



**Opening Statement by the
Guttmacher Institute to the
Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution**

November 8, 2017

Thank you very much for inviting me to give evidence to the joint committee. It is a privilege to be here. By way of introduction, I am a Principal Research Scientist at the Guttmacher Institute in New York. We are a research and policy organization, and we conduct population-level research on reproductive health in the United States and globally. The Guttmacher Institute advocates for the evidence-based policies that promote reproductive and sexual health. Our evidence is used by stakeholders on various sides of the discourse.

I have been asked to present evidence on abortion trends worldwide and on the characteristics of women who have abortions.

Abortion levels and trends:

I will start by giving a global overview of abortion trends, which can provide some context for abortion in Europe. This evidence was published in the Lancet last year, and it is based on work that we did in collaboration with our colleagues at the World Health Organization (WHO).

We estimate that worldwide, about 56 million abortions took place each year in 2010 to 2014, as you can see in Slide 2. The annual number of abortions has increased slightly since the early 1990s.

It can be more useful to talk about how many abortions take place for every thousand women of childbearing age. This is because the absolute number of abortions can increase as the number of women in a population increases, but the number of abortions for every 1000 women, also known as the abortion rate, is not influenced by the size of the population.

The 56 million abortions that take place each year translate to 35 abortions for every one thousand women of childbearing age (Slide 3). Another way of saying this is that roughly 3.5% of women of childbearing age have an abortion each year, globally. The global abortion rate has declined slightly over the past 25 years.

We have also estimated abortion incidence across the 17 major subregions of the world. We were not able to estimate incidence for every individual country because we did not have enough data on which to base country estimates.

Slide 4 shows the trends in the abortion rate in major parts of the developed world - that is, Europe and North America. We can look at Northern, Western and Southern Europe together because the abortion levels and trends in these three subregions are similar. The abortion rate is much lower in North America, and in Europe outside of Eastern Europe, than the global average of 35 per 1,000 women. It is about 17 and 21 in North America and non-Eastern Europe, respectively, and the rate has declined modestly in both of these regions in the past 25 years or so.

Eastern Europe is a different story, as you can see. As you are probably aware, the abortion rate was very high in Eastern Europe during the Soviet era. It declined dramatically in the past 25 years, to less than half what it was in the early 1990s.

The abortion rates in Northern, Western and Southern Europe are the lowest subregional abortion rates in the world, and the decline in Eastern Europe is by far the sharpest decline we have seen.

While we were not able to estimate abortion incidence for all countries, we did compile abortion statistics from countries with good reporting systems, for the most recent year for which such evidence was available (see Appendix) (Slide 5). These are countries where it is recognized that at least 90% of all abortions are included in the official reports. Across these 18 countries, which are all in Europe, the abortion rate varies from five per 1,000 in Switzerland to 18 in Sweden. In eight of these eighteen countries, the abortion rate is less than 10.

Globally, when we grouped countries according to their abortion laws, we found that, on average, the abortion rate in countries where the procedure is prohibited altogether or allowed only to save a woman's life is not significantly different from the rate in countries where abortion is allowed without restriction as to reason (Slide 6). The vertical lines around the points indicate the margins of error around these estimates, and you can see that they all overlap. This is a bird's eye view of abortion rates in groups of countries, and it does not examine the other factors that could influence abortion rates in these groups of countries.

We were also able to estimate the percent of all abortions that were obtained by married women and the percent obtained by unmarried women (Slide 7). We used data from the United Nations, which defines married women to include women in cohabiting unions. We estimated that about 73% of all abortions worldwide are obtained by married women, and 27% are obtained by unmarried women. These are presented by the first two lines in this chart. In the developed world, about 69% of the abortions are obtained by married women.

Safety of abortions performed:

I showed abortion rates in countries grouped by the legal status of abortion. Last month we published estimates of the safety of abortions performed worldwide, and in groups of countries classified according to their abortion laws (Slide 8). These estimates were also made with colleagues from the WHO, and are also found in the Lancet.

As defined by the WHO, safe abortions are those that are done by a trained person *and* using methods appropriate for the gestational age of the pregnancy. Less safe abortions are those for which only *one* of these criteria are met, and least safe abortions are those for which neither of these two criteria are met.

About 31% of abortions are in the least safe category in countries where abortion is illegal on all grounds or only allowed to save a woman's life or preserve her physical health; less than 1% are in the least safe category in countries where abortion is permitted without restriction as to reason.

We also found that abortions are also more likely to be unsafe in low income countries than in high income countries, based on the World Bank classification of countries (Appendix Slide).

Abortion by age of woman:

We did not have enough information with which to estimate the ages of women obtaining abortions across the world's subregions. Instead we compiled statistics from 13 countries with good quality reporting. These are countries with liberal abortion laws. Across the countries with this information, about half (45-53%) of abortions are obtained by women in their 20s, and another third (27-37%) are obtained by women in their 30s (Slide 9). Across all these countries, adolescents 19 years old or younger (predominantly 15-19 year olds) account for a smaller share of abortions than their share of the population. That is, the abortion rate is lower among adolescents than among women in their 20s and 30s. In almost all of these countries, adolescents' share of all abortions has decreased since the 1990s. In the countries that further break down the ages of women into smaller windows, the majority of adolescents' abortions are obtained by 18-19 year olds.

Abortion by number of living children:

According to evidence we compiled from 15 countries (European countries, the US and New Zealand), 48-74% of women who obtained an abortion already had at least one child (Slide 10). In all but two of these countries, more than half of women obtaining an abortion already had at least one child.

Abortion by gestational age:

We are currently preparing a report on the gestational ages of pregnancies when they are terminated across countries that have reliable evidence (Slide 11). The blue and the grey bars together represent abortions done in the first trimester of pregnancy. According to these preliminary findings, in all but three of these countries, 90% or more of abortions are obtained in the first trimester.

Women's reasons for having abortions:

For four countries we have information from nationally representative surveys of women on the reasons for wanting an abortion, among those who have had an abortion (Slide 12). The point to take from this chart is that women obtain abortions for a wide variety of reasons.

In these surveys women were asked to give their primary reason for having an abortion. For example in Belgium, the country on the left, about one-fourth of women said they sought an abortion for socioeconomic reasons, and another one-fourth had an abortion for partner-related reasons – for example, their partner didn't want to have a child or their relationship was dissolving. About 18% wanted to space their children or postpone having a child, and another 13% already had as many children as they wanted or could manage. About 1% said they were having an abortion because of issues related to the health of the fetus. In the other three countries, less than 1% of all abortions were for reasons related to fetal health.

In a survey in the United States, women who had an abortion were asked to indicate all of their reasons for having the abortion (Slide 13). And an interesting take away message from this survey is that many women gave more than one reason. Financial issues, wanting to space or delay childbearing and partner-related issues remained common. About 30% of women said they sought an abortion because they needed to focus on the children that they already had.

Abortion laws

I will shift gears and wrap up by giving a broad overview of abortion laws of countries across the world. Leah Hoxter will go into more detail on this topic. Some 75 of all countries allow abortion without restriction as to reason or for socioeconomic reasons; 58 countries allow abortion to preserve a woman's physical or mental health, and 40 allow abortion to save a woman's life (Slide 14). Ireland is one of these 40 countries. In 26 countries, abortion is not allowed for any reason, though some of these countries make exceptions in cases of rape, incest, or fetal anomaly.

Looking now at just the 50 developed countries (using United Nations' classification of countries according to whether they are developed or developing), 41 of these countries allow abortion without restriction as to reason or for socioeconomic reasons, five allow abortion to preserve a woman's physical or mental health, one –Ireland – allows abortion to save a woman's life, and three (Andorra, Malta and San Marino) do not allow abortion on any grounds (Slide 15).

Conclusion:

I will end by summarizing some of the key points from this review: the subregions with the lowest abortion rates are those whose countries have the least restrictive abortion laws and generally strong reproductive health programs; women obtaining abortions represent a broad spectrum of all women - young and old, single and married, childless and with children; and many women who seek an abortion have multiple reasons for doing so.

I will end there, and thank you again for inviting me.

Appendix: Reference year for abortion statistics:

Age

| Country | Year |
|-----------------|------|
| Scotland | 2015 |
| Finland | 2015 |
| England & Wales | 2015 |
| Netherlands | 2015 |
| Norway | 2015 |
| Estonia | 2015 |
| Denmark | 2014 |
| Iceland | 2013 |
| Portugal | 2015 |
| Spain | 2015 |
| Sweden | 2015 |
| Switzerland | 2014 |
| Italy | 2015 |

Parity

| Country | Year |
|-----------------|------|
| Sweden | 2010 |
| Finland | 2012 |
| Netherlands | 2014 |
| Scotland | 2014 |
| Belgium | 2011 |
| England & Wales | 2014 |
| Spain | 2014 |
| New Zealand | 2014 |
| Iceland | 2014 |
| United States | 2014 |
| Portugal | 2014 |
| Germany | 2014 |
| Slovakia | 2014 |
| Czech Republic | 2012 |
| Hungary | 2014 |
| Estonia | 2014 |

Gestational Age

| Country | Year |
|---------|------|
| Estonia | 2016 |
| Sweden | 2016 |

| | |
|-----------------|------|
| Slovenia | 2012 |
| Denmark | 2015 |
| Norway | 2016 |
| Czech Republic | 2013 |
| Finland | 2016 |
| Iceland | 2015 |
| Scotland | 2016 |
| England & Wales | 2016 |
| Spain | 2015 |
| Slovakia | 2014 |
| Israel | 2013 |
| United States | 2014 |
| Netherlands | 2015 |
| New Zealand | 2016 |