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March for Choice 2017 — report from Dublin

Ireland gears up for referendum to repeal anti-choice
clause

Dermot Freeman

October 13, 2017

Saturday the 30th of September 2017 will go down as a high point in the fight for abortion rights in the Republic of Ireland, and that is a struggle that stretches back decades. Years of campaigning and maintaining a focus on the issue, saw a massive crowd of nearly 30,000 people take to the streets for the annual March for Choice as organised by the Abortion Rights Campaign [ARC]. The calls are for action, and the need for Repeal of the 8th Amendment which bans abortion in almost all circumstances.

The day was glorious, the sun blazed down on us, and as I cycled across the City you could see the crowds assemble. Families disembarked from buses and trams, the distinctive black Repeal sweatshirts were much in evidence, and you could see visibly see people being drawn to the starting point at the Garden of Remembrance, in Parnell Square. It was akin to seeing people flock towards Croke Park on the big game day. By 1pm it was apparent that the numbers attending were going to be significant. I made my way to

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Jigsaw, on Dublin's North side, to meet up with Comrades there. A breakfast for choice had been going there all morning by the time I showed up. In the sunny back yard I heard the sweet sounds of choir singing something about repealing.

The march started bang on time, sometime around 2pm. People were packed in on the streets. I saw students there, assembled left wing groups, and various groups from around the country, so that counties representing choice had brought buses to Dublin. The message was that it was Time to Act, Free Safe and Legal abortion in Ireland, and it was obvious that the message had been heard and understood all over the island. The atmosphere was one of protest, but there was also a sense of power in realising that we had the numbers, and as the march progressed there would occasionally have hollers and cheers. There is a sense of power that comes from knowing that so many people had heard the message and were here to keep up the pressure. Political promises are not enough. Waiting is not an option when you know that over 200,000 have Travelled to the UK since 1983 to secure an abortion. The chants were clear and to the point. 'We wont' wait — Repeal the Eighth'

The Taoiseach may not have made up his mind on the subject, but here was an army of people to help him along. This army was overwhelmingly young, with energy, imaginative placards and slogans, but coupled with that a wisdom that the way to bring about change is to get on the streets. It was heartening to be in that crowd, and in that sea of humanity we had all sorts of imaginative placards, signs, flags, banners, colours, smoke bombs, chanting, singing, hand clapping, and dancing. I believe it is a sense of people power. It stems from the campaigns that have gone before and perhaps the lesson is that social change can be delivered this way by bringing it about for yourselves.

The march made it's way around the city, and I believe more people joined in as we passed, so the numbers appeared to grow. It was great to see the protest unfurl in front of you, winding it's

The day ended on a high note when the ARC choir, gave a fantastic alternate rendition of Journey's "Don't Stop Believing" – titled, of course, "Don't Stop Repealing".

political. Cis men's role in this political struggle, as Gerry said, "*as brothers, partners, husbands, friends*", is not to stand up for women, it is to stand with women – "*until all of us are free, none of us are*".

Eileen Flynn, a Traveller woman spoke and said she suffers discrimination within the Irish health system. Referencing the All Ireland Health Study, she noted that traveller women are the most likely section of Irish society to be at risk of poverty. "*We face discrimination because of who we are*". Traveller women have a suicide rate, five times that of women in the general population, and a life expectancy eleven years shorter. She also noted the situation traveller women face with regard to stigma and patriarchy in their own communities: "*it is not easy for me to stand here as a traveller woman and talk about abortion. It's not something that is talked about*". Talking again about the experience as a subjugated minority within a state healthcare system she said, "*When you are oppressed all the time you have low self-esteem, you tend to think the doctor is always right*". Finishing with sardonic understatement she said "*Ireland, you are a little bit backwards*".

Kate McGrew of Sex Workers Alliance Ireland was the final speaker on the day. Opening by leading the partially ironic chant "*Hoes need abortions*", she drew clearly the intersection between the rights of sex workers and rights of bodily autonomy at large in society. "*Consent is key, partial autonomy is oppressive, it is dangerous*". Noting the recent legislation which has been inflicted on sex workers in Ireland she told us about how this has impacted on the lives of sex workers who, like people seeking an abortion, are "*left to navigate the treacherous path of illegality*". "*We need legislation that leaves space for personal circumstance and the sometimes messy reality of life*" she said. "*Shame is not an effective deterrent*". Embodying the optimism of each of the speeches she proclaimed "*sex workers rights are coming to Ireland. Abortion rights are coming to Ireland.*"

way down the quays and over the bridge towards our destination in Merrion Square.

The Abortion Rights Campaign organised a wide variety of speakers who discussed many aspects of the pro-choice struggle, including political intersections with migrant and indigenous ethnic minorities in Ireland, queer and trans struggles, and sex worker struggles, as well as two musical acts. All of the speakers spoke with honesty and conviction to the huge crowd, about issues which had clearly impacted them intimately.

Cork comedian, Tara Flynn MC-ed the talks, opening from the very start with: "*my name is Tara Flynn, and we are going to repeal the eight!*". The enthusiasm and compassion present among the crowd was palpable as she introduced the names and backgrounds of each of the speakers who shared with us their own perspectives and experiences of life in Ireland under the eight amendment.

The first pair to speak were the current conveners of the ARC; Angela Coraccio and Caoimhe Doyle. They discussed their organising activity as part of the ARC, noting the significance of these annual demonstrations in bringing pro-choice people together publicly, providing us all with the opportunity to voice our dissent collectively, and the boost in energy particularly positive for people who feel more isolated, living in rural communities all over Ireland. They highlighted the various solidarity actions, against the eight amendment, taking place all over the world on the same day, including, London, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Bristol, Paris, Berlin, Vancouver, Montreal, New York, Brussels, Utrecht, Luxembourg, Cyprus, Manchester, Liverpool, Melbourne, Sydney and Darwin. Prohibition of abortion as they reminded us is an "*instrument of inequality and torture*" which is rightly condemned by international human rights institutions.

When people are educated on the reality of the eight amendment they said, they are pro-choice. Considering our opponents in achieving Free Safe Legal, they noted that all of the mainstream political parties are now "*attempting to water down the recommen-*

dations of the Citizens Assembly”. “We don’t have pulpits to recruit from” they said – noting the influence of organised religious intuitions in drawing people into anti-choice demonstration and massively funding their disgraceful and dishonest campaigns. Urging everyone in attendance to get involved in the struggle, they finished with “now is the time to act.”

The massive crowd in attendance then had an unexpected musical performance from Galway pro-choice, joined on-stage by esteemed song-writer and performer, Lisa Hannigan. The performance, we were told was part of the “*I Can’t Keep Quiet Project*”.

The third speech from the platform was given by civil rights leader, independent electoral politician, feminist, republican and ant-fascist Bernadette Devlin McAliskey. *Speaking with her usual clarity and conviction she began by noting “it is unbelievable that we’re still here, demanding something we demanded almost fifty years ago.”* She praised the diversity of the current campaign, noting a sea-change from previous activist scenes she had been a part of where the “*bad images*” of “*sex workers, trans people, traveller women, migrant women*” would not have been given any voice, and consequently denied any of the gains made by the movement. “*The eight amendment*”, she said, “*is not exclusively about abortion. It is the usurpation of the individual’s right to have control over their own body*”. It is the right of each person “*to exercise first and last control over their own body, all day, and every day*”. With such cognisance of the dynamics of power and political struggle, she made clear: “*repeal of the eight amendment is not a favour we are asking, it is a fundamental defence of democracy for everybody and every citizen.*” Achieving our aims is decriminalising, and making accessible, abortion, here in the South will give courage to those in the North to continue their same struggle for the same ends.

[see Bus for Choice to Belfast at the end of this article]

Emily Waznak a Japanese-American activist living in Ireland for over nine years, speaking on behalf of Migrants and Ethnic Minorities for Reproductive Justice (MERJ) highlighted the importance

that “*migrant women are a part of this movement, as they are disproportionately affected*” as due to travel constraints, some cannot flee the jurisdiction of the Irish state to procure and abortion in the UK or elsewhere. The procurement of abortion pills, for which people face a potential penalty of fourteen years imprisonment is a vital resource to people in the migrant community, and Emily urged us to support groups like Need and Abortion Ireland. She asked the question “*how will migrants fare with government restrictions on abortion?*” referring to the potential legislation likely to replace the eight. “[*We are*] *expected to be grateful for living in a country where our body is not our own*”. Finishing, she highlighted the vital importance of “*standing shoulder to shoulder*” with migrants, in solidarity; making potently clear, that anything other than Free, Safe, Legal and accessible abortion is discrimination.

This was followed by a discussion/performance from Gender Studies graduate, LGBTQI + and student activist, Matt Kennedy. He thanked everyone in attendance and noted the importance of trans and non-cis voices in the movement. As a trans man he said, “*This country wasn’t built for me. It wasn’t built for us. It was built in the back of churches; I sat there too.*” The talk flowed, beautifully and artistically, resembling more a poetic recitation than a political declaration or manifesto. “*I was always someone’s son*” he said, “*though they thought I was their daughter*”. After making clear our project, building the new society in the shell of the old, he thanked ARC for including trans-voices in the struggle, “*which are so often forgotten*”.

The next speakers was a moving contribution from Gay and Gerry Edwards of “Terminations for Medical Reasons” (TMFR). They told us about their experience of being forced to leave Ireland to deliver their son, because of the eight amendment. Addressing “*one of the last great taboos*” Gay talked about late term abortions, in cases of fatal foetal abnormality or when the mother’s life is in danger. Speaking with such authority on the gruelling reality of abortion prohibition, they brought such honesty and clarity to the