**British Pregnancy Advisory Service submission to Citizens’ Assembly on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution**

British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) is a reproductive health charity that sees 80,000 women a year with unplanned pregnancies or pregnancies they feel they cannot continue. 98% of our work is funded by the NHS in Britain and the remaining cases are most commonly women who travel from places where they are unable to access legal abortion. **On average 1,000 of those women each year are from the Republic of Ireland.** Department of Health abortion statistics show that in 2015 at least 3,451 women travelled to England and Wales for an abortion.[[1]](#footnote-1) Our submission focuses on the experience of the thousands of Irish women who make the journey to access abortion outside of Ireland.

Discussion around the repeal of the Eighth Amendment must foremost acknowledge that Irish women have abortions. The amendment does not stop Irish women undertaking an act the state believes should be illegal, it simply forces them to travel for legal care or take medication illegally at home. In doing so it has created a society in which women who can access money have legal abortions, if they are prepared to pay and suffer the indignity of travelling to another country for treatment, while the poor are forced to have children or buy illegal drugs online. If the amendment remains in place nothing will change - this situation will continue for generation after generation of Irish women.

**BPAS care for women from Ireland**

BPAS has been caring for women from Ireland for 50 years. We believe that these women should have been able to access treatment and support at home. BPAS wishes to ensure the Assembly understands the lengths women and British charities have gone to in order to provide treatment and support that the Irish state refuses to offer its women. BPAS has developed measures to mitigate the damage caused to Irish citizens by this situation. These include:

* A website created specifically for Irish women[[2]](#footnote-2) and their support people, incorporating travel advice and links to the Abortion Support Network[[3]](#footnote-3) for cases of financial hardship.
* Reduced prices for Irish women (although BPAS is a charity we need to cover our costs).
* Charitable funding for those unable to meet the cost of treatment.
* BPAS staff established relationships with three options crisis pregnancies centres to streamline referral and remove consultation fees.

It is absolutely staggering that in 2016 a nation like Ireland would find it acceptable that another country is intervening in this way to support its citizens at a vulnerable time in their lives. Ireland relies on charities in other countries to establish mechanisms to care for its citizens, despite having the means to do so at home.

**Women BPAS is unable to help**

BPAS will never stop providing services to women who need them, but even our organisation cannot treat every woman who asks us for help. Women with complex medical conditions cannot be treated in standalone clinics in England and Wales because we do not have immediate access to emergency care facilities if there are complications. Medically complex cases cover a broad range of conditions which may require inpatient treatment, including high BMI, diabetes and epilepsy, and have possible complications relating to anaesthesia. Ordinarily, those patients are eligible for NHS treatment and our Specialist Placements team would work to arrange an appointment in an NHS hospital. That is not always possible even for British residents. Consequently, an Irish woman presenting with uncontrolled asthma, for example, cannot be treated in any of the charitable clinics here, and the Irish state has refused to care for her at home. This presents an enormous risk to her life and health.

Forcing these women to continue a pregnancy is not only unethical but poses greater risk to the woman because of the condition which has prevented her accessing an abortion. There is an assumption made by some in Ireland that if a woman can travel she can be helped – that is not necessarily the case. Unfortunately, it is usually women with most need of medical intervention who are most likely to be affected. The Assembly should consider that repealing the Eighth Amendment is not a matter of abstract debates about rights but also about the life and health of women living in Ireland. It has genuine practical and personal implications that have the potential to harm women and their families. The current legal framework leaves all women of child-bearing age in a situation in which they are less safe than if there were resident in England, Wales, Scotland, or any other country where abortion is available as a standard part of healthcare. BPAS would never turn away a woman we are legally and clinically able to help but sadly we are not always able to provide care to every woman.

**Messages from women**

In preparation for this submission BPAS asked women travelling from Ireland and attending our Merseyside clinic if they had a message for the Citizens’ Assembly. The following are direct messages from your mums, sisters, daughters, friends, colleagues and neighbours who were forced to travel to England because they could not access care at home. These voices, above all others, should be heard.

*“Having to travel here is difficult financially and emotionally. Being in a country I don’t know to go through something quite traumatic is horrible (as is) having to save up for flights and treatment. It is very unfair.” 25/11/16*

*“It is a women’s constitutional human right to do and have freedom of choice regarding her reproductive health. It is quite ridiculous to such an ever changing society that the Eighth Amendment is even in existence. Ireland is becoming a secular society in which many do not see. So for such and many reasons it needs to change for the better for the women in society.” 1/12/16*

*“Women should be given the right to choose. It’s not an easy decision to make having to travel makes this difficult.” 1/12/16*

*“I think it is both sad and pathetic that the UK look after Irish women better than their own country. I am fortunate enough to have money but lots of women don’t. We need to repeal the 8th now.” 2/12/16*

*“Makes the decision harder for women as we are made to feel we should be ashamed of our decision. Puts financial stress with the cost of travelling to the UK.” 8/12/16*

*“I think Irish women should be allowed to have the right to decide for themselves to terminate a pregnancy, as it is their body and life therefore should have a right to choose.” 14/12/16*

BPAS hopes that these messages, and the voices of the women we care for, will lead the Assembly to conclude that the Eighth Amendment must be repealed. The Citizens’ Assembly has an opportunity to send its own message to the women who have been brave enough to tell you their story. To continue to treat women in this way is simply wrong. Repealing the Eighth Amendment would be the first step in ensuring that their distress will not be shared by future generations of women in Ireland. The reality is that Irish women have, and have always had, abortions – the only question is whether Ireland will continue to force them to continue with the degrading and distressing journey to Britain to do so.

1. Department of Health, 2015, Abortion Statistics: England and Wales <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/report-on-abortion-statistics-in-england-and-wales-for-2015> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. BPAS Ireland <https://www.bpas.ie/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Abortion Support Network <http://www.abortionsupport.org.uk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)