

Abortion and the law

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A chara, – On the anniversary of Savita Halappanavar’s death, we, the undersigned, are calling on the trade union movement to work to repeal the 8th Amendment to the Constitution. With women comprising half the workforce in Northern Ireland and nearly half in the South, the 8th Amendment is an affront to gender equality.

In 1983, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions already opposed Article 40.3.3, stating that “the rigidity and inflexibility of constitutional directives on social and moral issues is inappropriate in a democracy”. Since then, over 150,000 women and girls have had to travel abroad for abortions and 12 more go daily to the UK for a medical procedure they should be able to access in their own country. Men in Ireland face no such restrictions to any medical care they may need.

For over 30 years, Article 40.3.3 has given rise to tragedy and discrimination. From Miss X in 1992 to Savita Halappanavar in 2012 and, more recently, the State’s treatment of Ms Y, shocking situations for individuals have arisen through a constitutional provision that equates a woman’s life with that of a foetus.

In austerity Ireland, the €1,500 needed for an abortion abroad is beyond the reach of many women, particularly migrant women and those on low pay. Recent legislation means that obtaining abortion pills from the internet or helping someone to get an abortion may result in up to 14 years in jail. Trade unionists who are healthcare workers say they routinely have to tell women they cannot give them, or refer them for, abortion services because there is not enough of a risk to their lives.

Yet, opinion polls consistently show a radical shift in Irish attitudes to abortion. Securing repeal of the 8th Amendment is the duty of all trade unions to protect the lives and health of women and girls in Ireland. – Yours, etc,

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