to Article 40.3.3 was brought into action. It states:

“The State acknowledges the rights of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right” ( Bunreacht Na hÉireann, 1983).

This amendment ultimately meant that, no matter what the situation was, or the risk to the pregnant woman, she would not be able to access an abortion while the pregnancy was still viable. If the woman was caught having an abortion or a doctor assisted in a termination they would face jail time. The sentence was 12 years in prison, meaning if a woman was raped and became pregnant and was then convicted for having an abortion to terminate the subsequent pregnancy she would face a longer time in prison than her attacker. Ultimately it removed women's right to body autonomy. “But let us make no bones about it! We have lost the most basic protection of the legislative framework” (Barry, 1988, p. 319) The consequences of this amendment has been devastating for women. It has led to several high profile abortion-related court cases that have brought the issue out of the dark, normally at the expense of a woman in a desperate situation. I will now include a brief timeline of the discourse of abortion in Ireland.

### **Timeline of milestones of abortion discourse**

#### *1935 Criminal Law Amendment*

Outlawing the sale, advertising and importation of contraceptives into the Irish Free State.

#### *1969 Fertility Guidance Company Ltd*

The first ‘family planning’ clinic opens. This was originally a British company and would later become the Irish Family Planning Association

#### *1983 September The Eighth Amendment referendum*

#### *1985 Condom sales liberalise*

Allowing the sale of spermicides and condoms to people over eighteen without a prescription

#### *1992 - The X - Case*

This was a landmark case, as it was the first time the 8th amendment boundaries were tested. A 14 year old girl (Ms X) had become pregnant as a result of a rape and was suicidal. The girl and her parents booked the trip to England for the abortion. ]They contacted the *Garda Síochána*<sup>17</sup> to check if DNA for the aborted foetus could be used to investigate the case. The Attorney General then sought an injunction preventing the girl from travelling. The High Court upheld the injunction but the Supreme Court overturned it, establishing that the pregnant woman had the right to travel if her life was at risk of suicide.

1992- Three more referenda to deal with the issues that arose with the X case

- 1 - The state shall not prohibit the freedom of those wanting an abortion
- 2 - The state cannot prevent the distribution of information on access to abortion outside Ireland
- 3- The threat of suicide is grounds to access an abortion in Ireland (this referendum was not passed).

1995 Regulation of Information (Services Outside the State for Terminating Pregnancies

This act governs how abortion information is available in Ireland

March 2002 Another referendum

This referendum was to decide if the risk of suicide should be removed as grounds to access abortion. This failed 50.42% to 49.58%. Let me just repeat this fact, in 2002 half the population of Ireland did not believe a women should be able to end a pregnancy if she is at risk of killing herself.

July 2012 - The Abortion Rights Campaign Founded.

This marks the start of a very public REPEAL movement.

September 2012 - First March for Choice.

Organised by the Abortion Rights Campaign, this would become an annual march, the first one attracting 2,500, the attendance has grown dramatically over the last 6 years. The 2018 March for Choice attracting over 40,000 (Irish Times.2018)

October 2012 - Savita Halappanavar dies.

Savita Halappanavar died in a hospital in Ireland after being refused a termination following a diagnosis of a septic miscarriage. The baby was stillborn on the 24th of October and Halappanavar passed away on the 28th of October.

January 2014 The Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013.

Allowing for terminations when the pregnancy endangers a woman's life.

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<sup>17</sup> Garda Síochána is the Irish police force

2014 - The Ms Y Case.

Ms. Y, a young asylum seeker, arrived in Ireland already pregnant, after being raped in her home country. She was suicidal. Despite this being confirmed by a psychologist, she was not granted an abortion. Ms Y went on hunger strike and was force fed. At 25 weeks the baby was born via cesarean against the wishes of Ms Y.

December 2014 Miss P.

Miss P was pronounced brain dead, after a head trauma, while also being 18 weeks pregnant. Despite the wishes of the woman's partner and parents, Miss P's body was kept alive on life support, to protect the life of the foetus. The High Court ruled the doctors could switch off the life support.

2015 - Coalition to Repeal the 8th Amendment.

This marked the coming together of all the small grassroots organisations that had been supporting women and fighting to repeal the 8th amendment from the very start. This created a growing alliance of over 100 organisation

April 2017 Citizens' Assembly.

This was established by the government, and involved a chairperson and 99 citizens of the nation, chosen from the spectrum of Irish opinion on the matter, to examine the abortion situation in Ireland and make a recommendation to the *Oireachtas* (the Irish legislative body). The result was a shockingly high level of support for repealing the 8th amendment. There were 3 ballots of the members of the Citizens' Assembly. In the first ballot, 87% voted against retaining the 8th amendment. In the second ballot, 56% voted to amend or replace the amendment and in the third ballot, 57% recommended replacing it with a provision authorising the Government to address abortion.

September 2017 Referendum on the horizon.

The Taoiseach<sup>18</sup> Leo Varadkar proposed that there would be a referendum on the 8th amendment in April or May 2018

May 2018 Referendum to remove the 8th amendment.

On May 25th 2018, 66.4% of Irish voters voted to repeal the 8th Amendment and to allow the Dáil to legislate for abortion. A legal challenge brought by anti-choice individuals failed and legislation is currently being drafted to allow for full access to abortion for Irish women up to 12 weeks in a pregnancy and in limited circumstances after 12 weeks.

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<sup>18</sup> An Taoiseach is the Irish prime minister, Varadkar is the leader of Fine Gael and it also an openly gay man



Nearly every letter of the alphabet has been used protecting women's and children's anonymity in cases centered around abortion. As a woman in Ireland you know the moment you become pregnant you no longer have control over your body. The reality of this is that it is impossible not to think about abortion, what would you do, who could you trust. But where do you go to find the answers, who can you trust to give non-directive advice. Could I be the next big case?

## **2 Irish Feminist Thinkers**

Ireland is not a unique country in having restrictive abortion legislation, but it is unique in being a progressive western country in most other ways. The reality is, women have been historically brutalized and trampled on, since the creation of the state. This has required a certain Irish feminist discourse and narrative, one that encompasses the specific different conflicting interactions of Irish life; Religion, class, family, morals, sexuality, embodiment, systematic and historical abuse of women and a divided country with a civil war in living memory. The abortion issue has been the focal point for much of Irish feminist attention, as women having control over their reproductive choices is a fundamental aspect of equality.

### **2.1 Who They are**

Irish feminist academics are historically low in number, but what the movement lacked in numbers they made up for with power and drive. Feminists were critiquing and publishing work all the way through the 1980s, before the 8th amendment was introduced. At a time when the Church had a chokehold on the country, these women fought tirelessly for the rights of women by generating theory, engaging in community development and activism. Dr Ursula Barry, who is currently the Director of the Masters in Women, Gender & Society, in the school of Social Policy, Social Work & Social Justice at University College Dublin. Barry has done much writing on foetal rights and, in particular, the use of graphic imagery and language used by the Catholic Church for their anti-choice agenda. I will be exploring this theory in relation to how this affects women's internalized knowledge formation, as this anti-choice rhetoric is a prominent aspect of Irish life. With Barry's academic career spanning over 40 years within the field of feminism and women's studies, I will be turning to her work as the foundation of my understanding of women in Ireland.

Ailbhe Smyth was a founding director of the Women's Education, Resource and Research Centre (WERRC) University College Dublin (UCD). She was head of Women's Studies at UCD from 1990-2006, she is convenor for Feminist Open Forum, chair of the National LGBT Federation and a board member for Equality and Rights Alliance. Smyth has been prominent in the pro-choice movement from the start and become the spokeswoman and convenor for The Coalition to Repeal the 8th Amendment and become the face of the Repeal movement. Smyth has focused much attention on writing about abortion, the Church and the power structures that

have prevented progress. I will use her papers as theoretical guidance for understanding the abortion issue.

I will also be using the work of the newer wave of Irish feminist thinkers such as Dr Aideen Quilty and her writings about how abortion is dealt with in the education system and how this is internalised and manifested. Dr Quilty is the Director of UCD Women's Studies Outreach Program. Also Anne Quesney, Director of the Abortion Rights and is also a senior women's and human rights advocacy advisor, and a volunteer with the Abortion Support Network. I will reference her work in relation to contemporary abortion activism. I will be forming my knowledge also from outside the academic field, using resources produced by Irish feminist journalists, poets, artists, activists and writers, in order to produce a fully rounded, culturally situated body of research.

### **2.3 Civic Feminism**

The journey to reproductive freedom in Ireland has been about creating a movement strong enough to take on the Catholic Church. But it has also been about supporting women practically and directly. Civic feminism refers to forms of advocacy and direct support for the person in need. In the Irish context, this refers to aiding women who were seeking information or needing directive support about abortions.

Civic feminism works in small social groups as social actors, their work contributes to the larger pro-choice movement. Fletcher draws attention to the advocacy work of pro-choice groups such as ESCORT<sup>19</sup> and the role they have played in bridging the gap in the care, as advocates for reproductive justice (Fletcher 2015). "Civic feminism makes a difference by acting so as to enhance women's sense of belonging in spaces where they have been made to feel 'out of place'" (Fletcher, 2015, p. 120). For this thesis I will explore this idea further, in particular in relation to one of my interviewees who participated in this sort of organized civic feminism in the 1980's. Women have been supporting women to learn and obtain information on abortion completely outside formal state structures from the very beginning. The networks created by civic feminists, whether they are self identifying as civic feminists or not, has been a critical aspect of the pro-choice movement.

### **2.4 Knowledge Formation On Abortion Access**

Unlike other countries, where you might learn about abortion in school, from doctors or from your parents, this isn't the case in Ireland. Knowledge formation about abortion is not a linear, structured process, it is steeped in cultural context. Learning about abortion is a visceral experience. The information we are exposed to directly affects our relationship with our bodies.

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<sup>19</sup> ESCORT is a volunteer based feminist group that helps women in Ireland organize and access abortion the UK while also supporting them and providing care.

Irish feminist scholar Quilty A, citing Burke and Jackson, explains the form of knowledge formation; “the need for an expanded understanding of knowledge that moves beyond the assumption that knowledge is made through a rational process but that it also produced at the intuitive level, involving feelings, emotion and subjectivity” (Quilty, 2015, p. 161) This is the approach to knowledge formation I will use for this thesis, as it allows me the opportunity to explore the topic from a multi-layered approach, including the inner dialogue that all women in Ireland have, when they are presented with information from both pro-choice and Catholic anti-choice viewpoints. In this way I can create an alternative genealogy of abortion knowledge formation discourse, one that places the women and the women's experiences and feelings in the centre.

### **3 Methodology**

One thing that I have learned through my own journey to constructing knowledge on abortion is that everyone's experience is different, everyone is introduced to the topic in different ways. For this reason I have decided to conduct interviews as my main methodology. I wanted to find a method of enquiry that was produce the largest amount of unstandardised information. For this I decided to go with feminist research practice and designed a semi sturied interview that could be applicable to a rage of ages.

#### **3.1 Selecting The Interviewees**

For my research I wanted to capture a moment in Irish history, when the country contemplated, the topic of abortion with compassion for the first time. I planned on interviewing women that I had a personal connection with. I am aware that talking about abortion is difficult in Ireland because you never know what a women has experienced. I felt by interviewing women I know there was a mutual level of trust, so the women could talk freely.

Dublin has been the main hub of activism in the REPEAL movement, it is where the Dáil is located and has been at the heart of political action from the creation of the state. I am from Dublin, I have a taste for the city, the lingo, the atmosphere and I have my own history there. I selected interviewees who are from Dublin, people who have been socialized, educated, politicised and scandalized in the same city, I felt this would give a consistency to the narrative of the thesis. I decided to interview mothers and daughter because it felt appropriate to the subject. Having information on how to access abortions gives control over when women become mothers, and I felt that interviewing mothers would give depth to the debate. I included daughters to achieve a cross-generational profile of how, at different times in history, different information was available. Once I had decided to interview mothers and daughter I wanted to include a diverse age range so I could create a comparison. From this point I went in search of women in my life that fit these criteria.

### **3.2 Feminist Interviewing**

Using a feminist interviewing approach allowed me to generate broad-spectrum, qualitative information, covering my areas of interest. It also allowed the women a chance to introduce their own topics. I was particularly influenced by the work of Reinharz who has written about the merits of feminist interview research (Reinharz, 1992).

During planning, I considered my position in relation to the interviews. Amy Best (Best, 2013), feminist interview researcher, had explored the insider/outside relationship between self and the interview participant, I placed myself somewhere in the middle between the interviewees and the readers. Once deciding to research women from Dublin that I had a personal connection to, I became aware that I was much more an insider than an outsider. I had to be very conscious of asking the women to clarify a term or a comment that is culturally located in Ireland in order for it not to be lost in translation. I was also hyper aware of any assumptions about the women that I may have already made, having had a personal connection to them.

For my research, I conducted semi-structured interviews, which best fit the type of information I hoped to gather from my participants. I first formulated 5 base questions, starting off with an ice breaker question then continuing with open-ended questions. I also made a list of key areas of interest. If the interviewees mentioned any of these themes, I would direct the interview in that direction. This allowed me to come up with questions and generate new theory during the interview. Reinharz highlights the benefits of having the option for clarification during the interview, an option I found very useful in particular for the older women that I interviewed, due to their lived experience being so very different. They brought new themes that were not even on my radar.

Semi-structured interviewing allowed me to be respectful of each person's story. Even though these are all women to whom I have a personal connection, abortion is a difficult issue to talk about. This allowed the interviewees to share sensitive information with me if they wished to move the interview in that direction. My interview questions were mostly on matters of the past, on moments that might not have felt significant at the time but have all contributed to how we learn about abortion. Women's voices have not been listened to enough in Ireland, in fact they've been systemically silenced. I felt this was my opportunity to discuss a topic that very soon will become a thing of the past. These women's experiences will be forgotten, but I can bring these women and their stories into the academic discourse.

### **3.3 Conducting the Interview**

I flew back to Dublin in order to conduct the interviews in person (also to vote). To create a comfortable environment I offered to go to their homes for the interviews. All the interviews (both mothers and daughters) happened at each mother's home. I used a mobile phone with a recording app and a laptop with the questions open in a document. The way women learn about

abortion is not linear, so during the interview there was a lot of moving between different subjects. One minute we were talking about childhood, the next about the REPEAL movement. We talked until we covered all the areas I wanted to explore. This took between 34 minutes to 1 hour depending on the person.

### **3.4 Organising Interview Findings**

When I listened to all the interviews for the first time and I was delighted with the quality of information the women had shared. I transcribed all the interviews and started to separate out areas of interest. I found it easier to listen to the interviews rather than read them, so I would listen and highlight the areas in the text that I would use when it came to time for thesis writing. All of the women offered that if I needed to clarify anything, I could contact them, but nearly all the information was clear and useful.

### **Conclusion**

My aim with this section was to paint a picture of what life is like, being a woman in the Republic of Ireland. The Irish abortion situation does not exist in a vacuum, it is a result of our history, politics and religion. Having this background information will allow the reader to better understand my interviewees. I wanted to conceptualise womanhood and motherhood because they are interlinked and a critical part of this study. I included the timelines to allow the reader to refer back to where in history certain moments were happening, once I start introducing the women that I interviewed. By including the section on Irish feminism, I aimed to show how the abortion issue has been framed within the field of women studies/gender studies in Ireland, both historically and currently. I introduced the idea of civic feminism and the important and essential aspect of who women in Ireland learn about abortion from. I explored the approach to knowledge formation that I will be using. Re-thinking the way we think knowledge is formed is hugely applicable within the Irish abortion context. Next I explored the method of research I would be doing, i.e. a feminist interview method, with semi-structured interviews. I expressed the benefits of this style of research, and how it allowed me to get the most texture out of my interview, while respecting the women and their stories.

## Chapter Two

### Primary Institutions

#### **Introduction**

For Irish women, finding correct information about abortion is complex. This topic has been controlled and silenced, through systems that stem from a deep connection between the Catholic Church and Irish state. Through the constitutional ban on abortion, the state washed its hands of its responsibility to provide this essential, and possibly life saving, education.

Despite this aggressive, anti-choice position, young women still need and are accessing information about this essential aspect of reproductive health. This teaching happens outside the standard realms of learning practices. 'Ireland's constitutional construction of women as 'mothers' and 'homemakers' has impacted on attitudes to female sexuality and reproduction'. As cited by Boyle 'we take for granted particular constructions of the individual and of their relationship to the world.' (Boyle, 1997, p. 6) 'This is particularly permanent in the case of abortion, when social and cultural contexts still frame the category of 'women and reproductive policy', resulting in inevitable stigma' (Quesney, 2015, p. 133) How does this stigma affect the process of knowledge formed in everyday instructions? What happens when there is a conflict between the role of 'homemaker' and educator? Mothers in Ireland encounter this clash between moral code and lived reality when it comes to educating their children about abortion. This issue is dealt with on a family by family case: all of us become aware at different ages of this mysterious topic, your ears became sensitive to slang words and phrases designed to hide the true meanings, The keepers of these meanings are the women themselves; mothers, sisters, friends, who out of necessity created new ways to find, share and hide information.

In this chapter I will introduce the reader to the everyday institutions that girls and young women in Ireland meet, in the early stages of learning about abortion. For this section of my research I will be exploring the information given by mothers to daughters. What dialogue was happening at home and how was the topic introduced. These stories matter, as do the places which our stories unfold, are housed, are memories, are living, as they involve transforming lived experience into language' (Quilty, 2015, p. 160) This will help us get an understanding of contrasting conversations that were happening behind closed doors. I will then go on to explore formal education: what information, if any, was given in the Irish school system. I will explore to what extent the Catholic Church affected the knowledge formed during this time.

## 1.1 Meet the Mothers and Daughters

Firstly, I would like to introduce the six women I interviewed for this research. The women have all provided me with some personal information to help contextualize them and their experiences. As mentioned above, the participants all have a personal connection to me, and therefore I will explain my relationship to each. I have changed their names to respect the personal identities of my interviewees. Two of the women provide pictures from for attending pro-choice demonstration in Dublin, Ireland. I have included them later in the thesis.

### **Aileen, Born 1-1-1949** - Mother

A graduate from DCU (Dublin City University) and a qualified High Scope trainer . She is passionate about the Irish language and is particularly interested in teaching Irish to children. She has published two books that teach Irish to children through song and rhythm.

### **Sioda, Born 21-4-1983** Daughter

*“I’m a 35 year old woman. I’ve live in Dublin, Ireland all my life. I’ve worked in film and television industry for over 10 years, starting as a video and now the programing department of the IFI<sup>20</sup>. I’m passionate about equality, human and animal rights, music, film and the arts”*

Aileen is my great aunt, the sister of my grandmother from my mother’s side. Aileen and her daughter Sioda played a large role in my upbringing. I spent many weekends and evenings with them when I was younger, and we have continued to be close into adulthood.

### **Doireann Born 26-1-1957** Mother

*“Grew up in hard times, in an Ireland that was strictly ruled by the Catholic Church, and education for girls was mostly provided by nuns. Slaps<sup>21</sup> were administered freely to children, no matter how small. Recognizing the bullying and cruelty of organized religion aged 14. Stopped going to church. Reared four children without religion and was seen by some as mad. Had various jobs in restaurants and sewing. Went back to education at 40 becoming an adult literacy and personal development tutor, working mainly with childcare workers and women in addiction recovery. Always left-wing in my political beliefs”*

### **Eimear Born 23-11-1990** - Daughter

*“I went to an all-girls secondary school where I was exposed to the reality of Catholic guilt for the first time. In art college (IADT) I studied Animation, I wrote an essay ‘Catholic guilt in Irish film’. Then I went on to study tax and I now work as a Chartered Tax Advisor. Studying tax was completely new for me, my background was so different to everyone. I have never had the desire*

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<sup>20</sup> Ifi is the Irish Film Institute

<sup>21</sup> A slap is Irish slang for snack

*to travel abroad for work or even holidays. I much prefer the idea of staying in Ireland, there is still so much left here to do. I collect cacti and have about 20 in my apartment. If I ever wanted to travel, it would be to see a huge cactus growing in the wild”*

Doireann and her daughter Eimear are very old close friends of myself and my mother. Eimear was in my class in primary school, we became friends and our mothers became good friends through the school. I also spent lots of time with Doireann, Eimer and their family when I was smaller because they would mind me when my mother was working. We have all continued to stay in touch over the past 23 years, both the mothers and the daughters.

**Caoilfhionn Born 24/11/1970 - Mother**

*“I am an artist, a maker and mender, nature lover and community activist. Founding member of Common Ground Bray and Wicklow Sudbury School. I have 25 years' experience in community art, 22 years of attachment parenting, 10 years blogging and writing. I believe in climate change and our personal responsibility in relation to its cause and its solutions. I believe the answer is in community and communication”*

**Fiona 11/06/1998 - Daughter**

*“I'm going into my second year of a photography BA and I've done previous courses in Film and similar areas. I like to use my photography in a more candid style then structured shoots as I think it conveys people and their personality and actions more accurately”*

Caoilfhionn works with my mother at both Common Ground and Wicklow Sudbury school. Caoilfhionn and her family including Fiona have become very close family friends and they share many of the same political, ethical and parenting views.

**2 How Mothers Talk to Daughters About Abortion**

I will explore the various ways my interviewees were introduced to abortion by their mothers. For women in Ireland the mother, or a significant older female family member, would be the first place that you would learn about important female matters. The shape of these conversations change depending on the time in history. The language has evolved as this issue has been debated in the public sphere, and in turn has affected how knowledge is formed and passed on. I will explore how three of the women I interviewed first heard or talked about abortion from their mothers.



### **Aileen's story**

At the very start of my interview with Aileen, I was asking her if she had ever had a conversation with her mother (my great grandmother) about what would happen if she had an unintended pregnancy:

*'Jesus no Min, are you joking me, I'm from Catholic Ireland, my mother was very religious so no, Jesus no, sure you weren't even allowed to kiss a boy'*

I went on to ask if she heard about it from any other relatives and she remembered this story from when she was a little girl.

*'I remember being with her (Aileen's mother) with a group of women and they were discussing what they would do if they didn't want 'it' and they were talking about 'oh god I drank a bottle of gin and was in and out of the hot bath all night and it worked for me' and I'm sitting there about 5 or 6 and she goes (Aileen's mother) 'well it didn't work for me' and they all looked at me'*

This conversation would have taken place in the mid 1950s, about 30 years before condoms could be sold freely without a prescription. (Mullally, 2018, p. 9) and would have been symptomatic of Ireland at the time. Stories of trial and error highlighting the conflicting realities of mothering in a strict Catholic country. Although Aileen's mother does not use the word abortion, nor was talking directly to her, overhearing this conversation introduced the idea of controlling family size, while at the same time normalizing the idea, because of the context where she hears this. Indirectly, Aileen is being introduced to a uniquely Irish world of the conflicting narratives surrounding abortion.

### **Eimear and Doireann's story**

When I asked Eimear if she ever talked to Doireann about what would happen if she has an unintended pregnancy

*'we talked about it all the time, see I hate children and growing up I always said I didn't want kids and people always say the same thing, even now, 'aw sure you'll change your mind'.....and my mam would always say joking, 'sure I'll look after it for you, cause you won't, but that was joking because it would never have been an option, for me having an unintended pregnancy would have been an inconvenience'*

Doireann had created an environment where herself and Eimear could keep in active conversation about the topic. This directive approach to knowledge sharing meant that Eimear

felt empowered to make her own choices, despite the anti-choice backdrop that existed in the larger community. Doireann's approach has been shaped by her own experience. She became a mother at a young age. Despite coming from a Catholic family, her own mother had given her a progressive attitude and empowered her to make choices

*'in the late 1970s when I got pregnant she said if you want to have the baby and stay at home we'll get you a flat. We weren't a wealthy family, normal, just paying the bills. If you want to have the baby and have him adopted that's ok. If you want to have an abortion that's ok, my mother said that to me in late 74'* Doireann

Doireann's mother was realistic, with a clear idea of the reality of becoming a mother. Despite the state's best efforts of shaming families into silencing abortion information, Doireann's mother's life experience and wisdom broke the barrier of silence. Like many home situations at the time, there was a contrast between the moral image being presented and the realities of raising a daughter.

### **Fiona's Story**

Fiona is the only one of the women I interviewed that has grown up with proper access to social media. She was 20 at time of interview, Fiona's whole adult life has corresponded with the massive increase in coverage of the abortion issue and the enormous push to have the referendum. When I asked her about conversations she had with her mother she explained:

*'I remember originally saying to her (Caoilfhionn), because I'm never the kind of person that's like, how would we deal this this?, it was more like this is how I would deal with it. Not that I would exclude them, I wouldn't ask them what to do. I remember saying to my mum I don't know if I could have an abortion, but I want to have the choice'* Fiona

Fiona's access to social media meant that, by the click of a button, she had all the information about abortion that had previously been impossible to find alone. Similar to Eimear's story, Fiona's open relationship with her mother allowed her to find her own position and come to this conversation as an equal. They could have an informed discussion about what is, ultimately, a personal health care matter.

### **3 Education**

Within an Irish context, it is almost impossible to find someone who has had the experience of learning about abortion from the school system. In Ireland, 96% of Primary Schools and 91% of Secondary Schools ('Diversity of Patronage' 2012) are state sanctioned and run or owned by the Catholic Church. This means that schools have the capacity to silence some subjects, such as abortion. According to A Resource for Teachers and Boards of Management 1995 'The Catholic school in the formulation of its policy should reflect Catholic moral teaching on sexual matters. Even more fundamentally, it needs to be specific in excluding approaches which are inconsistent with the foundation of Catholic moral thought' (O'Sullivan, cited by Quilty, 2015 p.162). The reality of this strict moral code meant children from the ages of 4-18 years old who went to Catholic schools were attending institutions that had an actively anti-abortion teaching.

#### **Sioda's Story**

Sioda is the only interviewee who actively remembers the topic of abortion being brought up in secondary school. She recalls a student in her class asking her teacher about abortion.

*'She was quite a new teacher at the time, I think we were her first class... She was stumped that someone had brought it up, and she just said look, 'I'm afraid it's not on the curriculum so I can't discuss it with you, I'm not allowed'* Sioda

This is a strong message to hear as a young person. Your teacher who has been put in charge of your learning is forbidden to discuss this topic with you. Sioda internalised all the moral teachings she was exposed to in school and this impacted on how she felt about herself and her womanhood. She explains

*'when you're 12 you suddenly realize what your body is capable of and what could happen to you, I think I went through a weird kind of phase of feeling this huge responsibility, all my education had been done in a Catholic Gaelscoil (Irish speaking school), all the imagery you are given about Mary<sup>22</sup> and all the kinds of stuff that women are supposed to take the burden and they have no choice and I kind of felt that as a 12 year old. I remember thinking, god, this is something that might happen to me one day and it's just something I must do.'* Sioda

Sioda's inner thoughts from this young age show the damage caused by this approach to moral teachings around sex, sexuality and womanhood. Before she had even entered puberty, she felt the weight of this responsibility that womanhood carried and was preparing herself for the

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<sup>22</sup> Mary is the mother of Jesus

sacrifices that come with it. Girls in Ireland are socialized from a young age to adhere with this moral code with no real concept of the context. Girls are taught to feel guilty and shameful about something they haven't even thought about. The absence of the topic in school ended up teaching more than any class teaching could have.

## **Conclusion**

It being a woman in Ireland is hard, and it must be even harder to raise one. You can see a dramatic change between Aileen's and Fiona's stories when it comes to knowledge gained from their mothers. In 50 years, the conversation has drastically moved on. Each generation adds a new take on the Irish abortion situation, creating new ways to support children, both directly and indirectly.

The absence of knowledge is as damaging as knowledge based in religious morality. Where there is absence, there is the possibility of religious moral absorption just from existing in such a Catholic country. The state puts this responsibility to educate on mothers, who are expected to pretend their children are not sexually active until they come home 'in trouble.' Women in Ireland have been dealing with abortion behind closed doors for hundreds of years, like Aileen's mother and her friends, discussing how to end a pregnancy without any medical or scientific guidance. Dioreann's mother, despite being Catholic, understood the struggles of motherhood and wanted to give her daughter a choice, in spite of the state's criminalising stance on abortion. The future will be brighter, with a new generation of young women who are taking back control of the abortion issue and are being given correct, and empowering, knowledge about the topic. The Irish school system is still mostly being run with moral teachings following the Catholic Church. This will really need to change if we are to create an Ireland that doesn't want its young women confused and overwhelmed just by having a female body.



*Image 2 - Doireann 6th from the left, 1983*

*“I would have been involved, I would have gone out with banners with other comrades, females, with a big banner that we held up outside the Dail<sup>23</sup> and various other things saying ‘women have the right to know’” Doireann*

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<sup>23</sup> Irish house of parliament

## **Chapter Three**

### **Casting The Net- In Search of Knowledge.**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter will engage with how women in Ireland gain their knowledge about abortion, both practically and ideologically. This is not a linear process, as there is never a guarantee that the source of the information will be truthful, unbiased or non-judgmental. At various times during Irish history, there have been different barriers to this information, but several affecting factors remained a continual feature. Firstly, I will explore the place of practical medical information: what role healthcare professionals, governmental and non-governmental bodies play in the formation of knowledge. Then I will explore the role of civic feminism in how advocates provided the support and information for women seeking abortions, out of sight from politics and mainstream Catholic discourse. I will then go on to explore the role of social spaces and how they play a key role in access to information, particularly in a pre-internet Ireland. Lastly, I will explore the role of the Catholic Church and in particular the role of the graphic imagery and language used when they talk about abortion.

#### **1. Official Providers Of Information**

There are a number of structural factors that block accessing knowledge on abortion directly from healthcare providers. Before the introduction of 1995 Regulation of Information (Services Outside the State for Terminating Pregnancies) Act (The Irish Statute Book.ie), religious fanatic group SPUC<sup>24</sup> had attacked the family planning services and student unions, over their providing of information on how to access abortion. The family planning services were taken to court in 1988<sup>25</sup> for providing this information. This culminated in a High Court case<sup>26</sup> leading to a ruling that prevented these agencies from providing women with information on how to access abortions overseas. SPUC took the student unions to court for the same reason. (Mullally, 2018). The introduction of the 1995 Regulation of Information Act allowed for women to access abortion information but only directly from doctors, specific agencies and individual counselors, stating that doctors do not have to give information on accessing abortion if they have an objection. The state left the family planning services as gatekeepers to the information. In addition, information would not be displayed publicly, becoming accessible only to those who had the confidence to seek it out, and only then given the information to contact abortion

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<sup>24</sup> SPUC The society for the protection of the unborn child

<sup>25</sup> 1988 SPUC v. family planning services

<sup>26</sup> High Court Case AG v. Open Door Counselling and Dublin Well Women providers

services abroad. Maeve Taylor, Senior Policy and Advocacy Officer with the IFPA<sup>27</sup> points out “Unlike any other medical treatment situation, the continuum of care is broken, the onus shifts onto the patient to make contact”(Taylor,2015,p181).

## 1.2 General Practitioners

In most healthcare situations, a person in need of medical information or support would first go to their General Practitioner (GP). GP’s in Ireland have the freedom of refusing this information on the basis of ‘moral objection’, a concept that is generally rooted in Catholic, anti-choice ideology.

When I discovered I was unintentionally pregnant, my first point of call was my GP in the university (University College Dublin). I expected to receive all the practical information I needed on how to access an abortion; phone numbers for clinics in the UK, phone numbers for the family planning centres in Dublin, how to access counselling services. Also I expected to receive some emotional reassurance that there were options and that I had a choice. This was my regular GP and I found her supportive and kind. Once I revealed the pregnancy, I explained that I hadn't decided if I wanted to continue the pregnancy yet. Her tone and approach completely changed. She wasn't openly anti-abortion but she really put pressure on me to continue with the pregnancy. I explained that I didn't feel ready to have a baby nor did I have the resources to support a child. She in turn told me there were many organisations that help young mothers. Having just finished a degree in social policy, I was aware this wasn't the case. She then proceeded to encourage me to read books on the developmental stages of a pregnancy. Leaving her office I felt scared, disempowered, judged and emotionally vulnerable. Women in Ireland are aware that this reaction is a possibility when seeking advice about abortions, I hadn't expected it from a GP in a student centre.

The topic of distrust in doctors' reactions, in the search for knowledge on abortion, was brought up by Sioda in her interview. She brings attention to the problem of having a family doctor that you share with your relatives and the community. When I asked her why she didn't talk to her doctor about how to access an abortion.

*“She (Sioda’s grandmother) had gone to that doctor’s father and then the father had retired and she started going to his daughter and I think it was purely because she was the family’s doctor I just felt I wasn’t as comfortable, I had been going to her from when I was very young and I wasn’t as comfortable talking about.. Now again I never tried talking to my family doctor about*

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<sup>27</sup> Irish Family Planning Association

*it, so maybe I'm making an assumption, but a friend of mine had had a slightly negative experience with her family doctor about looking for information about the pill and the family doctor didn't want to talk to her, they wanted to talk to her parents instead .” Sioda*

This demonstrated that, in pursuit of knowledge, an Irish woman needed to be aware that she would have to be careful where she searched. There was also a real fear, as in this example, that it might come back to her parents, as was the case with Sioda's friend. This also demonstrates the pressure on young women to uphold an image of sexual purity, which in turn reinforces the barriers to accessing knowledge. According to Taylor “the information itself is treated as odious and hazardous and those who avail of this information...are stigmatized”(Taylor,2015,pp176)

### **1.3 The Well Woman Clinic and the Irish Family Planning Association**

The Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) was established in 1969 and The Well Woman Clinic (WWC) in 1978. These organisations are the biggest providers of knowledge on family planning in Ireland. Both organisations provide a range of healthcare services for women. As family planning services they are also two of the few organisations allowed to provide information on accessing abortions, under the 1995 Act, but only under the strict restrictions set out in that legislation. For example, as I mentioned above, the law states they cannot directly make contact with an abortion clinic on behalf of the patient, but they can provide the necessary pre and post abortion care.

Aileen, Sioda, Caoilfhionn, Doireann and Eimear all mentioned the Well Women Clinic as a place they felt they could go for for information on reproductive health, as some had already been in contact for other services. This organisation provided the services that were unavailable elsewhere in Irish healthcare. I made contact with the WWC, hoping to access the crisis pregnancy counselling service that involved an abortion consultation, the person running the support phone line was cold and unfriendly. In the pursuit of gaining knowledge on how to access an abortion I found that I was repeatedly blocked, physically, by the restrictions on access to information, and also mentally, by the attitudes of those who had the authority to provide information. Women are aware of this potential to block their access through the subtleties of attitude, and it can cause great fear and concern. For example, Eimear expressed this fear when I had asked her where she would go for information on how to access an abortion. She talked about searching for the knowledge in advance of her ever needing to use it to protect herself from a negative reaction.

*“ I know it may be 2018 but you can literally pick up a phone in a distressed state of mind and the person on the other end can literally be biased and the most unhelpful and finding out I was*



*pregnant for me that's the worst possible thing that could happen...I was afraid I could have said anything or done anything, I could be so panicked and so stressed....If the person who picked up tried to sway and I was in a distressed state I don't know what I would have done.” Eimear*

This again demonstrates the disempowered position of women when they seek out information about abortion. This element of chance is unacceptable, when we are talking about a life saving service. The doctors and agencies placed in control of the knowledge are not legally required to provide it, but if they do provide information there is no requirement to provide unbiased information, other than a restriction on advocating abortion and a requirement that the information be “truthful and objective” (Sections 3 and 5 of the Regulation of Information Act 1995) . There is no official state body that acts as an advocate for women and the pregnant during the search for information, leaving them vulnerable to the attitudes of the individual person that deals with them

## **2. Civic Feminism**

As mentioned in chapter one, civic feminism has played a large role in Ireland's pro-choice movement. This is not one group: there are many small groups that have taken up the role of advocate. Fletcher characterises this form of feminism by “small-scale, relatively short-lived, practice-focused groups who organise so as to have a beneficial impact on women’s lives”(Fletcher, 2015, p119) There is an extensive abortion help network that exists completely outside the realms of government bodies. These people have single handedly been supporting women's rights to reproductive justice both from Ireland and places abroad. In the 1980s, Doireann, one of the interview participants, took part in civic feminism while she was involved with the Socialist movement. Through a landline phone in her apartment that she shared with her friend and small son, Doireann and her friend would provide women in need of an abortion the number to a support network in the UK. These phone-lines were among the only lifelines to women in a pre-internet Ireland.

*“Phone lines were connected to different people’s homes and we’d get phone calls say between 2 and 4 so many days a week with women ringing us looking for the phone number and we had to ask certain questions, they were put something along the lines of ‘are you sure you know what you’re doing’ ‘have you got any support around this?’” Doireann*

The number they were passing on would be to a further support network, although Doireann couldn’t remember to what exact group they referred people. She mentioned another London based Irish Women’s Support Network and spoke about what services they provided.

*“If a woman had to go over and she had no money, someone would pick her up at the airport, bring her to their home, give her a bed for the night, sofa, depending, it would be like us looking after somebody that had nowhere to go, you’d look after them whatever your home looked like, also maybe bring them to the clinic and help them get back to, but also pay for it, they obviously did fundraising in England” Doireann*

Doireann was at the forefront of the distribution of knowledge on how to access abortions, at a time when people were being taken to court for this kind of action. These phone-lines and phone numbers were the only option that provided support for many women. Their importance would continue to be a major feature of the civic feminist movement.

## **2.1 The Number**

‘The number’ (a phone number for finding information on abortion) has taken many forms but always meant the same thing: a safety line for those with an unintended pregnancy. You can find this number written on nearly all bathroom doors throughout Dublin city even today when the internet has taken over most information distribution. Sometimes you see someone has scribbled it out and someone has re-written it with an even stronger pen as a sign of protest, refusing to be silenced. The number means options, it means support, it means knowledge. Like the women who rang Doireann’s phone, women could call up and receive direct information on how to access an abortion, without the concerns that come with contacting state run services. Social spaces played a key role in the accessibility to this number. During my interview with Caoilfhionn, she mentioned that she was always aware of ‘the number’ as an option, should she need to find out how to access abortion services, when she was a young woman in early 1990s Dublin.

*“At college, the number would be available in the women's toilets..... a few bars and clubs in town that would have stuff in the loos” Caoilfhionn*

Sioda also mentioned the number as a possible option to contact, had she needed the information on how to access an abortion.

*“someone used to graffiti a number onto the door in one of the toilets, so there was some number you could ring for information. And I do remember at the back of Hotpress<sup>28</sup>, there was a number, I didn’t know, I was aware of the fact that some of these numbers weren’t what they were saying they were, now I really know.” Sioda*

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<sup>28</sup>Hotpress is a Dublin alternative based music and politics magazine

‘The number’ or in other words, the civic feminist at the other end of the phone line has been one of Ireland’s biggest sources of information on abortion. This underground network of activists and advocates have saved many women's lives and prevented countless women from experiencing forced pregnancies. The placement of ‘the number’ has been key to its accessibility, a women can write the number down quickly and not worry about someone finding out who she is contacting. The placement in student bathrooms, bars, clubs and alternative magazines meant it was unlikely to be noticed by people who are not searching for this specific piece of knowledge.

### **3. The Presence Of The Church**

It is impossible to ignore the influence of the Catholic Church and their particular approach to promoting their anti-choice message. As long as I can remember, every weekend, outside prominent locations in Dublin City, there would be a group of old men holding up extremely graphic (fake) imagery of what was presented as aborted foetuses, along with a banner that said abortion is murder. When I was a small girl, my mother always covered my eyes, but they are impossible to ignore. I was exposed to this imagery before anyone had a chance to explain the complexity, it is impossible not to internalise such a shocking message when it is part of daily life.

Barry explains the particular type of abortion discourse that we have in Ireland as one that is characterised by graphic imagery and brutal language targeting young people in particular. Barry uses the theory of Foetal Rights (Barry, 2015) to explain why this form of iconography has been enacted in Ireland. “Women are seen as an ecosystem, ‘delicate and dangerous’ which the fetus inhabits and consequently this ecosystem must be subjected to strict management and regulation” (Barry citing Duden, 2015, p108). Similarly, “The foetus in utero has become a metaphor for ‘man’ in space floating free attached only by the umbilical cord to the spaceship. But what is the mother in this metaphor? She is empty space” (Barry citing Rotman, 2015, p108). With the anti-choice ideology stemming from such a deep rooted place of disrespect and disregard for the lives of women you can start to understand the battle faced by those trying to support and educate women.

Graphic imagery is a theme of the anti-choice side and so it became part of Irish life. Most young women have seen these pictures before even learning about reproductive health. This can affect your relationship with your body and can also determine how comfortable you are in seeking out

knowledge on how to access abortion. The women interviewed all mentioned the graphic imagery and the impact it has had and is still having on them (coming up to the referendum there was a massive increase in the types of graphic imagery used). Sioda recounts her experience of this type of exposure

*“ walking on O’Connell Street and there would be anti-choice campaigners with horrific posters, horrific imagery, and very loud and aggressive and I remember my mam kind of holding onto our hands tighter pulling us past these people”* Sioda

When I asked Sioda how this made her feel she replied

*“I was conflicted, actually if I’m really honest I was conflicted because I remember around the age of 12 we started going into town on our own, me and people from my class, we were targeted.....to have to realize at 12 that even though you don’t in anyway feel like a woman, your body is capable of doing this, it’s so disturbing”* Sioda

Sioda was forced to into examining her own womanhood before it was appropriate. The people disseminating such imagery had created an internal dialog that forced her to reexamine her body and what it was capable of doing. Placing this into the context of knowledge formation, it can be argued that before Sioda even had the chance to learn the truth about abortion, or even about her reproductive health she was made to feel uncomfortable about the topic.

When I was interviewing Eimear, I asked when she became aware there was a pro-choice movement she replied.

*“I’ve always know there was anti-choice movement because they don’t hold back on their imagery and even I remember walking through town years ago walking up o’Connell street and they’d have pictures of photoshopped foetus”* Eimear

Like Sioda, the anti-choice graphic iconography reached Eimear’s consciousness before she became aware that there was a pro-choice side. Anti-choice discourse is the first shock of awareness of abortion for young women, and it is this shock that brings them into an awareness of a wider debate on the issue. This has a profound effect on young women. Barry explains this process as “a hostile deconstruction of women’s embodiment and bodily integrity, based primarily on the unequal distribution of reproductive justice” (Barry, 2015, p114). Before women can engage with any form of pro-choice knowledge, they must first experience the anti-choice propaganda.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explored the options available to women in relation to gaining knowledge on abortion. I started off by exploring what official avenues are available to women by exploring the role of doctors and the family planning agencies. I discussed several barriers to accessing knowledge on abortion from these agencies. Next I examined the role of civic feminism and how an underground network of advocates are providing the care and information denied to women in Ireland. I then engaged with the importance of social spaces as a place for circulating an important phone number. Finally I explored the role the anti-choice side play in the formation of knowledge, particularly in relation to personal embodiment through the use of graphic imagery.



*Image 3, Taken by Fiona at REPEAL protest 2018*

## **Chapter Four**

### **The REPEAL Movement**

‘Get your rosaries off my ovaries’ (Popular call at pro-choice protests in Ireland)

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I will engage with the REPEAL movement. This term, in an Irish context, refers to the contemporary social movement that successfully campaigned to remove the 8th amendment from the Irish Constitution in May 2018. Firstly, I will explore the background to the foundation of REPEAL and what are the features of the new movement. I will explore the role social media played, in that it created a platform through which the REPEAL movement could share information and organize. I will explore how this movement caused an unexpected sea-change around how abortion is talked about in Irish discourse, as a direct result of the growth of knowledge. I will engage with how the REPEAL movement affected how knowledge formation occurred, both on a personal and national level, after finally exposing the horrors women had been experiencing.

#### **1 Who Is The REPEAL Movement?**

Firstly, I will introduce the first wave of abortion rights activists, the Anti-Amendment Movement in 1983; Smyth, Barry and Doireann (my interviewee) belonged to this movement. Then I will go on to explore who are the new wave of REPEAL campaigners.

##### **1.1 The Anti-Amendment Movement 1983**

From the moment it became clear there would be a referendum on the introduction of the 8th amendment to the Irish Constitution in 1983, there has been a visible opposing side. Unfortunately their attempts at preventing the introduction of the amendment failed. Some affecting factors included lack of experience in organizing this kind of movement and lack of communication, pre- internet and pre- mobile phones, and in an era of immense church power (Mullally,2018). The state and Church worked together on a campaign that ultimately introduced the 8th amendment, directly affecting the lives of countless women and children for the next 36 years. The Yes vote receiving 67% of the votes while the no side 33% (TheJournal.ie,2018). At the time, anti-choice opinions dominated public discourse, while those promoting the pro-choice position were kept on the fringe. Smyth spoke of the dangers of being anti-amendment: “you were definitely putting yourself out there as someone who - whatever background - as a radical”(Smyth,2015,2018) Many members from this original group would continue fighting

tirelessly for removal of the 8th and for the reproductive rights of people in Ireland. A prominent figure in both the Anti-Amendment Movement and REPEAL movement, Smyth comments on why it has taken much a long time to achieve this: “we have had, and still have, a really vibrant, determined, clear-thinking and dedicated women’s movement from 1970s. I think it shows you how incredibly powerful these particle forces can be when they’re masses against you”(Smyth,2018,p134)

## **1.2 REPEAL 2018**

It would be difficult to pinpoint exactly when the 2018 REPEAL movement started, as it has existed under different names and forms over the past several years. I personally became aware of the movement after the 2012 March For Choice (mentioned in the timeline). For the purpose of this thesis, I will be focusing on the time between 2015-2018, as it was during this period that the topic spilled over into mainstream consciousness. The REPEAL movement and its change makers have taken a number of different forms, using any platform possible to gain attention for the movement.

One of the noticeable differences is that a huge number of young people got engaged with the REPEAL movement. From the 1990s, there had been a move away from the Catholic Church, following exposure of the clerical child sex abuse scandal. Smyth explains, during these years “you see a weakening of the power of the Church in relation to the society as a whole, but specifically in relation to its correlation with the state”(Smyth,2018,p134). This has opened the space for nearly two generations to grow up in an Ireland different to what existed in 1983. This generation has hugely benefited from “being more open about your sexuality and about your own sexual behaviour, your sexlife...that makes it easier to talk about personal experiences to do with abortion”(Smyth 2018,0138) Also there is a difference in the way the REPEAL movement has gained public attention. The new generation of activists is confident, creative and unashamed, wanting to live in and Ireland that reflects this. This created the perfect storm of activists, both those “who have stayed the course and fought civil rights for decades, and a new generation agitating with righteous impatience”(Mullally, 2018,p2-3).

## **2 The Internet**

The internet has played a massively important role in the REPEAL movement. This platform gives space to activists to discuss strategies, plan events and share information quickly and widely. This also created an opportunity for women to access abortions much more cheaply than traveling to the UK.



Women on Waves, sister organisation Women on Web (WOW), provide the abortion pill<sup>29</sup> by post, to women who have made contact with their service via the internet. A woman must first answer 20 questions about her medical health, then a certified medical Doctor reviews the case and pills are dispatched. This opened up access to abortion to women unable to travel due to financial, physical or mental health barriers. Between the years 2010-2015, 5060 women from Ireland made contact with WOW (WomenOnWeb,2016) seeking their service. In Ireland, 3 women a day end unwanted pregnancies with abortion pills they have obtained over the internet from safe organisations like women on web but also from the black market, risking a 14 years prison<sup>30</sup> sentence should it be proven they had taken them.

## **2.1 Social Media**

The use of social media by the REPEAL movement has been one of the most powerful tools, used to amplify their message. Mainstream media outlets have been historically biased<sup>31</sup> and have failed to adequately report the movement. Diverse activists have formed a myriad creative ways of sharing information, educating the public and creating a space for women to share their experiences with abortion. There have been countless fantastic collectives and groups who operated through social media using the medium to promote a pro-choice position. Many people first became aware that was an active REPEAL movement by coming across a social media post.

Fiona, who was 19 years old at the time of the referendum and only knows of a time with very vocal pro-choice groups, commented that she got all her knowledge about abortion by accessing facts from the internet.

*“I got a lot of my information online, interestingly enough through twitter is where I get a lot more of my political information.... There is a few pro-choice groups (I follow) and articles and then just questions, it'd go to the internet if i had questions”* Fiona

There is no longer a barrier to feminist politics, young women in Ireland are becoming politically engaged through social media. With the risk of receiving biased or judgmental advice removed, young women can learn about their reproductive choices with confidence.

Artists For Choice have contributed massively to the REPEAL movement. Through providing correct scientific information in a creative medium, they made their knowledge about abortion very accessible. Their message connected with people. Sioda talked about learning from Artists for Choice;

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<sup>29</sup> Women on Web provide the early abortion pill that can be used by women who are under 9 weeks pregnant.

<sup>30</sup> Under the 8th Amendment obtaining or assisting in a illegal abortion is punishable by a 14 year prison sentence

<sup>31</sup> For example before nation televised and radio 6' o'clock news the Angelus is played.

*“It was a factual, empathetic approach and they would have different artists feature each week, twitter was a big part of it for me for accessing information from them and they would have different artists that they would give the artist’s opinions of why the 8<sup>th</sup> should be repealed, at that stage I didn’t even know what the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment was, so they informed me, they were a big source of information about what the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment actually was....any they (artists for REPEAL) just presented (the information) it in a really common sense way, in a very gentle way, it was like the total opposite to the anti-choice side’s approach, it was a very pro-women, pro-choice obviously but also pro- medical facts you know”Sioda*

The creative style of activism performed by Artists For Choice online spilled over into street activism. They are the creators of one the most iconic images of the movement, a simple 8 with an X. This image was printed onto badges that the artists would sell in prominent locations around Dublin. Badges became a tool of promotion for the pro-choice movement, with different groups creating their own designs. In the days leading up to the referendum, it was not uncommon to see people wearing many different REPEAL badges. Without social media, groups would not have platforms to organise such large scale activism.

### **3. Making the Personal Political - Women Speak Up**

One of the most powerful aspects of the REPEAL movement is that, for the first time in Irish history, women are telling their stories about accessing abortions. The numbers are staggering. At least 170,000 women have travelled to the UK. This number excludes those who have accessed the abortion pill or have travelled to other countries. Each of these women has had a harrowing story that deserves to be heard. For too long, Ireland ignored these women’s existence, and women in turn stayed silent, in fear of people's reactions. It was a vicious cycle of secrets and lies.

#### **3.1 Storytelling as Activism**

As mentioned above, for the first time in Irish history, women were open about their abortion stories. This became an integral part of the REPEAL movement. A Facebook group was created called ‘In Her Shoes - Women of the Eighth’. It started off as a place for women to share their story about accessing abortions abroad or by pill. Each story was accompanied by a picture of the women's feet in their shoes. Every single story was completely different, each heartbreaking for different reasons. On my Facebook news feed, in the run-up to the referendum vote, every other post was a story from ‘in her shoes’. I genuinely believe the majority of people in Ireland had no idea of the horrors women had experienced under the 8th amendment, because women never told anyone, shamed into silence. Seeing the numbers of likes and shares on the posts was a clear indicator that a sea-change was happening in the way the nation viewed women’s right to choice. “Advocacy has a long tradition of storytelling, with the strategic use of stories by

organisations having long-since been recognised for their ability to create...collective identity and issue framing”(Digital Storytelling - Abortion Rights,2018).

The REPEAL movement has been shaped by digital storytelling in one form or another. Pro-choice campaigners have moved away from linear ideas about knowledge formation, presented in mainstream discourse, and instead have focused on creatively exposing truths. The anti-choice voice had always been both physically and metaphysically louder in Ireland, simply because of how their voices and images scream in your face, chase you down the street, scaring you when you least expect it. Their voice had the support of the Church and the state. But now there is a new voice, that started as a whisper and has gotten louder and stronger the more people joined in. Instead of screaming at you, these voices are compassionate, kind, healing and redemptive. Even for women who haven't shared their story, reading words of support, shock and apology from strangers removes the feeling of isolation.

#### **4, Raising a Nation's Consciousness**

There is no going back now.

It would be hard to put a finger on what factor created this most dramatic change of public opinion on abortion, but I attribute a large part to women being allowed the space to share their stories for the first time. There has been a process of internal de-stigmatisation for most women in Ireland during the course of the REPEAL movement. This stigma had been formed by lack of or inadequate correct information about the process of having an abortion. Clear facts and figures about the lived experiences of the women who needed an abortion had been completely missing from the conversation. I ask the interviewees what they had learned about abortion through the course of the campaign.

*“ I didn't know that if a women had cancer and she was pregnant that she would have to travel to get the termination before she could treat her own health, I actually didn't know that (voices rises)” Aileen*

Me: They also do a urine test before each chemo treatment

*“See I didn't know this, I DID NOT KNOW THAT, I think that's disgraceful” Aileen*

As Aileen has demonstrated here, when thinking about a ban on abortion, people can forget that that means a blanket ban. No means no. Not in any case. No matter if the woman is already a mother or how sick she is. The Irish state would rather see her die than perform an abortion. This

also highlights the very problem when there is no transparency; you only find this knowledge out when you are in the situation.

*“In a weird way I don’t think until recently that I thought of it as an Irish issue, I don't think I realised how unusual, how backward, how behind we are....I don't think I had thought about the whole traveling over to the UK thing, like women having to do it, like for abortions, I wasn't aware of any of that.....It was just never talked about”* Fiona

For Fiona, realising that women are exiled from the country was shocking. It is easy to forget about this if you are not dealing with the problem directly. Even as I write, 12 more women will make the journey today.

I feel elated when I think about Fiona. Thanks to the referendum result, she will never have to deal with ‘the trip’. Throughout my early 20s I supported some friends in organising ‘the trip’ and it is upsetting, expensive and very worrying. I am so delighted that her generation will not know this hardship.

## **5, THE RESULT!**

On the 25th of May 2018, the people of Ireland voted in favor of removing the 8th amendment from the Constitution, 66% of Ireland voted in favour while 32% voted against (IrishTimes.2018). Words fail to express the happiness and relief at this result that was felt collectively by anyone involved with the campaign. The margin had been predicted as very close, even in the last few weeks leading up to the vote, with no-one being sure what way it would go. 100,000 Irish citizens registered to vote for the first time before this referendum (Irish Times,2018). Part of the tactics of the REPEAL movement was helping people to register to vote. 40,000 Irish people who had emigrated were eligible to vote and there was a massive movement to get people home to vote. I flew home 5 days before the vote in order to conduct the interviews and get involved with some last minute campaigning.

The Yes result brought with it two waves of happiness, particularly for anyone who had personally supported someone to access an abortion. The first wave was joy for the future of Ireland: we had created a legacy for an Ireland that includes bodily autonomy for women, ‘My body. My choice’! I experienced such deep pride for Ireland like I had never have before. I felt that people are decent after all, they are not all these close minded Catholic sheep that had dominated the 1983 referendum. I was ecstatic about the message this result sent to the Catholic Church: your reign is over, you can just go back under a rock.

The second wave came as a mix of sadness, for all the women who never got to see this moment. Women who were sent to the Magdalene Laundries and the Mother and Baby homes, who were rejected by and disavowed by a state too backwards to see them as people. When I cast my vote, I was thinking about those women, the '*fallen women*' who will never see this progress.

The referendum was won by the REPEAL because the nation as a whole gained knowledge about abortion. The campaigners were armed with scientific facts and clear information, that they could talk to people about their fears. The misinformation surrounding abortion knowledge was shocking. The campaigners took the time to talk to everyone, helping people to alleviate their fears. Knowledge production and circulation has played a vital role in this movement, cross-generational people of Ireland banded together and educated the nation's consciousness.

### **Conclusion**

In this section I have introduced the REPEAL movement. Firstly, I identified who the current REPEAL movement is and where its genealogy lies. I explored how the current group's use of the internet has been crucial to their success. I examined some of the ways in which social media has been used in the movement, from Artists for Choice to In Her Shoes. I explored the idea of digital storytelling as activism. I looked at how the current REPEAL movement has shaped the consciousness of the whole nation with the power of knowledge, and for this first time this knowledge was coming from women's real life experiences of having abortion. Then I explored the result and what it means for Ireland's future.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I set out to explore how women in Ireland constructed their knowledge on abortion, in a pre-legalised state. I have explored the factors affecting how this knowledge is created and tracked how this has changed over time, particularly with access to the internet. For chapter one, I contextualised Ireland: I started off by exploring the historical, political and religious context, how these three factors have worked together to create a system of oppression. Then I placed womanhood / motherhood and abortion into this context. I explored how, systemically, the Irish state and Catholic Church have been controlling and dictating how women live their lives. Next I explored the work of Irish feminist thinkers, how they produced knowledge for Irish women, taking into account the specific layers of oppression experienced by Irish women. This whole exploration is designed to show how difficult it was for women to access knowledge that was not tainted by the Catholic Church. Next I explored Civic feminism, as a form of advocacy that has been essential in accessing information. I described my methodology, where I explained about my feminist research methods that I used for the interviewing process, from choosing my methods, to considering the findings.

In chapter two, firstly I introduced my six interviewees, then I explored the roles of primary institutions in the way women began to construct their knowledge on abortion. I focused on what information women got from their mothers, if any. Then I went on to explore the role of education, how schools approached the topic of abortion within the boundaries of the restricted laws.

In chapter three, I explored what happened when women cast the net outside of primary institutions in search of knowledge on how to access abortion. For this I first explored the roles of the official providers of information on how to access abortion; these are doctors and family planning agencies. I looked at what barriers to accessing this information were in place and how civic feminist created a lifeline in the form of a phone number for access the information to get an abortion. Then I explored the role the Church played in affecting young women's knowledge formation about abortion, particular with graphic imagery, how this was internalized.

In chapter four, I described the REPEAL movement. Firstly, I explored the genealogy of the movement and introduced the current movement. I explored the importance of the internet and social media to the movement. I explored the importance of women sharing their abortion stories, stories that allowed for the first time knowledge on abortion to be informed by women's experiences. I finished off by exploring how these stories contributed to Irish people voting to remove the 8th amendment, allowing for women to have the dignity to access abortion safely on home soil.

In conclusion, I can say that the way women constructed their knowledge on abortion was largely prescribed by the state on the surface level. Due to the church- state relationship, women's experiences with abortion were removed from the public discourse. Despite this denial, civic feminist provided a pro-choice avenue for Irish women to learn about accessing abortions. The invention of the internet changed how knowledge about abortion was circulated, now Irish women could access information directly.

Over time, activism and improved access to information empowered increasing numbers of women to believe in their reproductive rights, to fight for the right to access abortion in Ireland and to vote for that change. Civic feminism played a huge part in the run-up to the referendum vote, telling personal stories, getting people home to vote and registered to vote. Telling the stories of real Irish women that helped to sway voters towards a yes vote for change.

How women constructed their knowledge changed over time and each change was built on what went before from the feminist activism of the 1980s right through to the individual story telling of 2018. In this thesis, I have explored the stories of six Irish women in the age range 20 to 70, to explore the changes in how they gained knowledge on abortion, but their six stories reflect the changes, but also how the knowledge Irish women gained changed Ireland.

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Image 2, No Name, 1983, 'Women Have The Right To Know', Dublin, Ireland

Image 3, 'Fiona', 2018, 'Repeal', Dublin, Ireland