

‘Opening Pandora’s Box’: The Anti-Amendment Campaign, 1979-1983

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ABSTRACT

This article takes a close look at the history and development of the Irish right to choose and anti-amendment abortion campaigns from 1979-1983. In 1980 the Women’s Right to Choose Group (WRCG) was formed and was the first Irish feminist group to openly campaign for women’s right to choose. This article will consider why campaigns for choice happened so late, and why the response by the anti-choice lobby to any right to choose activism was so fierce and dogmatic. By situating the abortion campaigns in their historical context, we can further understand the barriers that the pro-choice feminist activists faced. The activism and ideas of the WRCG, as well as those of the Women’s Right to Choose Campaign (WRCC), trade union activists, political parties etc., along with tactics of the Anti-Amendment Campaign (AAC) will be considered. The arguments used by all groups will be analysed, as will the discussion points put forward by the board-based umbrella group, the AAC. The tensions and splits in the anti-amendment side will be analysed to further understand the enduring legacies of the 1983 anti-amendment campaign for the Irish women’s movement once the 8th amendment was inserted into the Irish Constitution.

Keywords: anti-amendment campaign, Ireland, abortion, 8th Amendment

INTRODUCTION

On 4 April 1979, RTÉ, the Irish National Radio and TV station, recognising travel for termination was something experienced by many Irish women, featured a radio documentary about one woman travelling to England to access a termination of pregnancy. The first substantive investigation undertaken by the State broadcaster into the issue, *Abortion*, was broadcast on RTÉ Radio 1. Presenter Marian Finucane accompanied an anonymous young Irish woman as she left Dublin to travel to London. She went with the woman to the healthcare clinic, spoke with her in the recovery room and followed up with her six weeks later. One of the questions asked by Finucane, was how, morally, the woman was able to justify her decision to seek an abortion. The young woman replied,

a certain part of me thinks it’s wrong because of my Catholic upbringing. I feel it is right for me (...) But I don’t think it’s right under all circumstances - that might be a hypocritical thing to say (*Abortion*, 1979, RTÉ Sound Archives, A858).

The moral ambiguity felt by this young woman was very common among Irish women, including Irish feminists, on the question of abortion. Despite almost a decade of second wave feminist activism, the ideological influences of American and British right to choose activists, and the slight opening of a previously inward looking, conservative society, by 1979 abortion was not, publicly at least, always understood as a women’s healthcare issue. By then feminists may have been talking about and writing on the issue in their meetings and magazines, but while access to contraceptives was a public feminist issue, no national campaign on the right to choose or to decriminalise abortion had begun.

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS IN IRELAND, 1922-1979: A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Research and publications on abortion and Ireland have increased in recent decades, which allows for a fuller understanding of the historical complexities of reproductive rights in the Irish State since its foundation in 1922.

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The State did not have to criminalise abortion as it was already a crime under the 1861 Offences against the Person Act, adopted when Ireland was governed by a British Parliament. As work in recent decades by feminist scholars and historians has demonstrated, campaigns for full reproductive rights in Ireland have a difficult history. The first decades of the Irish Free State saw a stabilising of democratic systems after a War of Independence (1919-1921) and Civil War (1922-1923), but the promised equality for which women militants (suffragettes and female republicans) had fought and expected was not forthcoming. In a conservative Catholic majority country, the State in partnership with the Catholic Church, which, even prior to the establishment of the State, had control over education and health care, ensured that women's lives and women's bodies were subject to legislative and moral controls and strictures. From the floor of the Dáil¹ and from the Catholic pulpit came the promotion of the dominant discourses on the 'proper' performance of Irish womanhood; domesticity, marriage, motherhood, and above all, respectability. This impacted on all aspects of women's lives 'where the right to work outside the home, the right to control fertility and reproduction' as well as access to social, cultural and political power was regulated and controlled (McAuliffe, 2015: 50). As Delay (2019: 481) notes, for the nascent Irish State, it was important to control the sexual behaviour of women,

ensuring that they only reproduced within marriage and encouraging high marital fertility rates (...) [this] was particularly essential in a new nation-state that equated women's roles, and particularly motherhood, with the virtue of the nation itself.

As Earner-Byrne (2007) has shown in her research, successive Irish Governments also considered contraception a moral rather than women's health issue. The idea, she writes,

that birth control might constitute a positive health intervention was not countenanced on the grounds of Catholic doctrine, which rested obstinately on the belief of moral absolutism (47).

As part of the drive to regulate and constrain women's ability to access birth control, censorship became a very effective tool. Maurice Curtis' study of militant Catholicism in Ireland demonstrated the extent to which Catholic lay organisations and the Catholic clergy were concerned about how 'knowledge of sex and contraception' could be culled from 'birth control literature and sex manuals' (McAvoy, 2012; 37). This led to a campaign to control access to this type of literature and censor any information on birth control. As outlined by McAvoy (2014: 194), opponents of birth control gained early successes when they 'influenced the 1926 Evil Literature Committee and the subsequent 1929 Censorship of Publications Act (1929/21)'. Both led to very effective censorship of birth control information, while continued pressure from those opposed to any access to contraceptives gained more success with the passing of the 1935 Criminal Law Amendment Act. This Act criminalised the importation and sale of contraceptives, instituting an outright ban on access to contraceptives. As McAvoy (2014) further outlines, the 1930 encyclical letter, *Casti Connubii*, issued by Pope Pius XI, which 'condemned contraception, sterilisation and abortion as "criminal abuse" of marriage', while dismissing any arguments about family limitation on women's health grounds, further emboldened the anti birth control lobby (197). Catholic morality would be the dominant set of doctrines used when dealing with or discussing Irish women's reproductive rights and healthcare in the following decades. This 1935 ban on contraceptives much delayed 'the emancipation of Irish women-not least by subordinating their life and health to their reproductive functions' (McAvoy, 2014: 202).

These campaigns to censor and subsequently outlaw information on and access to contraceptives reinforced the connection between Irish femininity, morality, and respectability. Domesticity, respectability and marital reproduction were seen as the vital contributions of women to the wellbeing of the Nation, and as noted by Meaney (1991: 6) 'in post-colonial southern Ireland [this] particular construction of sexual and familial roles became the very substance of what it meant to be Irish'. Female reproductive virtue was based on motherhood only within marriage, while containing reproduction within marriage rested, as Fischer (2020: 989) notes, on the 'withholding of information, especially on reproduction and sexuality, a prohibition of contraception and, of course, abortion'. Not only did legislation and religious teachings define a marital, maternal, and domestic role for Irish women, this narrow construct of acceptable femininity was also recognised in the Irish Constitution. Article 41 of the Constitution of Ireland (1937) defined the marital, heteronormative model of family as 'primary and fundamental unit of society', decreeing it 'a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law'. This article is followed by further insertions, known as the 'women in the home articles', which are essentially prescriptive definitions of women's place within society. They recognise that by her life in the home, woman gives to the State 'a support without which the common good cannot be achieved' and furthermore, it (The State) would ensure 'that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home' (Article 41.2). This led to a situation in Ireland that, as Bacik (2015: 147) has noted, was unique, a 'legal and constitutional approach to reproductive health'; Ireland,

¹ The Dáil is the lower house of the Irish Parliament (Oireachtas).

being the last country in Europe to legalise contraception and the only country in the world which had a constitutional provision giving equal rights to life to ‘the pregnant women and to the foetus she carries’.

In their study, *The Irish Abortion Journey*, Earner-Byrne and Urquhart (2019: 9-10) note that,

since the legalisation of abortion in Britain in 1967, an estimated 200,000 women have travelled from the island of Ireland to England for the termination of a pregnancy.

Prior to 1967, Irish women had not only to deal with their own healthcare within a system which viewed the female reproductive body through a faith-based lens, but they also had to navigate ‘moral, legal and social controls’ when dealing with pregnancy (Earner-Byrne and Urquhart, 2019: 33). These controls included a complete ban on contraceptives, a moralising and carceral attitude to pregnancy outside of marriage and an acceptance that reproduction should be unimpeded by knowledge of, or access to, abortion or indeed, after 1935, contraceptives. Scholars have looked at the many ways unwanted pregnancies were dealt with - infanticide, backstreet abortions, and other methods were all used. Interestingly, therapeutic abortions were sometimes occurring, despite challenges from religious and political quarters, in some Irish hospitals, if the life of the mother was at risk, but ‘their [the mothers] condition had to be acute, and death must be imminent’ (Earner-Byrne and Urquhart, 2019: 36-37). So-called criminal abortions might also be presented to doctors, essentially cases where the women either attempted a home abortion or suffered a botched back street abortion—here it was recommended that the doctor should treat the women but should also consider involving the police, which stresses that the doctor was both healthcare provider and moral gatekeeper.

Cliona Rattigan’s work on infanticide up to the 1950s in Ireland shows that it was mostly young, unmarried, working-class women, many of them victims of abandonment by the father, and who, due to socio-economic and familial pressures combined with a sense of shame and desperation inculcated by the moralising society in which they lived, committed infanticide (Rattigan, 2011). While infanticide was not uncommon, in her study of how women illegally accessed abortion in 19th and 20th century Ireland, Delay (2019: 481) details other methods by which unwanted pregnancies were dealt, two methods being the ‘use of ‘noxious things’ and surgical/invasive methods’. Abortion did not always,

begin with an abortifacient; a complex array of other traditional methods—self-harm, hot baths, and strenuous exercise—also coexisted with, or sometimes preceded, drugs. (Delay, 2019: 482)

Where drugs, herbs, exercise or self-harm failed ‘most women sought help either from friends and family or a ‘professional’ abortionist’ (Delay, 2019: 481) and, as Delay argues, the numbers of women who tried to self-terminate or seek an illegal abortion were high, in the hundreds, and possibly thousands prior to the 1967 UK Act. The pressure on backstreet abortions increased when travel to Britain was difficult, for example, the 1954 Commission on Emigration reported a rise in persecutions of backstreet abortionists during the Second World War when travel was restricted, indicating the service that travel to the UK provided, even then, to keep Ireland ‘abortion free’ (Connolly and O’Toole, 2005: 69). However, during the first five decades of Irish State, 1920-1970, for most women faced with unwanted pregnancy options were very limited; travel to the UK, procuring pills and potions which could kill or maim as soon as work, a backstreet abortion, confinement in a Mother and Baby Institution and giving up the child for adoption, or for the most desperate, infanticide. This was all the result of a moralising, carceral regime imposed on the female reproductive body, which shamed and silenced women through the diminishment of their selfhood, autonomy and agency.

SECOND WAVE FEMINISM AND (NON)ENGAGEMENT WITH REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS, 1970-1979

The disciplinary regimes of Irish Church and State and the ideologies of respectability and morality in the first decades of Irish independence were, according to Kitchen and Crowley (2008: 369),

so deep-seated that it was not until the 1970s through to the 1990s that legislation and the Constitution were subject to sustained critique and campaign, and a reconfiguring of the immediate post-independence, moral landscape was undertaken.

The introduction of the 1967 Abortion Act in the UK offered some relief to Irish women particularly as an alternative to backstreet abortions, but moralising, carceral responses to unwanted pregnancies remained dominant. Incarceration in Mother and Baby Institutions was still prevalent and would remain so through to the 1980s, while unease and anxiety about abortion activism was prevalent among Irish feminist and women’s groups. The Irish Women Liberation Movement (IWML), founded in 1971, did not mention abortion in its 1971 manifesto

'Chains or change'—its main concerns then were equal pay, equality before the law, equal education, contraception for all, justice for deserted wives, unmarried mothers, and widows, and one family one house. Its direct-action activism focused on access to contraceptives, still banned under the law; one of the more spectacular actions was the 'Contraceptive Train', when on May 22, 1971, IWLM members took the train to Belfast to buy contraceptives in protest at the inequality of having a law prohibiting the importation and sale of contraceptives in the Republic of Ireland, while these were for sale north of the border in Northern Ireland.

While the IWLM helped bring feminism into the public's consciousness it had fragmented by 1972, and it was not until 1975, and the setting up of the more 'consciously left wing' Irishwomen United (IWU), who were self-described as 'socialists, nationalists, republicans, lesbians and radicals', that abortion as an issue became part of the feminist agenda (*Banshee*, 1976: No. 2). The aim of the IWU was, as founder member Anne Speed recalled, to build an autonomous women's movement (McAuliffe, 2015: 90). Prior to their launch in June 1975 a working group drew up their charter—on which the important issues of equal pay and contraception were described as

the two things which allowed women to control their own lives, economic independence and the right to control their own bodies (McAuliffe, 2015: 90).

An offshoot of the IWU, the Contraception Action Programme (CAP), would campaign, from 1975 to 1981, for legalisation on contraception, and while they had some success in opening discussions on the issue, the subsequent 1980 Health (Family Planning) Act, which permitted limited access to contraceptives within marriage for 'bona fide family planning purposes', was regarded by activists as 'repressive, regressive (...) moralistic' and 'access to contraception remained restrictive into the 1980s' (Kelly, 2019: 291-294). While Speed (1992: 86) later wrote that for Irish feminists at the time 'abortion was the great taboo subject', the IWU did broach the issue in its magazine, *Banshee*. In their first editorial they asked, 'where the howls of outrage were when Irishwomen were denied contraception, divorce and abortion' (McAuliffe, 2015: 97). In its February 1976 issue it included demands for 'Free Legal Contraception, State financed birth control clinics and the right to free, safe, legal abortion' (McAuliffe, 2015: 97). Notwithstanding the recognition that the right to 'free, safe, legal abortion' was a feminist demand, in the years up to 1979 there were no systemic, organised, grassroots feminist campaigns which focused specifically on the decriminalisation of abortion or on the issue of choice. Most IWU members were in favour of abortion access, however, for 'tactical reasons, it was decided that their campaign should focus on the contraception issue' (Kelly, 2019: 283). While, as Speed (1992: 86) acknowledged, feminists knew that 'there was abortion in Ireland (...) except that it physically took place in England', for the IWU and CAP access to contraceptives was a more immediate and, possibly, a more 'winnable' issue.

Pro-choice campaigner Mary Gordon outlined, in 1984, two reasons why abortion had not been an urgent political issue in Ireland. Firstly, as she noted, the 'conservative Catholic nature of Irish society meant that there was a solid ideological opposition to the principle of women controlling their own fertility', and secondly 'the problem of unwanted pregnancies simply did not impinge on most people's consciousness as Irish women went to England in secrecy in order to continue with or terminate problem pregnancies' (Gordon, 1984: 9). The conservative Irish State which Gordon referred to had handed the Catholic Church control of the delivery of healthcare, as well as the training of doctors and nurses, sex education and reproductive health care, which meant all were considered and delivered from a faith based medical ethics standpoint. Sex education, mostly taught by male and female religious, was narrow, defining marital, reproductive sex as the only acceptable expression of female sexuality. Institutionalisation of women and girls considered deviant, lack of access to contraceptives and knowledge about sex, sexuality and the body, a medical system run along Catholic social thinking meant that any conversations on the issues of unwanted or unplanned pregnancies was largely absent from public discussions. The 1861 Offences Against the Person Act was still enforced in the 1970s, making abortion a criminal offence and most backstreet or illegal abortions were prosecuted under this Act. As Earner-Byrne and Urquhart (2019: 30) noted,

many Irish women found ways to navigate the restrictive moral climate pertaining on the island of Ireland, but the solutions were often outside the state and at significant personal and financial cost.

In the 1970s, as travel to England became easier and more affordable, more women began to travel for terminations. The Irish feminist movement responded to this by providing information on travel. In London, the Irish Women's Abortion Support Group (IWASG), was from 1981, operating,

an information line, organising appointments for women at abortion clinics, negotiating with the clinics about price, meeting abortion seekers upon their arrival in England, hosting them overnight in their homes and sometimes providing childcare (Calkin et al., 2020: 8).

The ability of certain women, those with access to money, and hence to travel, contrasted with the continuing shaming and silencing of those women who could not travel for a myriad of reasons, in a still traditional conservative society. As a reviewer of the political programme, *Seven Days* on RTÉ television, noted, when a 1968 broadcast included a segment on the experiences of unmarried women; it was,

a terrible indictment of our approach to the girl who 'gets into trouble'. Our 'solution' is callous, cruel, and quite simple. The girl vanishes either to England or behind the walls of an anonymous 'home for Unmarried Mothers' (*The Kerryman*, December 7, 1968: 3).

Recognising this indictment of society, feminists did campaign for supports for and an end to discrimination against unmarried mothers and had some successes; in 1972, for instance, Cherish was set up as a mutual support group for single mothers and to lobby for supports which would allow mothers to keep their children; in 1973 a single mother's allowance was introduced by the Government. These achievements eased the experience of the non-marital pregnant woman and the unmarried mother in Irish society somewhat, but, by the end of the 1970s and a decade into second wave feminist campaigning, access to full reproductive rights remained, legally, morally and economically, far out of reach for most.

ABORTION ACTIVISM IN IRELAND, 1979-1982

In 1979 a feminist, socialist organisation, the Women's Right to Choose Group (WRCG), was set up with the intention of breaking the silence around abortion, forcing the issue onto the feminist agenda and into the public domain. It was a small group of more radical feminists who wished to discuss the lack of access to abortion in Ireland and the difficulties in obtaining information on how to access abortions in England. Placing the issue of abortion in the wider context of fertility control, it used the international feminist slogan 'a woman's right to choose' as its mantra. In June 1980, WRCG set up the Irish Pregnancy Counselling Centre (IPPC), to provide nondirective pregnancy counselling and information on travel to England. It also published a pamphlet, *Abortion: A Choice for Irish Women* (1980). In this, the WRCG placed abortion in the context of women's rights to control over their own fertility and to bodily autonomy, detached from all ideologies of morality, something which was quite radical in the Irish context. The aim of the pamphlet was to demonstrate that women in Ireland still did,

not have the basic civil and legal right to choose from among all the alternatives open to them when they [were] confronted with an unwanted pregnancy (*Abortion*, 1980: 23).

The most reactionary element of Irish society, it noted, was the fact that men still 'retain their traditional and absolute right to control women's fertility' and that those rights were reproduced through the 'collusion of state and the official [Catholic] Church' (23). Members of WRCG addressed the moral underpinning of Irish legislative and societal concerns with abortion—they argued that the right to choose was not 'a moral issue even though anti-abortionists have attempted to turn it into one' (24). The final decision whether to continue a pregnancy or not, should, they argued, lie not with 'priests, lawyers, doctors or politicians', but with the woman. On this basis they concluded 'the right to choose should be an inalienable right for women and is one we demand now' (*Abortion*, 1980: 25).

It soon became clear that the activities of the WRCG were regarded as dangerous by those who sought to retain the status quo. Tom Hesketh has argued that the 1982-83 feminist campaigns against the 8th Amendment were 'anticipative' as there 'were no pro-choice campaigns in Ireland' at the time (Hesketh, 1990: 2). However, the evidence does show that there were feminist reproductive rights (including pro-choice) movements prior to 1983, which, in and of themselves, did elicit a response from the right. Framing feminist campaigns as 'anticipative' denies these activists, and their demands on reproductive rights agency as sources of transformation in Irish society. The 1973 McGee case, where the Irish Supreme Court found a constitutional right to privacy within marital affairs, covered the use, albeit limited, of contraceptives. This along with the gains in access to abortion in the in the UK (1967 Abortion Act) and in the USA (*Roe v Wade*, 1973) led to concerns, among the conservative right that Ireland would also have abortion introduced through legislation or through court cases (Hug, 1999: 146). In 1980 the Health (Family Planning) Act angered the right as they regarded even the very restrictive access to contraceptives allowed by this Act as symptomatic of transformations in Irish society that they were unwilling to accept. As Barry (1988: 57) noted, by 1980, 'right-wing forces within the State interpreted the change as a major and ominous defeat'. However, while the dangers posed by the precedent set the McGee case, and the small gains on access to contraceptives were regarded as unsettling, the actions of the WRCG in 1980-81 caused much more serious anxiety among the right-wing moral crusaders.

By 1981 WRCG did make its aims clear on abortion: 'the decriminalisation of abortion (...) and the establishment of a feminist pregnancy counselling service for women in crisis' (Riddick, 2002: 267-268). As

reported in the *Evening Herald*, a public meeting of WRCG held on March 11, 1981, heard Riddick ask why women should be denied the basic 'right to control one's body' (Riddick in Bourke, 2002: 286). Despite its best efforts, however, WRCG remained a small, underfunded group which was having only a modest impact on the broader conversations on abortion. Indeed, the intense lobbying of the anti-abortion groups and the power of the Catholic Church had helped achieve what feminist groups were aiming for, a national public conversation on abortion. However, this national conversation was framed as a way of responding to and supporting what was perceived as the anti-abortion outlook of most Irish people, and of ensuring the equal right to life of the unborn be constitutionally protected. Those who were opposed restrictions on women's reproductive rights were slow to react to anti-choice campaigns to have a 'pro-life' amendment inserted into the Constitution, and it was not until December 1981 that WRCG held a conference to discuss the issue². Stemming from this meeting, the Women's Right to Choose Campaign (WRCC) was founded; its aim, to fight the anti-abortion groups based on pro-choice arguments.

THE ANTI-AMENDMENT CAMPAIGN, 1981-1983

According to Barry (1988: 58),

for nearly two years, between 1981 and 1983, the battle raged between PLAC and the Anti-Amendment Campaign (AAC), an alliance of feminists, left-wing and progressive forces.

The Pro-Life Amendment Campaign (PLAC), launched in April 1981, stuck to a singular, coherent argument in their campaign. They argued that people should vote for the amendment if they were against abortion and wished to keep Ireland's virtuous character intact. Abortion was constructed as an attack on the patriarchal, marital, reproductive Irish family as defined by the Constitution and by Catholic social thinking, undermining the 'construction of women in primarily maternal and subordinate terms' (Smyth, 2005: 60). It was against this argument that the umbrella anti-amendment movement, which included those who were pro-choice and seeking to have abortion decriminalised and those who were anti-amendment, although not pro-choice, or indeed, pro-abortion, were pitted (Barry, 1988: 58). In December 1981, a WRCC founder member Mary Gordon, noted that, 'it was assumed that (...) PLAC would be opposed by supporters of abortion rights on a pro-abortion basis' (Gordon, 1984:13). However, differences in strategy between the WRCG and the more radical WRCC soon emerged and were to cause ongoing tension among feminists throughout the anti-amendment campaign. While the WRCC wished to form grassroots, direct action, pro-abortion, feminist campaign, the WRCG preferred 'a broadly based 'respectable' opposition to PLAC, and worked among academics, professors and media people' (Mahon, 1987: 66). The debate on strategy between the WRCG and the WRCC continued until mid-1982, when the Anti-Amendment Campaign (AAC) was launched; indicating that the liberal platform of avoiding discussions of choice and women's bodily autonomy had won. The AAC was launched in June 1982 and WRCG became one of the lead organisers of its anti-amendment campaign through to the referendum vote in September 1983.

Gordon described the umbrella nature of the AAC, as a 'broad front campaign attempting to hold within its ranks many divergent views'. It was 'intended to keep out nobody and contain everyone' (Gordon, 1982: 5). As well as the WRCG, the AAC included Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL), the IPCC, Cherish, the Rape Crisis Centres, the Labour Party's Women's National Council, the Dublin Well Woman Centre, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), the London based Irish Women's Abortion Support Group (IWASG), the Council for the Status for Women (CSW) and the Trade Union Women's Forum. Lawyers and doctors also formed groupings to oppose the amendment, as did politicians. Its 1982 pamphlet established its position on the referendum, its five main points were that the amendment would,

1) do nothing to solve the problem of unwanted pregnancies in Ireland. It would not change the social problem of inadequate education and contraception facilities (...) 2) it would allow no exceptions even in the cases where pregnancy severely threatens a women's health or was the result of rape or incest 3) (...) it seeks to enshrine in the Constitution the teaching of one religious denomination (...) 4) (...) it will impede further public discussion and possible legislation on abortion (...) 5) At a time of severe unemployment (...) the proposed amendment is an irresponsible waste of public funds (AAC, 1982).

It also contended that abortion was already illegal in Ireland and there was only a 'remote to non-existent' chance that the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act would be repealed, that it was a sectarian and divisive amendment

² The wording of the amendment read 'The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right.'

at a 'time when all Irish people should be striving towards a more open, compassionate, pluralist and less hypocritical society' (AAC: 1982).

The pamphlet demonstrated that the aims of the AAC were very broad and focused on several issues relating to women's lives, as well as issues of legality, constitutionality, and sectarianism, while on the anti-abortion side there was a determined and singular sense of purpose to stop access to abortion in all cases. It also demonstrated that advocating for a women's right to choose was not going to form a central part of its campaign. This complex and broad-based messaging proved to be a drawback for the AAC from the beginning. However, this did not mean that PLAC and its allies had an easy battle, as despite intensive lobbying not all the political parties supported them. Of the two main parties, Fianna Fáil remained solidly behind the pro-amendment campaign, while Fine Gael were less so. In the 1980s Fine Gael, although centre right on economic issues, was seen as liberal on social issues and several feminists who had been members of the IWLM were now sitting Fine Gael TDs [Members of Parliament]. In February 1983, the Fine Gael Youth conference had rejected the amendment and campaigned against it. According to a report in the *Irish Times*, a speaker at the conference told the delegates that 'the very people who claimed to be pro-life were, in fact, causing abortions through their narrow-minded, insular approach to unmarried pregnant women' (Finlan, 1983: 7). However, Anne Speed, an IWU founder member and right to choose campaigner, pointedly noted that, 'certain Fine Gael 'feminist' TDs were seen with the badge of foetal respectability, SPUC's little feet lapel badge', demonstrating the inadequacies of, as she put it, 'of Irish liberalism' (1992: 94).

As for the other parties, the AAC had gained widespread although not universal nor unqualified support on the left (Horgan, 1983: 4). The Labour Party was then in a coalition Government with Fine Gael, but interestingly, the Minister for Health, Labour's Barry Desmond, who was against the wording for the amendment, would not introduce the Referendum Bill to the Dáil, so it fell to the Minister for Justice, Fine Gael's Michael Noonan, to do so. The Labour Party's Women Council did issue a statement against the amendment and affiliated with the AAC (Field, 2018: 610). On the far left the Worker's Party (WP) made clear its opposition to the amendment. However, it did not affiliate with AAC, even though its women's section pushed for affiliation (610). For the WP,

[the] decision on the matter [of affiliation] may well depend more on their perception of the AAC being tarred with the pro-abortion brush. Such caution may not please their activists (Horgan, 1983: 4).

In the end, the party did not affiliate with the AAC, but did campaign against the amendment. They produced a leaflet in 1983 which called for a no vote, in which, however, abortion was not once mentioned (Muldowney, 2015: 132). The anxieties about being tarred with the pro-abortion brush clearly influenced the WP activities. The Democratic Socialists were much more straightforward in their messaging, going further than most parties in calling for the decriminalisation of abortion. Because of this stance, Jim Kemmy, their only national political representative, became a lightning rod for the pro-amendment side, and lost his seat in the November 1982 General Election, in part because of his pro-choice stance.

Sinn Féin issued a statement opposing the amendment but would not affiliate with the AAC, as it felt that it might alienate its supporters, north and south, with such an open commitment, again signifying a left leaning party with clear anxieties about being seen to have a 'pro-abortion' taint. In October 1981, the party had issued a report entitled *Abortion Ireland*, which laid out its position on the issue. It noted that '10,000 Irish women will have had abortions during 1981' (Sinn Féin, 1981: 1), while its policy document *Women in a New Ireland* acknowledged it was 'an indictment of society' that so many women were forced to seek abortions. However, as a Party it was adamant that it remained 'totally opposed to abortion' (Sinn Féin, 1981: 1). The report laid bare Sinn Féin's ambiguous stance on abortion and the reasons which, they believed, led to Irish women (north and south) to seek abortions in the UK; inadequate family planning laws, lack of general access to contraceptives, and inadequate social welfare for single mothers and their children (1-5). They praised the WRCC because it, they felt, saw abortion as a 'fourth viable option to a pregnant woman after the choices of keeping the child, fostering it or having it adopted', but were disparaging about the IPCC, who, they felt, saw 'abortion as an easy option rather than as a last resort' (4). Sinn Féin's conflicted position was representative of many groups and activists, who, while not pro-choice or in favour of legislating for abortion in Ireland, were opposed to the amendment. These tensions would play out within and outside the AAC, during the campaign, and would in very fundamental ways impact on its ability to deliver an effective anti-amendment message.

The smaller far left parties, among them, the Irish Republican Socialist Movement (IRSM), the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI), the Socialist Worker's Movement (SWM), the People's Democracy (PD) and the Dublin Anarchist Collective were more consistent on their pro-choice message. They were all working with the WRCC but also hoping that the referendum would be an 'opportunity to raise the question of abortion and to promote debate about the right to choose' (Horgan, 1983: 4). Pat Donnelly of the PD criticised the leadership of the anti-amendment campaign for 'their reliance on Protestant Churches and lobbying prominent individuals. We pointed out the need to force the pace in local action committees' (Donnelly, 1983: 5). While, as Donnelly agreed, the AAC

had some success in creating a broad-based opposition to these groups, there was, he argued, an urgent need to build a national mass movement, engaging anti-imperialists, along with trade unions and the working class, which would 'clarify the confused debate about the long term aims of the campaign' (5). As Donnelly (1983: 5) outlined, some activists on the far left saw the anti-amendment campaign as an opportunity to,

to separate Church and State and demand a democratic, secular society (...) and form the broader democratic movement that feminists need for their own demands, for the right to choose and an end to sexual discrimination and repression.

This desire, on the part of the more radical WRCC and its political supporters, to focus in on the question of choice and legalisation for abortion, as well as other class and gender-based rights, demonstrates the complex and multi-faceted messages coming from the wider anti-amendment side.

These complexities, and the difficulties in keeping a broad, umbrella movement together, would become more evident as the anti-amendment campaign intensified in 1983. The WRCC and their supporters faced many obstacles in having their pro-choice position articulated in any anti-amendment public debates, promotional material, or media programmes. The mainstream media, national and local, where they included both sides of the debate, took their lead from the AAC, and for the AAC to get their anti-amendment arguments across, they felt they had to confine the message to the societal, legal, and medical impacts of inserting the amendment into the Constitution. Often the organisers and supporters of AAC had to deny they were pro-abortion or were interested in having abortion decriminalised in Ireland. Responding only to a 'pro-life' amendment with a campaign which contained no message on abortion or choice meant that the 'basic anti-abortion message was left untouched' (Gordon, 1984: 19). The difficulties of treading this line were often evident in interviews with AAC campaigners and affiliated groups. On December 9, 1982, Anne Dempsey, a journalist with the *Evening Herald* reported from the offices of the single mother support and advocacy group, Cherish. On the wall of the office she noted an AAC poster, 'It's life that needs amending, not the Constitution.' (Dempsey, 1982: 19). Cherish were affiliated with the AAC but considered itself an anti-abortion organisation. Its information officer argued that while Cherish offered nondirective pregnancy counselling it was not an abortion referral agency; instead 'women contemplating abortion are invited to stay and explore other options, and, sometimes, they do' (1982: 19). Despite its anti-abortion stance, Cherish was also vehemently anti-amendment:

we think it's a total waste of time (...) It's not going to change the situation, it's not going to alter the numbers of women travelling to Britain for abortions, except perhaps to make them feel more guilty than they're feeling already (Dempsey, 1982: 19).

Like many other women's groups who opposed the amendment, Cherish felt it would be better to direct their energies towards the societal, legal and economic issues which disadvantaged women, that campaigns for wider and affordable access to contraceptives, better allowances for single mothers, access to housing, affordable childcare and better sex education in schools were more important.

Another argument the AAC made was that the amendment would lead to a backlash against rights Irish women had already achieved. On June 25, 1983, at a meeting of the Clonmel AAC Group, reported by the local newspaper, *The Nationalist*, an AAC member, Ann Neary, stated that if the amendment passed 'certain forms of contraception including the coil, most forms of the pill and the morning after pill would be banned' (Anon, 1983: 19). She further stated that referral and family planning clinics would be liable for prosecution and the life of the mother would be threatened. She stressed that she was 'anti-abortion' and argued that 'in legal terms the amendment would be like opening a Pandora's box' (1983: 19). Prominent lawyers such as Senator Mary Robinson took very public anti-amendment stances. By September 1983, Maev Kennedy of the *Irish Times* reported that over 600 lawyers were opposed to the amendment. Most made their arguments on very technical legal points, and they were often at pains to insist that a defeat of the amendment did not mean abortion would be introduced into Ireland. The Lawyers against the Amendment statement argued that

[the] amendment was unnecessary and quoted from Supreme Court cases which they felt dismissed the idea that the Supreme Court would ever rule on abortion (Kennedy, Sept 1, 1983: 6).

Similarly, a group of doctors, who described themselves as 'pro-life and anti-amendment' (Nowlan, 1983: 9) had come together by June 1983. Their main concern was that the amendment would impact on the doctor-patient relationship and

could permit a third party to enter the one-to-one relationship between patient and doctor, with the claim they were acting on behalf of 'the unborn' (Nowlan, June 2, 1983: 9).

In August 1983, a few weeks before the vote, Anne O'Donnell, spokesperson for the AAC, gave an interview to Isobel Conway of *Irish Press*. In the piece a spokesperson for PLAC said that a meeting of the WTCG in March of 1981, where they [the WRCC] announced 'that it would start a campaign for legalised abortion in Ireland' (Conway, 1983: 10) was the reason it began its campaign to inset the amendment into the Constitution. This was not the full truth of the origins of PLAC, but it served to focus in on its main argument, that their opponents were, for the most part, pro-abortion. Instead of delivering the clear anti amendment, pro-choice message, similar to the pro-amendment, anti-choice clear message that 'a vote for the amendment was a vote against abortion', O'Donnell said that 'it was up to each individual to vote according to their conscience and a vote against the amendment doesn't mean that you are pro-abortion' (Conway, 1983: 10). Apart from the national and local newspapers, the principal forum for national debates on the referendum was RTÉ, where this complex and multi-faceted anti-amendment message was also delivered. Again, and again the legal and medical consequences of inserting the amendment into the constructional were used by those supporting the AAC position. As RTÉ producer, David Blake Knox, who worked on the referendum campaign programmes, later said,

the AAC tended to nominate a succession of bright young lawyers to appear on TV and radio. Many of the reservations they raised about the implications of the amendment have since been vindicated. But they often expressed these concerns in legalistic terms that did not seem to connect with the wider Irish public (Blake Knox, 2018: 28).

DIVISIONS IN THE ANTI-AMENDMENT CAMPAIGN

Throughout 1983, therefore, the mainstream debate on the amendment centred on the right to life of the unborn from the pro-amendment side and the various legal, societal, and medical impacts of inserting the amendment into the Constitution on the anti-amendment side. As late as August 1983, the AAC was still making these complicated arguments, and taking no stance on the issue of choice, or indeed, the need for legislation to decriminalise abortion. On August 15 they launched their official referendum campaign and announced their slogan and leaflet, *This Amendment Could Kill Women* (AAC, 1983). All the points which had formed part of their ongoing campaign were included. It argued that the amendment was not about keeping abortion out of Ireland, as Irish women could already access abortion in England; that it could stop women accessing abortion in England, as anyone could take out a High Court injunction to stop women leaving the country, thereby driving women back to seeking 'back street' abortions. It also stated that 'abortion was not the problem, the amendment was not the answer' (AAC, 1983: 3), again trying to remove abortion from the centre of discussion. The main problems for Irish women, as contained in previous anti-amendment propaganda, were reiterated; the social and economic conditions of many women in Ireland, bad housing, inadequate social welfare payments, lack of childcare, and the stigma of illegitimacy, which inserting the amendment into the Constitution would do nothing to change. Vote No, it argued, if you believe the life of a woman was more important than a fertilised egg, that women should have access to safe contraception, that the physical and mental health of rape victims mattered, that the views of one denomination should not be enshrined in the Constitution, and that existing adverse societal conditions should be solved rather than brushed under the carpet.

This official campaign leaflet reflects the marginalisation of the voices of more radical feminists who were in favour of the right to choose and the decriminalisation of abortion, especially those who were members of the WRCC. This marginalisation had been ongoing from the formation of the AAC, and as Gordon noted, even when it became obvious that the amendment would pass, the AAC National Steering Committee, 'dominated by liberals', still did not wish to engage with the more radical right to choose approach (Gordon, 1984: 20). Even the use of the word abortion was rare, with the media and many AAC activists preferring to use the term 'substantive issue' rather than abortion (Kennedy, 2018: 17). The more radical WRCC members, many already involved in left wing, radical, socialist groups, had wished to build a popular campaign which did not depend on legal, medical, or constitutional arguments. They had felt that when the referendum was proposed it was,

a godsend to the women's movement in Ireland as (...) a Women's Right to Choose campaign could never in ten years have generated the amount of discussion about abortion this proposal will do in ten months (Gordon, 1982: 5).

According to Gordon the aim was to build up a grassroots campaign, set up community action groups, and ally with other groups who were campaigning for the rights of marginalised sections of Irish society. However, they faced difficulties in persuading even those of the left of the strength of their arguments. Except for a few of the smaller parties, those on the left who supported the anti-amendment campaign continued to equivocate when making arguments for the right to choose, and, particularly, for the decriminalisation of abortion.

Activists in the WRCC campaign were to remain disappointed with, and marginalised by, the anti-amendment arguments used by the AAC. Most anti-amendment groups and activists were terrified of being tarred with the 'pro-abortion' brush, and the 'right to choose' argument was seen as problematic in persuading a conservative Irish electorate to reject the amendment. For many, anti-abortion attitudes were so prevalent that even opposing the amendment was considered radical (Gordan cited in Smyth, 2005: 67). Despite this some WRCC members did try and force the issue among campaigning groups. For instance, several lesbian feminists, members of both WRCC and Liberation for Irish Lesbians (LIL) sought a declaration of support for the 'right to choose' from the National Gay Federation (NGF), the main Lesbian and Gay campaigning group. LIL members, Joni Crone and Majella Breen, wanted the NGF to support the WRCC, and were determined to force a debate in the NGF about women's right to choose and the decriminalisation of abortion. They argued that it was 'women, lesbians, lesbian mothers, lesbians who have been raped, who have had abortions, who have needed the right to choose' (McDonagh, 2020: 316). However, at the time the membership of the NGF was overwhelmingly male, and more concerned with the campaign to decriminalise homosexuality. Despite support for the WRCC position from some members, it was eventually decided that it served the reputation of the NGF best to affiliate with the more moderate AAC, rather than let gay rights be seen to be associated with abortion. This would risk, they felt, damaging 'the public's' willingness to give a fair hearing to the gay rights cause' (318). A 'Gays against the Amendment' (G.A.A.) leaflet produced rehearsed all the AAC talking points, emphasising that 'whether you agree with the Right to Choose or not, the importance of voting 'NO' is overwhelming' (Gays against the Amendment, 1983: 1).

The NGF was not the only organisation to experience tensions and splits over the strategies on the anti-amendment side. The arguments against the amendment lacked the clarity of their opponents, the attempt to weld a consensus between anti-amendment and often solidly anti-abortion groups with pro-choice feminist groups and allies inevitably failed. Over the course of the campaign these internal tensions finally led, as Riddick (2002: 268) wrote to a 'number of important body blows (...) [and] the group split internally'. The AAC distanced itself from 'The Right to Choose', and the non-directive Irish Pregnancy Counselling Centre (IPCC) collapsed due to financial pressure in July 1983. This split between the WRCC and the WRCC was, in many ways, more about strategy than ideology. Both were in favour of a woman's right to choose and differed only on the timing and extent of the abortion rights for which they could campaign. The WRCC could, in a pragmatic way, work within the broad church of the AAC, despite the public anti-amendment *and* anti-abortion pronouncements of many of its (AAC) supporters. Most of the AAC arguments on better living conditions for women's and children, access to contraceptives and battling the stigmatisation of single mothers and their children, fit with the WRCC's other ongoing campaigns. The WRCC tried to build a grassroots movement to counteract the dominance of the anti-abortion messaging from the right. Unlike the more media focused AAC, they concentrated on working with local action groups, holding public meetings, handing out leaflets and providing an 'anti amendment presence' on door-to-door canvassing in local areas (Gordon, 1984: 19). However, despite all the grassroots work of the WRCC, in the final weeks of the campaign, the right to choose arguments were absolutely side-lined and the AAC relied almost completely on societal, legal, and medical points.

Although the AAC took a tactical stance of bypassing the central issue of abortion, many in the media could not tell, or cared to tell, the difference between the WRCC and the WRCC, and often mistook or conflated one for the other, and indeed both for the AAC. This meant that the AAC and the WRCC were often tarred with the 'radical feminist, pro-abortion' brush, which suited the pro-amendment groups. On August 21, 1983, just over two weeks before the vote on the amendment, the biggest selling national Sunday newspaper, the *Sunday Independent*, carried his weekly reflection piece by Michael Cleary, a Catholic priest in the Dublin Diocese. On page nine he outlined a timeline, as he understood it, of the radical feminist campaigns to have 'abortion legalised in this country'; 'in 1975 a group of radical feminists called Irishwomen United was founded. From the beginning they were openly pro-abortion' (Cleary, 1983: 9). He then connected the IWU and its former members, from when it dissolved in 1977, to the Contraceptive Action Programme (CAP), the Rape Crisis Centre (RCC), and the Women's Right to Choose Group (WRCC). He reminded his readers that,

Ann (*sic*) Connolly is a director of the Well Woman Centre and a founder member of the Women's Right to Choose and Rape Crisis Centre. Ann (*sic*) O'Donnell became director of the RCC and Spokesperson for the Anti-Amendment campaign while Ann (*sic*) Speed is in C.A.P and Women's Right to Choose' (1983: 9).

He drew connections between these people, groups and organisations, and the AAC campaign whom, he wrote, 'launched their campaign with a multiplicity of reasons, but no mention of their real and ultimate goal—abortion' (1983: 9). Cleary was not the only pro-amendment campaigner who insisted on connecting the AAC campaign opposing the 8th Amendment to an aim of decriminalising abortion in Ireland, an aim the AAC did not include in any of its literature, and indeed, an aim which many of its members did not at all support. To Cleary they were fudging on their goal of an Ireland where unrestricted access to abortion was available, something he wanted his

readers to fully appreciate, so it served his purpose to tar all anti-amendment groups as pro-abortion. The impact of Cleary, PLAC and other pro amendment activists became clear on September 7, when just over 56% of the electorate voted by a majority of 66.9% to 33.10% to insert the 8th amendment into the Irish Constitution.

CONCLUSION

After the referendum, journalist and IWLM founder, Nell McCafferty, wrote,

the debate was not really about abortion - it was about woman's role and woman's place, and we were shown clearly what that was. It was to be invisible (McCafferty in Bourke 2002: 269-271).

The defeat of the anti-amendment campaign, although expected, was a severe blow for feminists and women's groups in Ireland. Demoralised, battered, bruised, and split, the Irish women's movement underwent a period of dissolution and reassessment. After the result, the issue of the right to choose and abortion was dropped by much of the media and the AAC faded away. Both WRCG and the WRCC soon disbanded, although some did consider that achieving a 30% vote against the amendment in the face of 'social hysteria and the social might of Fianna Fáil' was a measure of some success (Speed, 1992: 25). Over 40% of the electorate failed to vote, suggesting that many were not convinced by either the anti-abortion moral argument or by the complicated societal and legal AAC arguments. Perhaps too the fact that the Irish people had spent months discussing women's reproductive rights, even if they voted to deny them those rights, could, in some ways be seen as a positive result. The right won, the 8th would be inserted into the Constitution, but open, public conversations on women's access to contraceptives, on women's right to choose, on the fact that Irish women were travelling, in growing numbers to England to seek terminations, were now possible. There can be seen here, a small start to the rejection of the ideologies of morality, respectability, secrecy, and shame which had dominated women bodies and lives for so long.

Nevertheless, Irish feminist groups were frustrated by the mistakes made during the campaign and the negative impact it would have on women's lives. There was a retreat from abortion activism even among the radicals, who now concentrated on socio-economic issues which blighted women's lives—campaigns for better supports for single mothers, for better housing for families, better access to contraceptives, campaigns against violence against women, and as the decade progressed, collaborating with other equality groups on issues such as the decriminalisation of homosexuality, AIDS activism, and campaigns to legalise divorce etc. On the question of abortion, most feminists now focused on attempts to make information on travel and information on abortion in England available to the many women who needed it, and those who warned that inserting the 8th Amendment into the Constitution was but a first step for the right were proved correct. The Society for Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC) began to take cases against clinics, organisations and individuals who provided non-directive pregnancy information, i.e., information on how to travel and access abortion service in the UK. This resulted in many of those who had campaigned against the 8th coming together to form a 'defend the clinics' campaign. This particular campaign would be one of many fights for the right of Irish women access to non-directive pregnancy information and the right to travel for an abortion in coming years. Goretta Horgan, as a former national organiser of the AAC, admitted, years later, that the AAC campaign made a

tactical mistake to have concentrated so much on stopping the referendum (...) And the fact that we had a range of sometimes complicated arguments against the amendment, weakened us (Ferriter, 2012: 471).

They should and could, she said, 'have been more audacious' (471). Over the next decades' Irish women's groups and other pro-choice activists began the long journey to repeal the 8th. While the defeat in 1983 was difficult for feminists, it did, however haltingly and however marginalised initially, foster feminist conversations about women's reproductive rights and provided the language about women's right to choose, which was to be so useful in the many ensuing campaigns for repeal. Feminists may have lost this battle, but women's rights, including access to contraceptives, right to choose, and access to abortion, as issues, were now permanently on the table. Pandora's Box had, indeed, been opened.

On the other side, the right saw the amendment as a first blow in an ongoing ideological battle to enshrine Catholic social thinking in sex education, contraception, reproduction, and the idea of the family, and to see off the liberalisation of Irish society. For them, women's reproductive bodies, the issue of contraceptives, sex and sexuality should always be considered from a moral perspective in a Catholic, abortion free, Ireland. They had won this battle, but there would be more battlelines drawn on issues such as divorce, homosexuality, sex education, contraception, while time and again, the right to choose and access to abortion would also be returned to; this would continue into the coming decades. It would take many years, and many campaigns, but finally, the 8th was removed from the Constitution in 2018, on foot of a female led, feminist, grass roots campaign which fore-fronted

the idea of access to full reproductive rights. This, perhaps, was one of the hardest lessons learned from the defeat of 1983 that a simple, feminist, message, 'Our Bodies, Our Choice' was, in the end, the most effective. In the Irish context, the journey from the ideologies of Catholic morality and conservative respectability which had dominated women lives and women's bodies is best encapsulated in the cry which echoed as part of so many pro-choice campaigns post 1983, down to Repeal in 2018—'Not the Church, Not the State—Women will control their Fate'. Abortion was finally, for the majority, no longer a moral issue, but had become a human rights and healthcare issue.

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