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# Ireland: Importing and Exporting Abortion

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Ireland's Crisis Pregnancy Agency (now known as the Crisis Pregnancy Programme) [published its annual report](#) <sup>[12]</sup> this past summer stating there had been a decrease in the numbers of Irish women travelling abroad for abortion services. Some 6,673 women gave Irish addresses to abortion clinics in Britain during 2001, and the figure dropped to 4,422 in 2009. At least 12 women leave Ireland every day to seek clandestine abortions. There are no figures available for the amount of women resident in Ireland who give false addresses, or who travel to clinics in the Netherlands or Spain. The anti-choice lobby applauded the decreasing figures and [took it as a sign that Irish women were no longer terminating pregnancies](#) <sup>[13]</sup>.

What the Programme report did not show was the number of women who were forced to carry their unwanted or unintended pregnancies to full term as a result of not having the means to make the expensive journey to travel overseas to access abortion services.

Furthermore, it did not mention anything about the numbers of women who are availing of [backstreet abortions in Ireland](#) <sup>[14]</sup>, or inducing miscarriages at home by ordering the abortion pill on the Internet through Women on Web, or other websites where it is readily available.

Dublin based pro-choice activist group [Choice Ireland](#) <sup>[15]</sup> made a Freedom of Information request to the Irish Medicines Board (responsible for control of medicinal products) regarding the number of seizures. It emerged that [1,216 abortion pills were seized during 2009](#) <sup>[16]</sup> alone. These seizures represent **1,216 attempted illegal DIY abortions**. Were it not for the actions of the IMB and Customs authorities, there would have been at least two dozen illegal abortions in Ireland every week during 2009. This enforcement may have stopped 1,216 pills getting to the women that ordered them, but it is unlikely that they could have stopped every single order from a website or indeed parcels of the drugs coming in from relatives overseas in states where the drugs are available.

The [Irish Medicines Board](#) <sup>[17]</sup> on becoming aware of the seizure of a package intended for a woman began to send the addressees letters seeking details of where they ordered it with the line **"On receipt of your response the Irish Medicines Board will**

***reassess your case. We look forward to your cooperation in this matter.***"

Clearly the implication of this letter is that there is a threat of criminal prosecution and sanction as a result of the purchase of the abortion drugs. It is not known how many of the women in crisis pregnancy situations complied with the direction of the IMB out of fear that they would be prosecuted and dragged through the courts. In addition, it is not known how many women were either forced to carry their pregnancies to full term against their wishes or went elsewhere in sheer desperation for backstreet abortion services <sup>[18]</sup>.

The reality is Irish women who want or need to terminate their pregnancy are faced with the prospect of spending large amounts of money to travel outside of Ireland <sup>[19]</sup> to do so. Immigrant women in precarious residency situations may be prevented from travelling through fear of not being allowed to re-enter the state. Working class and low-income women, very young women and teenagers will have to scrimp and save <sup>[20]</sup> the money or borrow from a local criminal money lender to pay for an abortion overseas. Or they will, as at least a thousand women in Ireland did during 2009, purchase an abortifacient on the Internet, which could contain absolutely anything <sup>[21]</sup>. If women are willing to take the risk of terminating a pregnancy using a pill bought online, there is a significant chance that when this option falls through as Customs have seized their order, that they will turn elsewhere having been forced to do so by a State that refuses to acknowledge their right to choose safe and legal abortion <sup>[22]</sup> services.

The continuous denial of Irish women having abortions was demonstrated by Irish Attorney General Paul Gallagher, <sup>[23]</sup> who defended Ireland in the ABC case where three women have brought the State to the European Court claiming their rights have been violated by having to travel overseas to procure terminations. Mr. Gallagher made the pious claim that the protection of the foetus was central to the "profound moral values embedded in Irish society." Given the statistics of women travelling abroad for abortions, and the number of seizures of abortifacients in Ireland, this claim flies in the face of reality for Irish women. While it might be entrenched in certain sections (such as anti-choice groups and the Church), it is estimated that 137,618 Irish women travelled for abortions <sup>[24]</sup> between 1980 and 2008 so there is something entirely different embedded in the society these women live in. Clearly they rightly hold the value of women having agency over their own bodies in higher esteem, and the Irish Government is happy to export the problem and force women to travel.

The hypocrisy of making women order pills online or travel for a service, criminalised on this island, is readily accepted by Irish politicians who state that there is no demand for abortion services here. Either they are completely ignorant, or displaying a level of callousness towards women in crisis pregnancies that is truly shocking. **More than three women every day intended to induce an abortion during 2009. The reality is illegal abortion is now happening in Ireland**, and yet the State ignores this. Sinead Ahern from Choice Ireland said:

*These seizures further demonstrate that the issue of abortion has not gone away in Ireland. It is time to face up to the reality that Irish women will go to desperate lengths and take huge risks to end pregnancies they feel they cannot continue. It is time to stop turning our backs on these women.*

How right she is.

. . . . .

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