



National Women's Council of Ireland
Comhairle Náisiúnta na mBan in Éirinn

Every WOMAN



**Affordable, accessible healthcare options
for women and girls in Ireland**

Abortion and its place in the Constitution of Ireland is a highly contested issue that leads to emotionally-charged and polarised debate. We know that for many people it is not the most important issue on the current political agenda. Few people think about abortion and pregnancy care until, for whatever personal reason, they have to think about it. In addition to those in urgent need of care, we know from our members that the Eighth Amendment casts a shadow over the daily lives of women and girls. It needs to be resolved for everyone's benefit.

Our hope is to build a sensitive and inclusive consensus that acknowledges people's experience of pregnancy and family life in all its diversity and complexity. Our aim is to build a shared understanding of what reproductive services we need that will enable all women and girls to realise their potential. This means facing, with honesty, openness and compassion, complex issues relating to life choices, fertility control and pregnancy care. We invite others who share our hopes and aims to join us in this conversation.





Context

The National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) is Ireland's national women's membership organisation representing 180 member groups and a growing number of individual members. We develop and promote policies and measures that are based on the diverse experiences of women. We work to ensure women's equal access, participation and recognition in Irish society. Together we are building a society that creates equality for women's life decisions.

One way in which equality is realised is through women's control of their fertility, education, contraception and maternal healthcare. This is why health and reproductive health have been a core area of NWCI's work for many years. We were closely involved in improving access to contraception, increasing maternity entitlements, advocating for affordable, quality childcare and most recently, ensuring women-centred maternity services.

As part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020 the Government has committed to develop a Women's Health Action Plan. It is in the context of our participation in the development of this plan that we are calling for the realisation of NWCI's model for reproductive healthcare.

When considering development of reproductive healthcare services in Ireland, we must also identify legal and Constitutional barriers. As part of current public discussions concerning the Eighth Amendment (Art. 40.3.3) we must address the restrictions that the Constitution places on the care of women and girls and how it interferes in the relationship between doctor and patients.



Every Woman – Ensuring quality, universal, lifelong reproductive healthcare for women and girls in Ireland

Put women's health and lives first

A model for providing caring, comprehensive reproductive healthcare services for women and girls:

- Where the complexities of real life are being recognised in a non-judgmental way.
- Where education and non-directive support are available in order to ensure the best decisions and outcomes.
- Where women's and girls' health and well-being are being protected.
- Where a woman who needs to end a pregnancy can be cared for in Ireland.
- Where care options are accessible and affordable for all women and girls, whatever their circumstances or beliefs.
- Where we support those who provide care for women and girls.



Every Woman - Our model for reproductive healthcare services

Reproductive health matters at all stages of our lives. It begins before adolescence with sexual health education and continues beyond the years of reproduction with post-reproductive services. Reproductive health is important for all individuals, couples and families in Ireland, with most women and men needing support from reproductive services at some time in their lives.

Reproductive health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, not merely the absence of disease, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes. It combines people’s ability to have a satisfying and safe sex life, the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to bear children.

NWCI advocates for the provision of comprehensive reproductive and sexual health services that are designed around the lives of women and girls.



A model for reproductive healthcare includes:

Priority area	Including
Relationship and sexual health education	<p>Relationship and sexual education programmes in school</p> <p>Consent programmes for young people and public information campaigns</p>
Affordable and accessible contraception	<p>Access to contraception, including long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARC) and emergency contraception</p>
Sexual and reproductive health services	<p>Specialist treatment for reproductive diseases</p> <p>Screening and treatment for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV</p>
Comprehensive pregnancy care, including abortion when needed	<p>Pre-conceptual care, including fertility treatment</p> <p>Maternity care, ante and post-natal care</p> <p>Abortion and abortion after-care</p>
Reproductive cancer care	<p>Vaccination, screening and treatment</p>
Menopause services	<p>Supports and treatments as women transition through menopause</p> <p>Support and advice around fertility and contraception during perimenopause</p>

Like all health services, reproductive health services should be based on a number of key principles:

- **Private:** The confidentiality between the doctor and the patient must be protected. All decisions should be private, personal and confidential.
- **Accessible:** Care options should be publicly funded and available to all through the public health system.
- **Comprehensive:** Services should provide for all reproductive health needs of women and girls.
- **High quality:** Services must comply with best medical practice, standards and safeguards.
- **Adequately funded:** Services should receive appropriate funding that ensures timely access.



Our model for reproductive health and the Eighth Amendment

We will only achieve our model for reproductive health if we:

- **Prioritise** funding and planning for comprehensive reproductive health services.
- **Ensure** the health and well-being of a woman or girl is prioritised over the forced continuation of a pregnancy. Treatment must not be denied or delayed because a woman is pregnant.
- **Recognise** abortion as a necessary element of obstetric care.
- **Acknowledge** that women and girls need to end pregnancies for many reasons and that those reasons should be respected and remain private.
- **Remove** criminal sanctions for people seeking to end a pregnancy.
- **Allow** medical professionals to provide quality, non-judgmental services within the public health system.

We aim to ensure comprehensive, quality, universal reproductive healthcare services for women and girls in Ireland. The Eighth Amendment to the Constitution is a fundamental barrier to achieving this.

Equality – Caring for all women who are pregnant in Ireland

Women's access to reproductive healthcare is fundamental to women's family and life decisions and essential for women's equality. Currently, the Eighth Amendment is a barrier to ensuring that all of women's healthcare needs are provided for in this country.

The Eighth Amendment is based on a belief that a woman's egg, from the very moment it has been fertilised, is a human being and has an equal right to life as the pregnant woman or girl.

The Eighth Amendment gives legal status to the fertilised egg which means that when pregnancy care decisions end up in Court, the woman and her pregnancy have separate legal teams.

We all know that many women will think of their future baby from the very moment they know they are pregnant. We know that women and men can feel the loss of a wanted pregnancy as a deeply upsetting bereavement. We also recognise that a fertilised egg may develop into an independent, full human being that will have every protection, medical care and support available, like the woman who was carrying the pregnancy.

However, we do not agree that at any stage while a woman is pregnant, the developing pregnancy should be given considerations that are completely independent from or superior to the life, health and well-being of the woman who is pregnant. Our position is informed by best medical practice and our knowledge of the impact of the Eighth Amendment on women who face an unwanted pregnancy or a pregnancy that has turned into a crisis pregnancy.

The Eighth Amendment allows only one circumstance to legally end a pregnancy in Ireland and that is if the pregnant woman will die as a direct result of the pregnancy continuing. While over 800 pregnancies, including ectopic pregnancies, are ended in Irish hospitals each year because the pregnant woman would die as a direct result of the pregnancy continuing, the law prohibits doctors from intervening in many other cases.

This means that some women's medical treatment is being denied or delayed to protect the developing pregnancy or due to understandable caution on the part of the woman's medical team.

Unlike in any other medical decision, the parity given to a woman's pregnancy prevents doctors in Irish healthcare facilities from putting their patients' health and wellbeing first.

The Eighth Amendment also means that a woman who has a pregnancy with a fatal condition is obliged to continue with the pregnancy to the end. Doctors in Ireland face a 14-year jail term for ending such a pregnancy early. We do not agree that any necessary medical treatment should be conditional on whether a woman is pregnant or not. It is impossible to imagine any other group in society having their healthcare limited in such a way in the Constitution.



Yet the Constitution allows these treatments if they are performed in another country. For women and girls who need to end a pregnancy this means that they have later abortions as they must travel outside of Ireland, often at high personal cost, in secrecy and without any support.

The unavailability of the option of ending a pregnancy also has an unequal impact on women who have the right to travel within the EU and those who may be refugees, undocumented or require visas.

We believe that medical professionals in Ireland should be able to care for all women who are pregnant in this country and we look for your support in achieving this.

No one makes pregnancy decisions lightly

We are mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, daughters. Every day we care for our families and make serious decisions that will affect our lives and the lives of our loved ones.

Recent debate regarding the provision of abortion care in Ireland has focused on restrictions, conditions and limits. We need to acknowledge that each person or couple choosing to end a pregnancy has real needs and their own reasons, before placing restrictions and sanctions in criminal law. We also need to acknowledge that the majority of women having abortions already have a family of one child or more and are using contraception.

The best, considered decisions will happen in a supportive, trusting environment where the privacy regarding that decision is protected in the same way the relationship is between doctor and patient.

We want all pregnancy options to be considered in an informed, caring and non-judgmental environment. Where a woman decides to end a pregnancy, she should be cared for and be automatically given access to free contraception and adequate family planning information. To ensure standards, oversight and accountability, we believe services should be regulated and incorporated into existing public healthcare facilities, the same as any other medical treatment.



Every pregnancy is different, every decision is personal

The variety and complexity of real life is nowhere more apparent than when it comes to pregnancy options and obstetric care. We must aim to design reproductive healthcare services around the lives of women and girls that offers them care and choice at every stage of their lives.

Given the unpredictable and exceptional aspects of many pregnancy experiences and the need for legislators to be able to respond to technological and medical advances, we believe that the Constitution is an unsuitable place for limiting or regulating provision.

Reducing the need for abortion

The Eighth Amendment has had no measurable impact on rates of abortion in women from Ireland. The number of NHS abortions attributed to women from Ireland in the three years prior to the introduction of the Eighth Amendment (1980-1983) is similar to the past three years (2013-2016).

Achieving comprehensive reproductive health provision as outlined in our model could reduce health problems, including sexually transmitted diseases, crisis pregnancies, reproductive cancers, unsafe abortions and sexual violence. In addition, providing all the elements of reproductive healthcare, particularly effective contraception options, could reduce the need for abortion.

Internationally, it has been found that laws and policies that provide for safe abortion do not increase the rate or number of abortions. Instead, they allow for legal and safe abortions, rather than the previous clandestine procedures. In Ireland this applies mainly to women who secretly order abortion pills online without medical supervision or women who travel home from abroad without having had the necessary aftercare.

States that have achieved significant reduction in their abortion rates have done so through a combination of legislation and ensuring that the women who have abortions are offered contraception, information and services. We want to achieve this for women in Ireland.

The way forward

The National Women's Council of Ireland aims to build a shared understanding of what reproductive services we need that will enable all women and girls to realise their potential. This is why we are proposing a needs-based approach including the following elements:

- **Constitutional change**
- **Protected period**
- **Protected treatments**

Every Woman is a model for ensuring comprehensive, quality, universal reproductive healthcare services for women and girls in Ireland. This is why NWCI advocates for a complete removal of the Eighth Amendment from the Constitution. Every pregnancy is different, every decision is personal. The complexity of healthcare decisions has no place in the Constitution.

We also advocate for legislation that will allow for the availability of abortion in early pregnancy for all women who need it. During this 'protected period' the ending of pregnancy is permitted under medical supervision and considered a private matter with patient-doctor confidentiality protected. This would allow for early abortion care on the basis of need, including in the case of rape or incest, and allow medical professionals to care for women and girls in an appropriate medical setting in Ireland. Limiting this period to early pregnancy will help to minimise the need for later term abortions.

Where a wanted pregnancy turns into a crisis pregnancy at a later stage in pregnancy, we advocate for legislation that would allow for restricted access to abortion where it is considered medically necessary to protect the mental and physical health of the woman, and where there is a nonviable pregnancy. These 'protected treatments' would allow medical professionals to care for women in sometimes extremely difficult and distressing circumstances and support women, couples and families in making the decision that is right for them and their personal circumstances.

We are every woman – we are mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers and daughters. NWCi's Every Woman model of comprehensive reproductive healthcare services will ensure quality, universal, lifelong reproductive healthcare for women and girls in Ireland.

Reproductive health matters at all stages of our lives and we will need support at different times, from relationship and sexual health education; affordable and accessible contraception; sexual and reproductive health services; comprehensive pregnancy care; reproductive cancer care; and menopause services.

We seek your support for providing caring comprehensive reproductive services for women and girls.



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