

Sarah Fisher

Abortion

Northern Ireland's Export to England

MARIE was one of our first clients. A mother of two in her late 20s who was recently separated from her alcoholic partner, and pregnant as a result of rape; her situation couldn't have been much worse. Except that it could. She had only £250 and no passport or credit card. We were able to help her by offering an understanding and non-judgemental person at the end on a phone, by booking her plane ticket, and providing her with a grant towards the cost of her abortion in England.

Abortion Support Network (ASN) is a volunteer-run organisation that works to support the thousands of women from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland who each year are forced to travel to England in order to access a safe abortion. Our volunteers in London open their homes to the women who make this difficult journey, and we fundraise to provide them with financial help towards the cost of their procedure. ASN was founded by Mara Clarke, who previously worked for a similar organization in New York called Haven Coalition. Since opening our doors in Oct 2009, we have heard from more than 100 women needing our support, and we've provided each of them with the appropriate mix of accommodation, financial support and confidential, non-judgemental information they require.

All of the women who contact ASN face enormous obstacles to accessing an abortion. While the individual circumstances of these women vary greatly, for each of them the journey they make is a difficult one. For while it is legal in both Northern Ireland and the Republic for women to travel abroad for an abortion, they have to pay privately for the procedure. Even with the discounted prices some clinics offer to women from other countries, the procedure alone costs between £350 and £1350, depending on the stage of pregnancy. With the additional



costs of accommodation, last minute plane tickets, and sometimes child care and time off work, women can end up paying as much as £2000 - to access a medical procedure which is paid for by the NHS for women living in England, Scotland and Wales. The lucky ones are able to borrow from friends, the less fortunate ones turn to loan sharks or credit unions with high interest rates.

The financial costs are of course not the only burden that these women are made to bear. While a crisis pregnancy is by its very nature extremely stressful, women in Northern Ireland face the additional anxiety of maintaining secrecy about their abortion, often having to lie to friends, family members and employers about where they're going, and in order to scrape together the money. The reality of this situation is that many women travel alone for their abortion, are extremely isolated, and have no place else to turn.

ASN exists to support these women because we believe that it's women who should be the ones making the decision about whether or not they have an abortion. That's assuming that women have a 'choice' as such. Of the women that have contacted ASN for support, it's common for women to say that they feel they have no choice. Take the single mother of four in her late 30s, who was left in debt after separating from her husband. She told him that she was pregnant again with his child, and he turned his back on her. Or the twenty three year-old woman who approached us for help after she became pregnant while on the pill. Both she and her partner were out of work and they were already struggling to support their young baby. And the teenager whose mum

threatened to throw her out when she became pregnant.

For the women who travel to London for their abortion, our volunteer hosts offer a place in their homes to those that need somewhere to stay the night before, during or after their abortion. We pick them up, take them home, make them dinner, give them a bed, and in the morning either take them back to the clinic or help them on their way back home, according to where they need to go. If the women are travelling with someone, be it a friend, partner or family member, we'll put them up too. Some of the women who contact ASN have not left the country before, and the prospect of travelling to London, navigating the tube alone, and finding the clinic while shattered after a long journey can be extremely daunting. So as well as saving accommodation costs, women really value having an ASN host to help them along the way. For me as a host, this is a way of showing solidarity to these women; letting them know that they are not alone and that I support them in the decision they've made.

The poorest and most vulnerable women are the ones that are hit the hardest by the injustice of the abortion ban, such as the mother of two who had recently migrated from Eastern Europe, who couldn't speak English and was already struggling to make ends meet (a friend of hers made the call to us). There was also the traveller who couldn't read, so had to ask a stranger for help getting the information. Then again, there was the woman with mental health problems who was suffering domestic violence.

Another impact of the abortion restrictions is that women end up having to have their abortion later, owing to the time it takes women to find out about their options, to make the necessary arrangements, and to save or borrow the money. And all the while, the cost of the procedure goes up, because later-term abortions are more expensive. ➔

You can't help but wonder whether the distress, shame and hardships that women are made to endure are deliberately inflicted upon women – to 'punish' them for daring to make their own decisions about abortion, and exercise control over their own bodies. The strict controls on abortion certainly aren't succeeding in putting an end to abortion; they are simply exporting the problem. Official statistics from England record that in 2009, 1,123 abortions were performed for women from Northern Ireland, and an additional 4,422 for women from the Republic. The actual number is in fact likely to be considerably higher, with some women giving a false address and others travelling to countries other than England to access the procedure. But what these statistics don't tell is the human female face and suffering behind these numbers; the struggles these women face, the isolation they are made to feel, the indignity they are made to bear.

For some women, the ASN volunteer that takes their call is the first person they have been able to tell about their situation. Other women have fallen into the hands of rogue (anti-choice) agencies that provide misinformation to pregnant women considering their options. When this has happened, women often have

many questions about the effects and impacts of abortion about which they have been deceived. They may, for example, need a great deal of reassurance that an abortion won't leave them infertile. On top of that of course, are the subtle, but all the more effective, suggestions of guilt that the rogue agencies have made.

Every week ASN hears from pregnant women who are in a state of crisis. As word spreads about us we are receiving more and more calls. This is good news because it means that more and more women are finding out about the support we can offer them, but we are desperately in need of more funds. With the coming months likely to be even busier than before, we have launched a fundraising campaign to secure at least £1,000 each month in regular income (standing orders) - so that we can reach more women and know to exactly how many we can provide financial assistance each and every month.

Do you want to make a direct difference to women who desperately need access to safe abortion?

You can support ASN in several ways:

- Make a donation to ASN or set up a standing order.

Whether it's £2, £5 or £20 a month, every little helps!

- Sign up to our eNewsletter
- Join us on Facebook or follow us on Twitter
- Fundraise for ASN – we have a fundraising kit to help you
- Help spread the word – tell your friends about ASN
- Visit our website or get in touch for more information about offering support

ASN is the only group on record providing women travelling to England for abortions with what these women need most: money and immediate practical support. We will exist as long as women continue to be denied access to safe and legal abortions in their own countries, and with the support of other individuals and organisations that object to this injustice, we can be there for more women who want help.

Names and other details have been changed to protect women's identities.

www.abortionsupport.org.uk
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Human Rights in Iran

Brendan Maher

A Die-in protest was held on Feb 12th at Stephen's Green, Dublin, sponsored by the Iranian section of Amnesty International. The human rights situation in Iran is worse than at any time in the last 20 years. Ordinary men and women who campaign for equality, who join a trade union or write for an independent newspaper, who support opposition candidates in elections, live in fear. They know they can disappear into a prison at any moment to be beaten and tortured. Their families can be threatened or attacked. Despite this, hundreds of thousands of Iranians take a stand for human rights every single day.

Amnesty International, with the Iranian section, works with them, and with activists and governments around the world, to highlight the human rights violations committed by the Iranian authorities. They campaign to free prisoners, end the death penalty, guarantee free speech and end discrimination. They put pressure on the Iranian government to comply with international human rights law. Because of the support of many people innocent men and women have walked free from prison. Others have been spared execution.

Stop the Death Penalty

THE Iranian Government executes more of its own people, per head of population, than any other country in the world. In 2009 at least 388 men and women were put to death. People can even be stoned to death for the crime of adultery. Many of these people were condemned after unfair trials. Some were put to death because of their political beliefs or even their sexuality. The death penalty in Iran is a tool of political repression. Thousands of political prisoners and members of the Kurdish minority were executed in the 1980s. This must not happen again.

Stoning

IN Iran stoning someone to death is not against the law. Using the wrong stone is.

The Iranian penal code says that the stones should not be so big that they might kill someone outright, but should be big enough to cause injury.



Facts and Figures

AFTER the disputed election in 2009 well over 5000 people were detained, including opposition politicians, journalists, students and lawyers. Many were tortured and some died from their injuries.

Newspapers, magazines, blogs and journals that criticise the government are shut down and journalists imprisoned. There are harsh penalties for non-violent crimes and juvenile offenders are frequently executed. In an Iranian courtroom the evidence of a woman is worth half that of a man.

Religious and ethnic minorities are also heavily discriminated against. Candidates can only run for election if they are approved by a committee of Islamic clerics and lawyers. Only four men were approved to run for president in 2009 out of 476 people who put themselves forward.

We the Irish people must persuade our Government to keep raising these issues with the U N and the Iranian Government in the interest of human rights. □