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BRIAN LAWLESS / PA / AP

Foreign influence shapes Ireland's abortion debate

As pressure mounts to repeal a ban on abortion, the role of international donors and organizers is coming under scrutiny

October 28, 2015 5:00AM ET

by **Lance Richardson (/profiles/r/lance-richardson.html)** - @lancerichardson (<http://www>)

This is the second in a two-part series about the controversy surrounding the abortion ban in Ireland. The first part, about the growing movement to repeal the ban, can be read here (<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/10/21/in-ireland-debate-over-abortion-takes-center-stage.html>).

DUBLIN, Ireland — The **Tweet**ards

began to appear in June 2012, featuring images of a crying woman or an unborn fetus torn into pieces. They showed up in cities and rural towns across Ireland, insisting that “there’s always a better answer” than abortion. Similar advertisements materialized in buses, trams and train stations. A few months later, anti-abortion leaflets were distributed to a million private

homes. Youth Defence and the Life Institute, the Dublin-based activist groups that co-sponsored the campaign, called it “the biggest pro-life outreach ever seen in Ireland” and estimated it would be viewed by more than 2 million people (<http://www.youthdefence.ie/latest-news/largest-pro-life-awareness-campaign-ever-will-reach-21-million-people/>).

Abortion-rights groups were “galvanized” by the advertisements, said Cathleen Doherty, a spokeswoman for the nonprofit Abortion Rights Campaign (ARC). Complaints were lodged (<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/youth-defence-billboard-posters-not-covered-by-advertising-standards-1.954324>) with the Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland, which announced that there was nothing it could do. Protests (<http://www.abortionrightscampaign.ie/2013/07/02/spontaneous-pro-choice-protest-takes-place-outside-the-life-house/>) then erupted after a mobile billboard claiming a proposed abortion bill would “just kill babies” appeared near the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre (<http://www.thejournal.ie/admobile-company-drops-youth-defence-after-rape-crisis-incident-969637-Jun2013/>). “Ireland is already one of the most difficult countries in the world to have an abortion,” said Doherty, reflecting the attitude of many anti-abortion advocates. “So why are they putting these pictures up?”

At the same time, other kinds of questions began to be asked: Who was paying for these advertisements? Was campaign funding coming from the U.S.?

Abortion rights have always been a difficult subject in Ireland, tangled in a web of competing interests and beliefs. In 1983, Ireland passed the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, extending the right to life from a mother to her unborn child. This amendment, which effectively outlawed abortion in almost all instances, was directly



One of the anti-abortion billboards created by Youth Defence and the Life Institute.

influenced by Catholic doctrine. It was also a response to loosening abortion restrictions in Britain and the United States during the 1960s and '70s, including *Roe v. Wade*. The Eighth was intended to protect Ireland from liberalization, and in the more than three decades since it passed, the country has been engaged in a heated argument about the amendment's scope and legitimacy.

Within this argument, foreigners are conspicuous. Some are part of the Irish diaspora; others are American, Dutch or British citizens who have appeared as tactical advisers and campaign organizers, service providers and, most controversially, donors. Far from being a private internal struggle, Ireland's debate is profoundly influenced by voices from the outside world.

The money trail

In December 2012, as outrage over the billboards grew, Joseph Scheidler, the national director of the Chicago-based Pro-Life Action League, told *The Sunday Business Post* that American donors gave “hundreds of thousands of dollars (<http://www.businesspost.ie/%23!story/Home/News/Anti-abortion+groups+set+for+major+US+fund+boost/id/be99d25a-dad6-4282-ae43-4da0106db702>)” to anti-abortion groups in Ireland. Scheidler — the “patriarch of the anti-abortion movement (<http://www.politicalresearch.org/2015/01/23/meet-joe-scheidler-patriarch-of-the-anti-abortion-movement/>)” in America, as the think tank Political Research Associates put it — singled out Youth Defence as one of the primary recipients. “They need the money for publicity,” he said. “Abortion is about conversion, and it's very hard to convert people in masses, and that is why people like Youth Defence go out into the street.”

His comments aroused considerable controversy (<http://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/01/why-american-pro-life-dollars-are-pouring-into-ireland/266981/>) at the time, mostly because they seemed to confirm what abortion rights advocates suspected. Not only would evidence of foreign support mean Youth Defence was not as autonomous as it claimed, but it would also justify scrutiny (<http://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/sipo-seeks-powers-to-act-on-youth-defence-complaints-239895.html>) from the Standards in Public Office Commission, an independent funding watchdog that can impose fines of almost 1,270 euros on nonpolitical individuals or groups for accepting political donations (<http://www.sipo.gov.ie/en/Guidelines/Explanatory-Notes/Explanatory-Notes-for-Third-Parties/Explanatory-Notes-for-Third-Parties.pdf>) from individuals outside Ireland. (Youth Defence claims it is a human rights organization and “not campaigning for

political purposes (<http://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/youth-defence-lashes-funding-disclosure-plans-240510.html>).” Therefore it maintains that it isn’t required to register with the commission and has consistently declined (<http://www.sipo.gov.ie/en/Reports/Register-of-Third-Parties/>) to do so.)

“ ‘We make our money from people like me – from families with kids, from grannies, from students, from shaking buckets and doing it the hard-slog way.’ ”

– Niamh Uí Bhriain
spokeswoman, Life Institute

Today, Scheidler maintains that his comments were spun into “a fiction” by magazines and newspapers. He said that Jim Finnegan, a Catholic anti-abortion activist currently affiliated with Illinois Choose Life, visited Ireland and raised funds in the United States for Irish anti-abortion groups but that those fundraisers “didn’t really take hold.” Finnegan said he visited Ireland for a Youth Defence event in 1995 and then raised “a little over \$60,000” for the organization at events in Chicago and Pittsburgh. He said that a second fundraiser, held in 2007, raised an estimated \$75,000. “They use it to keep their efforts going,” he said of the money, though he denied that funds were intended for lobbying purposes or billboard campaigns.

Niamh Uí Bhriain, a spokeswoman for the Life Institute, a Youth Defence affiliate, said that allegations of substantial American funding are “just not true” and that Irish people fund Irish projects. “We make our money from people like me — from families with kids, from grannies, from students, from shaking buckets and doing it the hard-slog way,” she said.

She claimed that abortion-rights groups in Ireland have received money from sources such as the Atlantic Philanthropies, a private progressive foundation backed by Irish-American billionaire Charles “Chuck” Feeney. Because of financial support from Atlantic Philanthropies, she believes, the Irish Council for Civil Liberties and the National Women’s Council of Ireland have been able to become major campaigners for abortion law reform. (Neither group responded to requests for comment.)

Asked about funding, a representative for Atlantic Philanthropies, which weathered similar accusations of meddling during the Irish same-sex marriage referendum (<http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/breda-o-brien-asking-questions-about-funding->

for-referendum-campaign-1.2205469) in May, did not respond directly, instead saying, “The total amount of our investments in the Republic of Ireland to date has been upwards of 1.1 billion euros, and this has been in several sectors, including education, health care, aging, children, youth and human rights.”

A Band-Aid service

While the flow of lobbying money may be happening behind closed doors, some foreigners are openly involved in connecting women in Ireland with abortion services. Among them is Mara Clarke, an American who, in 2009, founded the London-based Abortion Support Network (<https://www.abortionsupport.org.uk>) to help women from Ireland and Northern Ireland obtain abortions abroad. In 2014 at least 3,735 women — about 10 every day — traveled (<https://www.ifpa.ie/hot-topics/abortion/statistics>) from Ireland to England or Wales for an abortion, which can cost hundreds or even thousands of pounds, when all expenses are accounted for. In a June report, a U.N. committee described this situation as “discriminatory (<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/un-committee-seeks-irish-abortion-vote-1.2258874>).”

Clarke first encountered the germ of what would become the Abortion Support Network in 2002 when living in New York City. While reading an article about the difficulties many women face accessing abortion services (<http://www.villagevoice.com/news/emergency-landing-6413203>) in the U.S., she learned about the Haven Coalition, a grass-roots organization that offers free accommodation and transportation to women visiting New York for an abortion. She volunteered for the group and began giving up her bed in a one-room apartment in the Washington Heights neighborhood to women who needed it. When she moved to London, she learned that a similar organization, the Irish Women’s Abortion Support Group (<https://mybellyismine.wordpress.com/tag/irish-womens-abortion-support-group/>), ceased operation in 2001, and she decided to start her own organization, the Abortion Support Network, geared toward marginalized women.

She doesn’t think of herself as politically motivated, and she describes the Abortion Support Network as “a very specialized travel agency.” Approximately 60 volunteers offer



Abortion-rights supporters in front of the gates of the Irish parliament, in Dublin in 2013. Peter Muhly / AFP / Getty Images

information about abortion services abroad and help women determine the best time and method for accessing clinics. Clients are asked to contribute as much as they can: In 2014 its average grant was 225 pounds

(https://www.abortionsupport.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/asn_2014_annual_report.pdf), usually paid directly to clinics to reduce medical bills at the time of procedure. Since 2009, the organization, which is largely funded by private individuals, has extended financial assistance to more than 480 women, from young teens to premenopausal adults.

When seeking a model for the Abortion Support Network, Clarke looked to abortion funds in the U.S., nearly 90 of which are collected under an umbrella coalition, the National Network of Abortion Funds. These funding groups, which predate *Roe v. Wade* and used to belong to a so-called abortion underground railroad (<http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/10/texas-abortion-clinicswomensrights.html>), are located from Florida to Washington (<http://www.fundabortionnow.org/explore>). Like the Haven Coalition, they're usually run by volunteers. When she contacted the National Network of Abortion Funds, she said, she was given "an entire toolkit on starting an abortion fund" as well as advice on everything from fundraising techniques to the best strategies for assessing a stranger's financial needs over the telephone.

The Abortion Support Network has been a member of the National Network of Abortion Funds since it started taking calls, and it is not the only international affiliate playing a role in Ireland's debate. Another is the Canadian-based Women on Web (<https://www.womenonweb.org/>), which responds to 200 to 250 email queries each month from women in Ireland seeking to obtain abortion pills through the mail (<http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/emily-s-story-an-illegal-abortion-in->

ireland-1.2376568). “I think human rights issues are not confined to borders,” said Rebecca Gomperts, the group’s founder and director. “The lack of access to safe abortion is fundamentally about social justice and women’s rights.”

She described the primary role of her organization as offering “moral support.” Clarke is similarly adamant that the Abortion Support Network is not a campaigning organization, just a service provider. “We’re the Band-Aid,” she said. “Ireland needs to find the cure.”

Campaign role models

In Ireland numerous interest groups have come out in favor of abortion rights over the past few years, including Atheist Ireland and the Socialist Workers Party. More than two dozen of them formed the Coalition to Repeal the Eighth Amendment, a lobbying alliance that recently hosted a conference in Dublin dedicated to discussing repeal. Speakers were a mix of Irish and international guests and included Lisa Lindelef, a board member of the NARAL Pro-Choice America Foundation. After a morning of hearing about the challenges facing women seeking abortions in Ireland, she told the crowd, “I could be at a conference in the United States right now.”

“ ‘For some people who have lived here their whole lives, the notion of abortion being legal in Ireland is just too much. It seems crazy, like that could never happen. But we’re sort of from outside, saying, ‘No, it could.’ ” ”

— Emily Waszak
member, Abortion Rights Campaign

Not all the foreigners in the room were visiting. Emily Waszak, a textile designer from North Carolina, was among those performing a slightly different role. Along with at least two Canadians and three other Americans, she is a core member of the ARC, a two-year-old abortion rights organization that has more than 600 contributing members. She felt compelled to get involved with abortion rights activism after she moved to Ireland for her husband and learned about its legal restrictions. “For some people who have lived here their whole lives, the notion of abortion being legal in Ireland is just too much,” she said. “It seems crazy, like that could never happen. But we’re sort of from outside, saying, ‘No, it could.’”

At the Dublin conference, she shared her experience with an audience of more than 170 people. “I was 15 when I had my abortion,” she said. “I had it in my hometown, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, less than 10 miles away from where I lived. It was free, it was safe, and it was legal.”

Waszak sees her story as a model for what might be possible in Ireland. “No trauma, no hand-wringing, no sob story, no regret,” she said. “No panels of men deciding who is or isn’t deserving. Just a medical procedure. A conversation between a woman or girl and her doctor. That’s what abortion services could look like in Ireland if we repealed the Eighth Amendment.”

Though she does not have the right to vote in Ireland, the ARC offers her and other immigrants a powerful means of influencing debate. During her talk, she encouraged attendees to participate in the upcoming March for Choice, a rally organized by the ARC. Two weeks later, thousands of demonstrators (<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/march-for-choice-hears-call-for-abortion-referendum-1.2366549>) took to the streets of Dublin, demanding a public vote on repealing the Eighth.

Why Ireland?

Over the last few years, as rallies and protests have become increasingly common on both sides of the abortion debate, a vision of Ireland shared by some anti-abortion activists has snapped into focus: Ireland as an anti-abortion success story



A demonstrator in Dublin before a 2013 parliamentary vote on abortion. Julien Behal / AP / AP

(<http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/time-for-an-abortion-law-to-stop-irish-women-suffering-1.555375>); a bastion or final frontier

(<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/04/us-ireland-abortion-idUSBRE8930P420121004>) of abortion restrictions that must be protected. This is particularly apparent on social media. “Thank you Ireland for being what Ireland is all about; Love and Beauty,” wrote one supporter on a Youth Defence post on Facebook in

July. A U.S.-based commenter, taking inspiration from Ireland, wrote on Aug. 3: “The U.S. [Senate] is voting today to de-fund Planned Parenthood ... Send prayers/thoughts/hopes our way please!!!”

Irish anti-abortion groups tend to have substantial numbers of social media followers from foreign countries (<http://geoffsshorts.blogspot.ie/2012/11/pro-life-campaign-end-to-carrots.html%23more>). For example, 62.3 percent of Youth Defence’s 77,041 Facebook fans are in the United States, and just 23.9 percent are in Ireland. By comparison, 56.2 percent of the ARC’s 13,136 Facebook fans are in Ireland, and just 13.7 percent are in the United States.

When asked to explain the foreign interest, Uí Bhriain suggested that Youth Defence may be seen as a model for anti-abortion activists overseas. “We often get younger kids, especially from America, coming here to go on things like the Youth Defence Roadshow,” she said, referring to an annual event in which volunteers travel around Ireland distributing anti-abortion literature. “Youth Defence has very attractive messaging. They have a very attractive campaign. ... They get messages from people all over the world saying, ‘Can we use your billboards?’”

But for some anti-abortion activists, billboards and social media support is not enough. In mid-October, New Jersey Rep. Chris Smith (R), a vocal abortion opponent (<http://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/278537-gop-rep-smith-obama-is-the-abortion-president>) and a co-chairman of the Bipartisan Congressional Pro-Life Caucus, traveled to Belfast, Northern Ireland, to attend the opening (<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/american-anti-abortion-clinic-opens-in-belfast-1.2390605>) of an international crisis pregnancy center. The center is an outpost of Stanton Healthcare, an Idaho-based anti-abortion group founded by Christian activist Brandi Swindell (<http://www.thestantonproject.org/brandi-swindell/>). It opened on the same street as the Marie Stopes abortion clinic, and according to Stanton Healthcare Belfast’s website, the center was launched “in direct opposition to the abortion business of Marie Stopes (<http://www.thestantonproject.org/news/2014/11/1/stanton-healthcare-belfast>).”

A few days before the opening, Smith was the keynote speaker at the Pro Life Campaign National Conference, held at the Royal Dublin Society. Conference literature described the Eighth as “Ireland’s life equality amendment” and warned that the upcoming general election made it “an especially important time” to focus on “challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.”

In his speech, delivered in a crowded concert hall, he described Ireland as a beacon of hope for the international anti-abortion movement and encouraged the attendees to keep fighting attempts to loosen restrictions. Calling the Eighth a “precious gem,” he reflected on the time he spent in Dublin campaigning for the amendment in 1983. Ireland, he said, “has long been an oasis for life, a country that has rejected the tyranny of relativism that has engulfed much of the Western world.” This kind of divisive language is increasingly common when it comes to Ireland and abortion, and Waszak was even blunter when speaking of her adopted home. “Internationally,” she said, “it’s seen as a battleground.”

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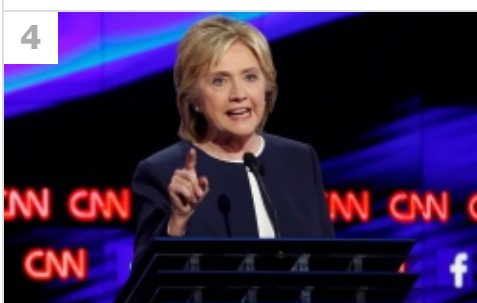
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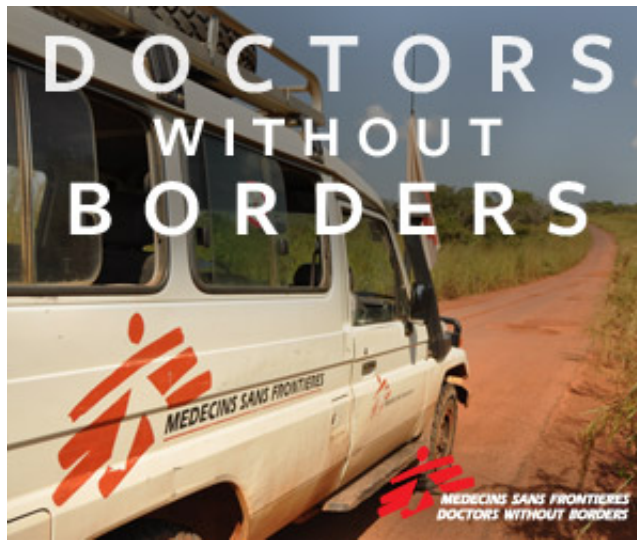
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Stephen Kahn

19 hours ago

Abortion should be rare and legal. As animals (I am an atheist), our evolution prompts us to protect our young. Also, most humans are empathic and reluctant to kill other human beings. On the other hand, as animals we are strongly impelled to have sex. Sex should be safe and undertaken by consenting adults. Birth control should be easily available. Alternatives such as adoption should be available but not coerced. Aside from my atheism, please note that about a third of pregnancies miscarry. If there is a God, then God is the ultimate abortionist, is IT not? To obsess about abortion is the ultimate hypocrisy, or very close to it.

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Youth Defence's violent past and fascist connections never seem to make it into these articles. Shame, that.

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