



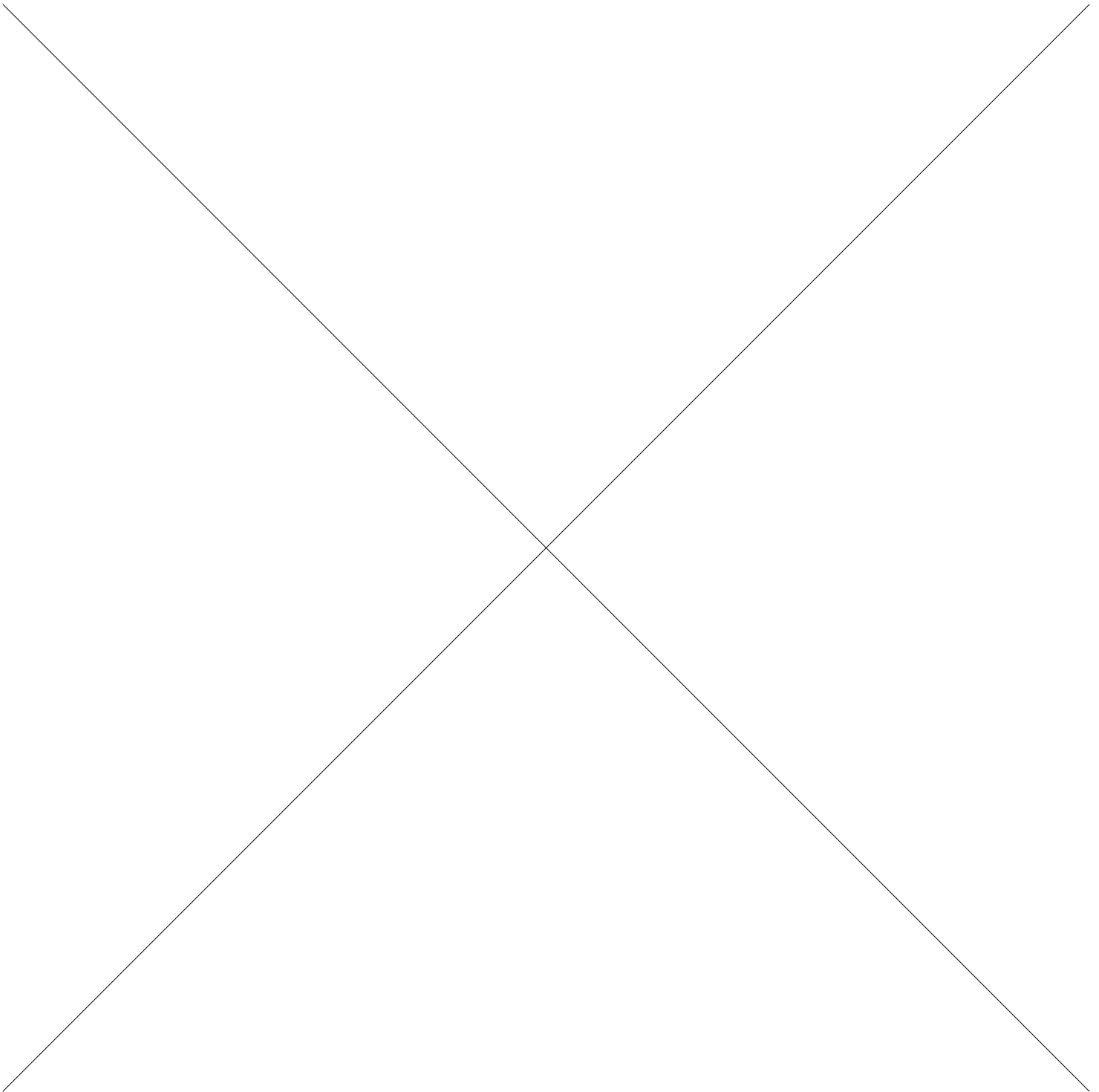
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Ireland's abortion referendum tests its Catholic traditions



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Ireland's abortion referendum tests its Catholic traditions

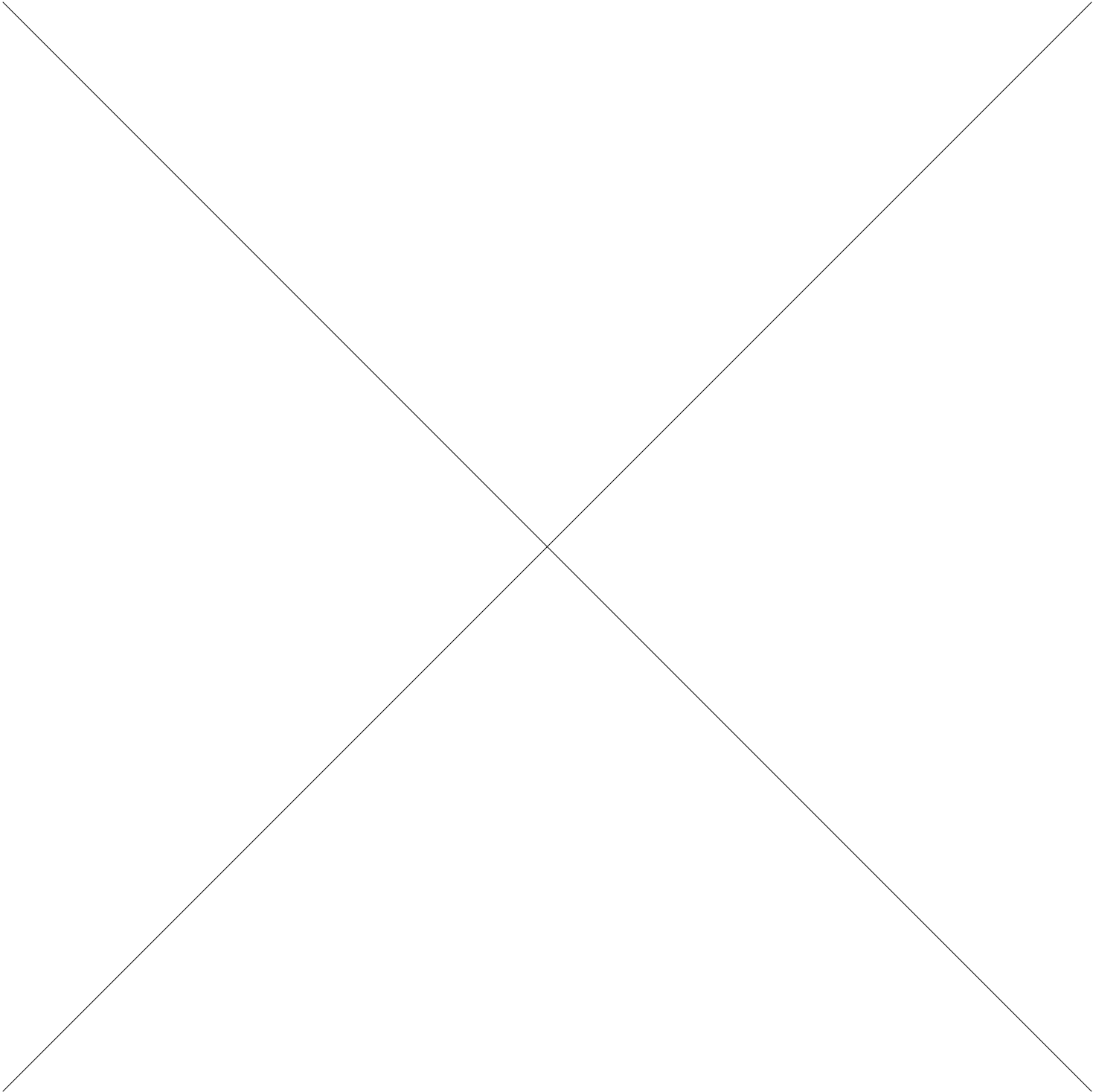
Abortion remains such a taboo in Ireland that it's rare for women to speak openly about it. A public admission could result in a 14-year prison sentence.

by Saphora Smith and Ziad Jaber / May.12.2018 / 9:36 AM ET / Updated May.24.2018 / 3:00 PM ET



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DUBLIN — Rita Harrold's decision to end her pregnancy turned her into a criminal in the eyes of the law.

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More than four decades after being legalized in the U.S., abortion remains illegal in almost all cases in the Irish Republic.

Five years ago, Harrold took abortion pills that had been smuggled into the country.

“I was dating somebody new and we were really happy together, but we weren't living together and we were both unemployed,” said Harrold, now 28. “I literally had 90 euros (\$110) in the bank. ... I was not in the best place to have a child.”



Rita Harrold took abortion pills in 2013. Ziad Jaber / NBC News

Catholicism has traditionally played a powerful role in Irish society, and abortion remains such a taboo that it's rare for women to speak openly about it. Such a public admission could result in Harrold being imprisoned for 14 years.

But change may be in the air. Ireland is due to hold a referendum on liberalizing the country's abortion laws on Friday.

The country has some of the most restrictive abortion legislation in the European Union, with Malta — where [abortion is banned under all circumstances](#) — the only member of the 28-country bloc with tighter laws.

Voters will be asked to decide whether they want to repeal the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, which enshrines the equal right to life of the mother and fetus. Repealing it would open the door to more liberal laws.

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“We refuse to ship our shame across the sea any longer.”

Prime Minister Leo Varadkar's government said it will begin drafting legislation to allow women access to unrestricted abortion up to the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. (In the U.S., abortion is generally restricted between 20 weeks and "viability," depending on the state, [according to the Guttmacher Institute](#). However, Mississippi recently introduced a bill to prohibit abortion after 15 weeks.)

"I believe that this is a decision about whether we want to continue to stigmatize and criminalize our sisters, our co-workers and our friends, or whether we are prepared to take a collective act of leadership to show empathy and compassion," Varadkar said.

Harrold says she is not afraid of speaking openly about her illegal actions. “It’s essential to break unjust laws, to show that they need to be changed,” she said.

'Either we are for Christ or we are against him'

Anti-abortion protesters were bused in from all over the country for a Rally for Life in Dublin in March. Many prayed or said the rosary as they walked the streets.

The turnout was not unexpected. Some 78 percent of the country's population identify as Catholic, according to [Ireland's 2016 census](#).

However, the Roman Catholic Church's authority and reputation has been damaged in a series of scandals over the past 20 years. They include the sexual abuse of children by priests, the exploitation and abuse of unmarried and "fallen women" at Catholic-run workhouses, and the forced adoptions of children of unmarried parents.

As he stood in the sun watching marchers pass by, James Mary McInerney, a friar at the Church of Visitation in north Dublin, said that as a Catholic it was his obligation to protect life.

“We believe all life is sacred and comes from God and is a gift from God,” he said. “From conception in the womb to our natural end, all life has to be protected, loved and cherished.”

Addressing his congregation at Mass the next day, McInerney did not mince his words, saying no Catholic could vote yes on the referendum and "be in union" with Christ.



Demonstrators hold up signs "Vote No" signs at an anti-abortion rights rally in Dublin on May 12. Artur Widak / AFP - Getty Images

"We don't have a choice," he told attentive faces in the church's busy pews. "Either we are for Christ or we are against him."

Members of the congregation let out audible gasps when the friar said he was aware of Catholics who will vote "yes" to repealing the Eighth Amendment. "You can't do that and remain a Catholic," he said to murmurs of agreement.

After his homily, McNerney said he believed there were no circumstances in which abortion could be morally justifiable.

"There are some things that never change, and one of them is 'Thou shalt not kill,'" he said.

A surreal journey

Harrold is not the only Irish woman to have been affected by the Eighth Amendment.

Seven years ago, Siobhan Donohue was just under 22 weeks pregnant when she traveled to England — where abortion is legal — to terminate her third pregnancy.

At 20 weeks, her unborn son, T.J., was diagnosed with anencephaly, a fetal anomaly in which he was missing a large part of his brain, skull and scalp. Donohue and her husband were told that if T.J. survived birth, he would not live for long.



Siobhan Donohue. Ziad Jaber / NBC News

Due to her baby bump, the doctor said she could foresee uncomfortable conversations in the supermarket and her children's day-care center and couldn't ignore "the fact that my baby was going to die."

Donohue, who is now 46, decided to travel to Liverpool. Describing the journey as "surreal," she recalled boarding a flight with her husband alongside bachelorette parties and tourists jetting off for a weekend away.

“It felt like we’d been sent out of our country, we’d been told go somewhere else if you want to do this,” she said, sitting at the kitchen table of her family home in the seaside town of Bray, south of Dublin. “It was a very isolating experience, a very lonely journey.”

Abortion is only permitted in Ireland if a woman’s life is in danger, which includes the risk of suicide. It is not permitted in cases of rape, incest or fetal abnormalities.

In 2013, the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act reduced the maximum prison sentence for procuring an illegal abortion in Ireland from [life imprisonment to 14 years](#). No one has been convicted under the new law, according to the Irish Courts Services' records.



Abortion rights activists dress up as characters from "The Handmaid's Tale" in Dublin on Wednesday. Clodagh Kilcoyne / Reuters

However, Irish customs officials regularly seize abortion pills at the border. And anyone who helps a woman procure an illegal abortion can also face up to 14 years in jail.

In 2016, [3,265 Irish women journeyed](#) to England or Wales to terminate their pregnancies, the equivalent of around nine women a day.

A few weeks after Donohue had the procedure, TJ’s cremated remains were delivered to her door by courier.

“You move on from a grief, you get over a bereavement eventually, you learn how to live with it, but the rejection I felt having to leave my own country, that’s the bit that’s really hard to swallow,” she said.

'They want to live, they fight to survive'

While Donohue’s experiences inspired her to campaign for the Eighth Amendment to be repealed, others who have been through difficult pregnancies say they feel differently.

Kate Lawlor, 52, says even as a child she knew abortion was wrong. That sense was solidified when anti-abortion groups visited her school to display pictures of the process when she was a teenager.

Then came the birth of her twins. They were born at 29 weeks, 11 weeks premature.

“I remember thinking, this is life, whether they’re due or not due, whether it is several weeks before they’re due, whether they’re still forming, it’s a natural process, they want to live, they fight to survive,” she said.

Lawlor feels that life begins at conception, but like many people who describe themselves as anti-abortion in modern-day Ireland, she said her beliefs are not grounded in religious faith but in human rights.

A heartbreaking secret

Sinéad — who did not want to use her real name because her family does not know she had an abortion — knows how black and white the Catholic faith can be on abortion.

“My family are quite Catholic and incredibly pro-life,” said Sinéad, who found herself pregnant midway through her entry exams for law school.

Having spoken to her parents about abortion previously, Sinéad said she knew she would have to go it alone.

“They turned around to me and said that in their views abortion, no matter how many weeks in, will always be murder and they could never allow me to go through with something like that, and they would be incredibly disappointed if I did,” she explained.

The 25-year-old said not being able to tell her parents was heartbreaking.



A mural calling for repeal of the Eighth Amendment in Dublin, Ireland. Brian Lawless / PA Wire/PA Images

Sinéad eventually discovered the Abortion Support Network, which helps women in the Irish Republic travel to England for the procedure. The now-trainee lawyer explained how they helped her gather money, book flights and arranged to have a volunteer pick her up on arrival in Liverpool.

“They couldn’t have been any better,” she said. “Thank God an organization like that exists.”

Mara Clarke, the founder of the Abortion Support Network, has received calls from thousands of women like Sinéad. “You can just feel it, the minute you say, ‘Yes, we can help.’ It’s like you can feel her spine untensing and her shoulders going down,” she said.

Two medical perspectives

As the head of the National Maternity Hospital in Dublin, Dr. Rhona Mahony has dealt with some of the most complex pregnancies in Ireland.



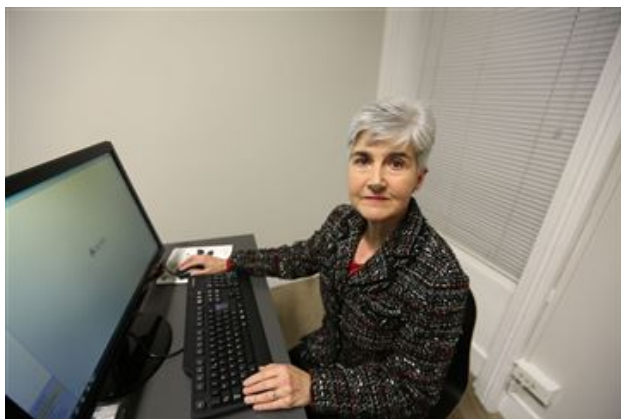
Dr. Rhona Mahony. Ziad Jaber / NBC News

Her experiences have left her in no doubt that the Eighth Amendment should be repealed, arguing that it poses an “unacceptable risk” to women’s health and places undue pressure on her staff.

“At what point does a risk to health become a risk to life and what is the risk to life? Is it 10 percent chance of dying, 20 percent?” Mahony asked, sitting on the bed of what was seemingly the only empty delivery room in the buzzing hospital.

“We’re making very complicated clinical decisions in the shadow of a custodial sentence of 14 years,” she said. “I think this distorts and potentially delays clinical decision-making, which is really not good for women.”

Dr. Orla Halpenny, a general practitioner, disagrees that repealing the Eighth Amendment is the answer for reproductive rights.



Dr. Orla Halpenny. Ziad Jaber / NBC News

While she says obstetrics is clear that if the mother’s life is in danger it will not always be possible to treat both patients equally, the constitutional amendment ensures that the life of the unborn child is protected.

“My perspective on it would be that there are two lives in the case of a pregnancy,” she said. “The fact that one life is inconvenient, or has a disability, or even has a terminal illness, doesn’t make it any the less deserving of respect and care.”

Instead of opting for abortion, Halpenny said society should do more to support women financially and socially to at least go through with their pregnancies and then decide on keeping the child or putting them up for adoption.

The split in the Ireland's medical community reflects wider society.

An [Irish Times/Ipsos MRBI poll](#) published on May 17 found that 44 percent of voters intended to vote "yes" to repealing the Eighth Amendment, compared to 32 percent who said they would vote "no." However, support for the anti-abortion rights campaign has grown in recent weeks and 24 percent of respondents said they remained undecided or were not planning to vote.

'We refuse to ship our shame across the sea'

An anti-abortion rally in March was distinctly patriotic.

Celtic bands played as tens of thousands walked from the Garden of Remembrance — dedicated to those who gave their lives in the cause of Irish freedom — across the River Liffey to the Irish Parliament. Many were draped in the Irish tricolor and at one point the crowd began singing the national anthem.

But the crowd was also diverse, with Catholics from Ireland to India, young and old, and feminist campaigners also present.



People march through Dublin to campaign for the Eighth Amendment to be retained on March 10. Caroline Quinn / PA via AP

Helen Seagrave, 66, had come with her daughter and five of her grandchildren. “I don’t think it’s right that you should kill babies,” she said, holding a poster displaying pictures of her grandchildren as newborns. “Any human being worth their salt would stand up for that.”

The pro-abortion rights rally held on International Women’s Day was smaller but more vocal. The spirit was defiant, and the crowd was younger and consisted primarily of women.

“Hey mister, hey mister, get your laws off my sister,” went one chant, as the marchers walked from the Garden of Remembrance to the Customs House on the banks of the river.

A line of young women wheeled suitcases, their luggage a symbol of the women who have to travel abroad to terminate their pregnancies.



Protesters carry signs calling for the repeal of the Eighth Amendment during at rally in Dublin on March 8. Niall Carson / PA via AP

Stickers stuck to the bags read: “We refuse to ship our shame across the sea any longer.”

Harrold, who took the abortion pill, was among the protesters leading the charge and as the speeches finished on the steps of the Customs House she began the unified chanting.

“Hear our voices, respect our choices,” she shouted through a megaphone. “Not the Church, not the state, women should decide their fate.”

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