

**QUALITATIVE FINDINGS TO ACCOMPANY WRITTEN
STATEMENT TO THE JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE ON THE
EIGHTH AMENDMENT**

Report prepared by

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Background and Data

The quotes in exhibits A-F below come from in-depth interviews conducted with 35 Irish women between March and October 2017. Women who had either traveled abroad to access abortion services at a clinic or who had used abortion medications from online telemedicine services were eligible to participate. Women were asked about their decision-making around how to access abortion services, their experiences finding information, and their experiences either traveling or using medications at home. A diverse sample of women from both urban and rural areas of Ireland, and of a variety of ages, family structures, and circumstances participated in the study. Interviews were conducted anonymously and the names assigned to each excerpt below are pseudonyms.

Section A—Why do Irish women access medication abortion using online telemedicine?

“I guess even before I took the pregnancy test, I was kind of Googling and I had found a lot of articles about girls actually purchasing the abortion pill online and getting it sent along with medical advice and things like that. So, I was interested in that because, to be honest, the actual travelling I did the last time was the most traumatic bit of the entire thing. The, like the level of shame and stigma that attaches itself to you from that experience is just horrific. So, I was sure I didn’t want to do that again.”

--Emma, 24 years old, previously travelled to England and recently used pills online

“I might have been able to get an emergency loan from a credit union or something to afford travel, but given the option of Women on Web I just thought well, if this can work and I’m within the timeframe physically for this to be a viable method it would suit me much better. I have a fulltime job, my husband has a fulltime job, neither of us get paid to be out sick, for example, so it would have been unpaid time off work to travel. It would have been still paying for childcare. I’m not sure who would have minded our kids while I’d gone away to possibly be overnight in another country. There’s a stigma attached to travel as well, even though we’re ‘allowed’ to do it. So just with all the practicalities and finances, going for pills online came down to be the most sensible option. It wasn’t a risky thing to do because it’s a safe medication, on the World Health Organisation’s safe medication list. I really wouldn’t have been prepared to put my own health at risk because it’s very important that I keep healthy for my own kids.”

--Stacey, 37-year old mother of 2, used pills at home

“We didn’t have enough money at the time to go across to England, so I started researching by myself about pills online and I read other people’s experiences with it and decided it was the right choice for me. Travel would have been a grand and half and I didn’t have a passport, and I didn’t want people asking questions or anything. I don’t think I even had 80 Euros for the passport that at the time. So, the pill would have been cheaper than the actual passport, never mind the grand and a half to go over there.”

--Lauren, 22 years old, used pills at home

"I didn't consider travelling at all because I couldn't. I just did not have the money to travel. I would have not been able to have left my children for very long. And even if I could have, it just seemed like very invasive and unnecessary whereas the pill just seems like such a sensible option, it's very much safer. You know, everything about it just seemed like it would be a far more sensible thing to do. I didn't want to go and do it all in another country."

--Jody, 40-year old mother of 5, used pills at home

"I didn't even know that Women on Web existed until that morning and somehow I came across it. I really didn't want to travel at all. The whole thing was just so stressful and the idea of having to go to a foreign country on my own and go through it on my own was just horrendous. So, I was like, if I'm able to get hold of abortion pills and do it at home that's better and a much cheaper option than having to go abroad. The idea of having to go through that in some random clinic or hotel room in England or on the continent somewhere is just awful. And trying to get to an airport and so on is stressful enough at the best of times. At home, my friend was able to support me through it all and it made an absolutely massive difference. The idea of having to travel alone to go through that on my own in a foreign country is just unthinkable."

--Mairead, 32 years old, used pills at home

"My family is very, very against abortion. If I had told them about my pregnancy then they would straight away say, "okay, who is this guy? Let's get married." And then that's all my studies and everything gone. If I didn't do that, the whole community and society will start degrading me and my family, so it would have been a great, great mistake. The main issue was cost, because I couldn't ask my parents and right now I don't have a job because I'm studying. And then I might get a stamp on my passport if I travel and my dad or my brother might see it and ask questions. It would also take a week for the visa to arrive. I couldn't go through all that pain and travel and everything, all of it."

-- Lakshmi, 23 years old, used pills at home

“Particularly if you feel that you can't tell your family, and you can't look for support elsewhere, then you have to find the money on your own. And then privacy, was a factor as well because there's this notion of shame in Ireland over the thought of having to go to a clinic and speak to a nurse, you know? So, there's something appealing about the online process and being at home. I didn't really feel like I wanted anybody helping me, or comforting me, particularly someone I didn't know, you know. The idea of actually being able to kind of be on your own, and just get it done was appealing to me.”

--Shannon, 29 years old, used pills at home

“I tried to make an appointment with Marie Stopes but because I was so early on in my pregnancy, the nurse told me that I had to wait for a heartbeat before I could terminate the pregnancy. So, I had to go home and wait for another week and a half. I felt like walls were being put up because “the pregnancy isn't far along enough”. It just blew my mind how crazy that sounded. It was very difficult because every second of every minute of every day you're thinking about this. You know, you want to get it done as quickly as possible. That's why the pills were the best option for me.”

--Jennifer, 36-year old mother of 3, used pills at home

“It is so insanely expensive. It costs over a grand to fly over and get the procedure, and then if you don't have a place to stay you have to fly back the same day. That just sounds awful and uncomfortable. And for me, not just the exorbitant cost of it, but the idea of being able to be in my own home is so much better. I know it's safe, I know that the organisation, Women on Web, I know that they're reputable. It's not like I'm googling abortion pills online and just getting something from some dodgy website.”

--Sarah, 33 years old, used pills at home

Section B—What are Irish women’s experiences accessing abortion medications through online telemedicine and using them at home?

“I really feel like doing my abortion with Women on Web was nearly ideal. I was in a friend's house who had been through something similar and she was able to hold my hand and talk me through it, there was no mystery to it at all. I felt really safe and looked after. And I think, yeah, if I could be in that kind of scenario again with somebody who really knew what they were doing, they're with me through it, I think I would prefer to do it at home rather than in a medical setting. I definitely felt much more kind of like comfort from being able to do it in the home environment than in like a medical environment.”

--Mairead, 32 years old, used pills at home

“It was just like a normal heavy period. I just felt relief when I started bleeding. I actually cried because I was so relieved. It was just like clockwork, exactly like they said it would happen. And I was just so relieved because I didn’t know what I would do if they didn’t work.”

--Marion, 36-year old mother of two, used pills at home

“I think the safety and security of your own home when you’re going through something like that is just preferable. You don’t have that worry but being able to be in your own bed, and your own bathroom is like literally a second away, and you can go and lie down on the couch. It was such a comfort. I couldn’t imagine being in a strange place. It was so much nicer being at home. But, there was a possibility that I could go to prison for this. That’s horrific. I should have been able to walk into my GPs and explain the situation and have them prescribe medication for me to go home and take and then check up the following week. Instead, I had the horrible, horrible stress of what if someone finds out? That was the biggest thing for me: only can I not access an abortion in my country but I can’t even legally try and provide it for myself.”

--Tanya, 28 years old, used pills at home

“The procedure was very straightforward and it did feel very safe with all the information they gave. I had some anxiety that if something had gone wrong, as can happen with any safe medication, it’s hard to know who can I trust...like, would I incriminate myself? All these things are going through your head because I wasn’t able to do this legally. So, all of that extra anxiety, I could have done without it, to be honest.”

--Stacey, 37-year old mother of 2, used pills at home

“Everything went fine with the abortion, but my biggest worry was that my pills would get stopped at customs. That really freaked me out because I know that pills do get stopped at customs a lot and I just found that like really terrifying. I thought it was awful when I heard about it thinking about, oh my God, all those women waiting on their pills to come and then not coming and then waiting and wondering. Trying to stop the pills getting through only makes you end up either having to have the abortion later on or even having to leave the country. You know, it's just awful and it makes you feel really angry. Like I felt really angry with the Irish Government of how they treat women.”

--Jody, 40-year old mother of 5, used pills at home

“Everything went fine, but it was just incredibly lonely. I felt like a criminal, which technically I am if you’re going to go by the Irish laws. I felt like I couldn’t discuss it with many people because of the way the laws are here. But I think people’s views on that are changing.”

--Margaret, 33 years old, used pills at home

Section C—What are Irish women’s experiences traveling to access abortion in clinics in Great Britain?

“What was the experience of traveling? Well, I was still getting sick, that didn't stop, I was still vomiting and then I was crying as well because the hormones really affected me early on. And so I just cried, I cried in the airport, I cried on the plane and then I finished crying by the time I got in the taxi. So it was really...it was horrific. I felt terrible. I think it's just horrendous that I had to go through this. I think it's so insulting to women because it's their bodies and it's like kicking them out and alienating them and then making them feel like they're sinners and some kind of problem for England to deal with. And when they come back, they have to keep it quiet, because the thing is I don't know anybody who's had an abortion. Nobody's told me they've had it, and I don't think anyone would. There's so much stigma because of the way our country disowns us.”

--Kate, 23 years old, traveled to England

“I booked flights and booked somewhere to stay. You're apprehensive the whole way over. I would have preferred to come home on the same day, but you're so tired afterwards and you're up so early, you have to stay because, you know, having to come back to an airport and get on another flight, it's just all a too much. You feel emotional after it, even though it's not regret or anything like that, but it's a long, stressful, hard day. And it makes it feel like you're doing something wrong when you have to travel out of the country, you know what I mean? I just think I would have been more comfortable at home. If you do it with the online tablets, you're at home, you know, you're surrounded by things you know.”

--Imelda, 29 years old, travelled to England

“Well, it feels like you're really processing the wrong stuff, you know, you're thinking about the wrong stuff. You've been told your baby has a fatal anomaly, and not you're not thinking about that, you're not thinking about your partner, you're just thinking about how do I arrange all of this? Rather than going to the maternity hospital and them just saying, don't you worry, just come in, in a couple of days and we'll sort it all out, you know, which is how it should be. Instead, you're wondering about who's going to mind my kid while I'm in the clinic, how are we going to afford this? It's awful, it's all just so horrific. Having to deal with the airport when you're feeling so vulnerable and feeling sick. And I remember when we arrived in Liverpool, and I was just standing there, I was, like, oh God, I feel awful. And then I puked on the floor, it was all really horrible, you know, just then the tears start coming. That journey, leaving, taking off, just every step was just one more insult, you know, it was just horrible.”

--Maureen, 33 years old, travelled to England

“So basically when you get to the airport and you get on that flight, it’s kind of known, that this very early flight is the flight people take...you’re waiting to board the plane and you can see the other women basically and you can see they’re with their partners and whatever and you all know you’re there for the same reason and to be honest, there’s like this horrible immediate sense of shame that comes with it and it’s very overwhelming. It comes out of nowhere and you can feel the women are experiencing it but it’s just an awful sense of shame and of guilt and just horrible. But the very worst part was when I got back to the airport afterwards and had to wait five hours to get a plane home, sitting there feeling I’d just committed a crime. I was so traumatized by that travel experience. I still can’t wrap my head around it.”

--Emma, 24 years old, previously travelled to England and recently used pills online

“Travel is stressful at the best of times, never mind when you’re trying to do something like this. It’s stressful and lonely, and you’re there and you’re looking at all the other people that are there, and there’s so many Irish people there as well and you’re hearing the accents. It’s pathetic, it’s a disgrace. It really is. Like as if we’re sweeping it under the carpet. The law causes the whole cloak and dagger feel of it, the whole shame, the whole embarrassment, the stress. I’m not proud of what I did, but I’m also not ashamed of it by any means.”

--Sinéad, 32 years old, travelled to England

“I had to go down to my local credit union and borrow 1,000 euro. I actually booked flights but had no passport. So, a few days before I realised I had no passport and I had to ditch the flights and get a boat and travel three hours on a boat and then spend four or five hours sitting in Holyhead before the bus could go. It was just a nightmare. I didn’t know how heavily I was going to bleed on the way back, so I was very conscious of that and very nervous. There were hundreds and hundreds of people around me. Strangers.”

--Carmel, 40-year old mother of 2, travelled to England

“I ran up something like 1,200 Euros worth of debt on the credit card between flights and the procedure. I think we ended up lumping money onto our mortgage to cover paying back the credit card. Because of how far pregnant I was I had to book the next week. Trying to get an appointment as well that close was difficult. And when you’re on the plane, you’re wondering if everybody knows why you’re travelling. Both ways. But If hadn’t done it, I’d have had to stay pregnant and had a baby with an abusive partner. It would have been catastrophic.”

--Niamh, 38-year old mother of 6, travelled to England

Section D—What role do Irish healthcare professionals play before and after Irish women seek abortion?

"I went to the GP and I said "I think I'm pregnant, can we do a check-up?" And he gave me the pregnancy test kit and I tested, and it was positive so he smiled at me, and looked at my face and I couldn't just smile back. And he said, "what's the matter?" And I said," look, this was not planned at all. I would love to have a child one day, but I really cannot right now." And then the doctor, he sat there in the room and he started crying, and I was really shocked to see him crying, and he said "I have a baby, I was young, I was in college". And then he said "You can just go if you're thinking you want to do an abortion. You don't need to come to my clinic." He wouldn't help me. And I had to leave the GP because he wouldn't treat me anymore."

--Maisie, 21 years old, used pills at home

"The doctor doing the ultrasound said to me that it looked like the baby had anencephaly, which is where the skull and brain have not formed and there's no chance of survival outside of the womb. And I said to her "what happens now, what do we do?" And she said, "well, you can continue with the pregnancy until you go to full term and go into labour and all the rest." And I just...I mean, I said, "I can't do that. I can't go on for another, you know, 18 weeks." And she said, "well, unfortunately, because of Irish law, we can't help you in any other way, we can't do anything for you. You'll need to go to the UK if you want an abortion."

--Maureen, 33 years old, travelled to England

"I wish doctors would be able to help you when you're in this situation. I needed a lot more advice. A lot more advice than eight numbers handed to me on a bit of paper. Some women will need extra support and no one assesses that. There should be a lot of changes, not just "right, no, you're not having it. It's not done here. You're pregnant so you're having a child." You want to have an abortion, you go and tell somebody else that you want to have an abortion. It's just like you're hit with a brick wall. Basically, I came out of the doctors and I was going, well they gave me eight numbers and that was it, on your merry way."

--Janine, 32-year old mother of 2, used pills at home

"After I didn't get my period, I was scared to go to the GP. I was sore with crying. I didn't want to go. But I went, and I gave her my urine sample I said, "maybe I'm pregnant" and I started cry and cry. She said, "why are you crying like this?" I said," I don't want this pregnancy" and asked her for help. But she said, "no, I'm sorry, I can't help you. You have to go to England." But getting to England was very hard for me because nobody knew my story. I couldn't tell anyone and nobody could help me."

--Shabana, 44-year old mother of 4, used pills at home

"I was so scared. I definitely knew that I couldn't keep the pregnancy, but I couldn't go to the doctor and openly discuss it because it's illegal. I was scared that if I even mentioned I was considering abortion, it would have a very negative impact."

--Jamie, 22 years old, used pills at home

"No, I didn't try to see doctors or anyone. I'd done a test at home and obviously because over here abortion is illegal, there's certain laws around it if the doctor knows that you're pregnant, they can't let you go and have an abortion and stuff. So basically, I just did it all on my own, researched websites and stuff that sold the abortion pills to people in Ireland and took it from there."

--Danielle, 27 years old, used pills at home

"God no, I couldn't talk to any doctors about it, definitely not, because I was just so scared. You hear these horror stories of women getting arrested and imprisoned. So I was completely alone. I did go in when I found I was at first pregnant when I didn't know what I was going to do and I went in and said, "okay, I'm pregnant", but I obviously never told them any of my intentions. And their reaction was just like, "great, you're pregnant, we'll put you in for your 12-week scan". But I couldn't say anything because you don't know what they're going to react."

--Adele, 29-year old mother of 4, used pills at home

"I didn't try to talk to any healthcare professionals because it's always a crap shoot when you're talking about if someone's GP is going to turn you in or be understanding. You never know in this country when you're talking to someone are they an ally or are they an enemy. Are they going to judge me as a murderer or are they going to help me get the healthcare I need?"

--Amber, 32-year old mother of 2, travelled to England

"When I found out I was pregnant it was such an awful shock and I would have liked to have talked to someone about it, I just felt I couldn't really because of the fear of negative reactions. So, I just started looking on the internet and I read other people's stories. I didn't feel like I could talk to my doctor. There was no safe place for me to go and talk about it."

--Aileen, 38-year old mother of 4, used pills at home

“Afterwards, I was passing a lot of big clots, so I had to go to my doctor and he said “go to the hospital straight away”. And I said, “I don’t want to go to the hospital”. But he insisted, and that was four weeks after I took the pills. So, I had no choice, but he told me to go to the maternity hospital, where people are crying because they’re losing miscarried babies, and I’m sitting there after having had an abortion. And they kept me overnight, and did a bunch of scans and just told me there were a couple of big clots in there that were going to come away themselves. And that was it. It was not a good experience ending up in the maternity hospital because people are walking around with newborn babies and people are miscarrying babies, and I had deliberately lost my baby. It was really awful.”

--Jackie, 39-year old mother of 3, used pills at home

“I felt completely unsupported by my country, by my health system, and the fact that I was having to think well, in what way will I lie if I need medical assistance? I mean, I shouldn't have to lie if I need medical assistance. I should be able to go to my health practitioner and tell them what's wrong with me and have them help me because I'm sick or I'm bleeding too much or whatever might be the problem. At the most vulnerable stage, I shouldn't be having to wonder in what way will I lie.”

--Stacey, 37-year old mother of 2, used pills at home

Section E—What are the consequences of lack of access to abortion services in Ireland?

“I would have definitely tried to find a way to have a termination. There was just no part of me that wanted to continue with that pregnancy, the whole thing just felt so wrong. So, I would have done whatever I needed to. I wasn’t suicidal or anything like that and I wasn’t depressed, I was just determined to access a termination. So, if there had been any kind of backstreet opportunity or something like that, I would have gone for that.”

--Jessica, 33 years old, travelled to England

“I was walking up to 20km every day. I was doing sit ups, I was doing squats. It was bananas, do you know? I was doing anything I could possibly do to make this happen. I don't think I ate for several days because I had read that if you have an extremely low calorie count and you're taking high doses of Vitamin C that can cause a miscarriage. I was actually reading pregnancy sites that warn you not to do these things and everything they were warning you not to do was exactly what I was doing, you know, roasting hot baths to the point that I almost scalded myself, and when I think about it I'm an educated woman, do you know, I'm a grown woman. It's just so sad.”

--Rebecca, 39-year old mother of 2, used pills at home

“I would have tried to get rid of it myself, to be honest. Because I was not in a good place mentally and I was getting threats from the man involved, saying he was going to pour bleach down my throat if I didn’t get rid of it. So, I was being threatened with violence at the same time and I really didn’t feel like I had any option. So, I probably would have found horrible ways to do it and I might have really hurt myself. Because I had to find a way, you know. There was no other option for me. I felt really stuck. So, I would have definitely found another way, or would have tried to, probably and failed, yeah.”

--Emma, 24 years old, previously travelled to England and recently used pills online

“I heard that like lots of vitamin C will work to cause a miscarriage, and about the coat hanger thing, and belly flopping, like you flopping onto your stomach on a hard surface. I did the vitamin C thing before but I don’t know, I don’t think it’s very reliable. The coat hangers and everything... that is so awful, but if I hadn’t been able to get the pills I definitely would have done something more extreme.”

--Keely, 19 years old, used pills at home

“There was this forum online where they were talking what they could do, like having a hot bath and drinking a bottle of vodka, or going in there with a long, sharp instrument, you know. I tried the hot bath thing. And there’s a fitness class here that’s on a rebounder which is like a mini trampoline, and people were telling me that if you go on that within the first six to eight weeks of getting pregnant, you miscarry. So, I tried that religiously for two weeks. But that didn’t help. you know? If you’re feeling desperate and your support system is non-existent, you do very desperate things.”

--Frankie, 35 years old, travelled to England

“I was training for a marathon at the time, and when I told my running buddy that I was pregnant, we were just about to do one of our long runs, so 20-mile runs, which takes, like, four hours or so, four and a half. And I kind of thought, well, surely it's quite stressful on the body, surely it'll just sort of dislodge it when I run that far. And I was really hoping that something would happen. And it didn't and my body was fine. And as I was running, I was kind of looking at the cars and going, you know, it wouldn't take very much just to kind of hop into the road and let one of them run me over. I was seriously thinking about it.”

--Jo, 28 years old, travelled to England

“I'm sure there are people who have ordered something online from somewhere dodgy, I mean, because we know that there are women who've done horrific things like just drinking bleach and throwing themselves downstairs. I've heard of women who threw themselves downstairs hoping to induce a miscarriage. But if we were allowed to get the information out about the abortion pill would women be throwing themselves downstairs? I don't think so. I think it's just disgraceful that there's so much contempt for women in Ireland.”

--Jody, 40-year old mother of 5, used pills at home

Section F—What do Irish women who have had abortions want you to know about the current law and your opportunity to change it?

“I would support a free, legal, safe abortion for everyone, not just people in my circumstances, who had a foetal abnormalities. In every circumstance. If you feel you're too old, if you feel you're not up to it, you already have too many kids, if it's just not the right time, you know there are a million reasons why a woman might want or need an abortion, and all of them are valid.”

--Maureen, 33 years old, travelled to England

“I just think parenthood is so huge and that every mother should be willing and wanting to embark on that and that every child deserves to be wanted. I think bringing children into the world who aren't wanted and aren't able to be provided for is just cruel. So, I'm really grateful for the Citizens' Assembly for listening to all the evidence so carefully. I was really heartened by the recommendations, but I feel really let down that our politicians aren't following suit and that they're so reticent. I think a lot of it is just fear of losing votes and I think it's dishonest.”

--Jessica, 33 years old, travelled to England

“I think not having the threat of a 14-year jail sentence hanging over my head whilst I was writhing in pain would have been really great. You know, I think that is really pretty disgusting and actually it's the worst bit of the whole experience, the fact that there was no support from the country I live in. And it makes me quite angry because I pay taxes and yet I don't understand why women have less rights...less bodily autonomy than corpses in Ireland. I think it's disgraceful. If I could go and say anything to the Oireachtas committee, I would probably say to them that the Citizens' Assembly had weeks of expert testimony and they really learnt a lot about every angle about abortions and about why people have them and what kind of people have them and about the whole procedure. What they came up with was actually just really a compassionate and humane kind of a response. So, I would say that that's the kind of Ireland that I want to be a part of, one that's compassionate and kind and understanding and doesn't try and control women's bodies.”

--Jody, 40-year old mother of 5, used pills at home

"I had to illegally have an abortion in my own country, and it's not right that I had to do that at 19 on my own without telling my parents or telling anyone out of fear of either being arrested or just being judged. I think it's absolutely disgraceful that women don't have a say in what they do with their bodies, and that women should be forced to give birth to children that they don't want or can't have."

--Bernadette, 19 years old, used pills at home

"If I was to imagine living in a place where abortion was legal and it was accepted and I had all my rights, I can't imagine feeling the trauma I feel right now. Because my shame and my guilt stem from the fact that this government has such a huge problem with my choice that I'm a criminal. It's completely down to the laws that I feel that way. If I had been brought up in a country where I was told from a young age that I'm in control of my body and that I can decide when to be a mother, I don't think for a second I would feel ashamed."

--Emma, 24 years old, previously travelled to England and recently used pills online

"It's not just women like me who were lucky and able to access abortion to consider. There are women who have basically told doctors that they are going to kill themselves, there are women like Savita Halappanavar, who died because doctors couldn't help her under the law. And when it comes to making legislation on this, there are a lot of people in the middle ground, who morally might have some issues with it, but who are fine to let the woman decide. It's not right to have that decision held to ransom because politicians are worried about losing the votes of the over-60's brigade."

--Jen, 29 years old, used pills at home

"Parenthood is a huge thing. A huge thing. It is not something you just walk into. It's a responsibility. And while abortion isn't something anyone wants to do, everyone must have the ability to become a responsible parent and the right to control their own body."

--Lucia, 33-year old mother of 2, used pills at home