

'I was forced to remain pregnant against my will'

Dispatch



By James Rothwell
in Dublin

Sitting in the kitchen of her terrace home in Dublin's suburbs, Niamh Crudden remembers the day she learned her baby was going to die. "When we went for the 20-week scan, we were so excited to see the baby for the first time," she told *The Daily Telegraph*.

"Suddenly the midwife went quiet. Another came in and they said her kidneys didn't look right. The next day, a specialist told me Eabha would not survive."

Her child was suffering from a fatal kidney abnormality; the 36-year-old wished to minimise her daughters' suffering and terminate the pregnancy. But in Ireland, abortion is effectively banned under the eighth amendment of the constitution, which puts the life of a woman and her unborn child on equal footing. This means terminations are only allowed if the mother's life is at risk.

As Ireland prepares for a referendum next Friday on whether to repeal the amendment, Ms Crudden says she feels obliged to tell her story nearly two years after that scan.

The current regime has forced thousands of Irish women, including rape victims, to travel to England for terminations and register their baby's death in an unfamiliar town before returning home to wait for the ashes to arrive in a package.

Those who cannot afford to "travel" must wait for a miscarriage, carry the pregnancy to term or resort to taking illegal abortion pills bought online, which risks a prison sentence of up to 14 years.

But while many support reform, a growing number are unimpressed by the alternative: unrestricted access to abortion for up to 12 weeks. Terminations in later term pregnancies would be permitted in cases such as Ms Crudden's, where there is no hope of the baby surviving.

Support for the pro-choice Yes

I hope it's a Yes, but when it's all over I just want to be left alone. Then I can grieve'

campaign has gradually narrowed, falling from a comfortable majority of 56 per cent in January to just 44 per cent this week, with nearly one in five voters still undecided.

Tim Jackson, a member of the No campaign Love Both, says he believes voters are "waking up" to the dangers of allowing "abortion on demand" which he fears will significantly increase the likelihood of unwanted or disabled babies being terminated.

"The government has really shot itself in the foot by bringing forward such extreme legislation that shows little to no regard for unborn babies throughout their time in the womb," he says.

"We in Ireland know that we can do better for mothers in crisis and we have to continue trying to improve those services whilst also respecting the one shot at life that that little baby in the womb has."

The Yes campaign says repealing the eighth amendment will pave the way for a more compassionate law that would spare women the stigma and distress of a termination in exile.

Ms Crudden says she could barely eat or sleep, let alone plan a legally complicated, expensive and distressing trip to England. "I couldn't decide what to do. I could not bear the idea of carrying her to term. She'd leave the warmth and safe of the womb, come out into a cold environment, gasp and die." A termination felt like the "kindest" option, she says. But in the end, the decision was made for her; shortly after the diagnosis, Eabha's heart stopped.

"I knew my baby was going to die anyway, so if we were offered a termination I would have taken it. Instead I was forced to remain pregnant against my will," she says.

"I was devastated. And I was angry."

As the vote approaches, Dublin's streets have been filled with women, and a few men, wearing black "Repeal" jumpers and handing out pro-choice leaflets.

Among them is Vicky Conway, a spokesman for Lawyers for Choice. "Women don't have autonomy over their pregnancies, but they need to be able to make the decision themselves because they have



the welfare of their families to consider," she says, adding that under the current rules women with cancer can be denied treatment if it risks harm to the foetus.

The vote is also forcing the country to confront its relationship with the Catholic Church, which Dr Peter Boylan, a spokesman for Doctors for Choice, says is partly to blame for Ireland having some of the toughest abortion laws in Europe.

"The Catholic Church has been unduly influential on our constitution since the foundation of the state," he says. "Our constitution is profoundly hypocritical - it effectively outlaws abortion unless the woman is going to die but there is another amendment that says it is fine if you do it abroad."

Ireland has already voted to legalise same sex marriage and elected Leo Varadkar, its first openly gay prime minister, who is himself in favour of Yes.

But whereas Dublin is highly likely to vote Yes, the outcome in rural areas is harder to predict.

"To some extent it is a facsimile of the Brexit vote, in that in Dublin you will get the impression there is mainly support for Yes but in rural areas it is very different," explains John McGuirk, a senior member of the pro-life Save the 8th campaign. He is

"horrified" by the stories of women forced to travel or take illegal pills and feels deep sympathy, but claims they are "a minority of cases".

"People might say to me, you are a man, you don't have a uterus so you should not have an opinion, but I spent nine months in a uterus and my view is we must protect the development of an unborn child."

One of the key battlegrounds is County Roscommon in the west, which rejected same sex marriage in 2015. Here, roads are dotted with graphic anti-abortion signs and residents are far less vocal, as even discussing abortion is taboo.

Father John Cullen, the priest at Roscommon Sacred Heart Church, is particularly concerned about the government's 12-week proposal. "I genuinely have a problem with it on the basis that over the past years there has been a lot of progressive legislation to ensure people who are vulnerable and have disabilities are treated equally ... but removing the law to protect the unborn is a serious breach of compassion."

Meanwhile, Maria Ni Mhathuna, a 37-year-old Save the 8th campaigner, wants Ireland to focus on offering support and counselling for women seeking an abortion, instead of allowing open access to terminations.

"Abortion is really about discrimination as it's often the case the vulnerable such as those with disabilities are targeted," she says.

"[In cases of rape] I don't believe that the baby should be held responsible for the crime of the father, which is what happens in that situation," she says. "A violent act should not be met with another violent act."

Another No campaigner, who asked not to be named, says he has been warning voters in Roscommon that Ireland "will end up like England" if the eighth amendment is repealed.

"Abortion destroys societies. They allow abortion over there and now look what is happening with all the knife crime in London," the 77-year-old says.

"Listen to Mother Teresa - she said a nation that kills babies in the womb has no soul," he adds, brandishing a set of rosary beads.

Back in Dublin, Ms Crudden has started to rebuild her life and recently gave birth to a healthy daughter.

But if Ireland votes for repeal on Friday, she will not be joining Yes campaigners for celebrations in the streets.

"I hope it's a Yes, but when it's all over I just want to be left alone," she says. "Then I can grieve."

Right to decide Abortion laws across the world

UK: Abortion allowed up to 24 weeks - but must be approved by two doctors. Abortions beyond 24 weeks are only allowed in certain circumstances, such as the mother's life being put at risk or the child facing severe disabilities

Italy: Up to 90 days + one week of reflection period. After 90 days abortion only allowed to save the mother's life or if a fetal abnormality is identified

Poland: Up to 12 weeks if there is a grave threat to the mother's health, the foetus is irrevocably damaged or the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest

Netherlands: Up to 22 weeks

US: Abortion legal but each state can regulate or set limits. Nine states have no time restrictions on abortion, three ban abortion after 28 weeks. Iowa is debating on a controversial bill that would prohibit doctors from aborting if a fetal heartbeat is detected

El Salvador: Banned in all circumstances, including rape. Activists claim some women have been imprisoned after miscarrying

North Korea: Allowed "for important reasons", which are not specified. The person who carried out the procedure is criminally responsibly, not the woman