



EUROPE (/TOPIC/EUROPE)

We Traveled Onboard the Irish 'Abortion Bus' That's Giving Illegal Pills to Women

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By Sally Hayden (/contributor/sally-hayden)

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There was a moment on Friday when a pro-life activist started flinging holy water at a pro-choicer in Limerick, a small, riverside city in Ireland's southwest. Aine O'Connor is a dark-haired, friendly 36-year-old who seems relatively calm, but being suddenly sprayed with liquid like that gave her "quite a fright," she said.

O'Connor didn't know how to react, but she was quickly rescued. A barista from a local coffee shop ran to chase away the unwavering woman, who had progressed to sprinkling salt in circles on the ground, all the time chanting prayers.

Limerick was the third destination on a whistle-stop tour for the "abortion pill bus," an action by an Irish activist group called (<http://rosa.ie/greet-the-abortion-pill-bus/>) ROSA (short for Reproductive rights, against Oppression, Sexism, and Austerity), which has seen a group of mainly young, mostly Irish women openly defy Ireland's strict abortion laws. Those laws prohibit the distribution of medical abortion pills, and criminalize abortions in almost any situation, including in cases of rape, incest, or fatal fetal impairment.

The women, girls, and two men involved in the action are aged between 16 and 48 — the youngest skipped school to make the two-day, 409-mile trip around the country. The group are promising abortion pills to women nationwide who board the bus, following an online consultation with a doctor. Branded "reckless" and "irresponsible" by pro-life campaigners, they are also risking up to 14 years in prison.



One of the packets of mifepristone and misoprostol on board the "abortion pill bus." (Photo by Sally Hayden/VICE News)

There's been some skepticism about whether there are actually pills on board the vehicle, but VICE News can confirm that at the outset of the journey there were at least 10 packets of mifepristone (<http://www.drugs.com/cdi/mifepristone.html>) and misoprostol (<http://www.drugs.com/cdi/misoprostol.html>). VICE News can also confirm that at least one woman who boarded the bus procured pills for personal and imminent use.

Possession of the pills is a "bit of a grey area," according to Rita Harrold, one of the organizers of the trip, though importing and distributing them is definitely illegal.

Then, she clarified. "This law is not fit for purpose and we'll break it if necessary."

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A traditionally fiercely Catholic country, Ireland has a history of being slow to allow things considered the norm in other parts of Europe. Contraception was illegal (<http://www.thejournal.ie/open-thread-do-you-remember-when-buying-contraceptives-was-illegal-681590-Nov2012/>) until 1980, after which it was only sold to those with a doctor's prescription. Homosexuality was decriminalized (<http://www.thejournal.ie/anniversary->

decriminalisation-homosexuality-ireland-963902-Jun2013/) in 1993. Divorce was legalized in 1996, the same year that the country's last Magdalene laundry (<http://www.thejournal.ie/magdalene-laundry-sean-mcdermott-street-924328-May2013/>) closed.

Ireland still has some of Europe's strictest abortion laws — with those getting terminations or anyone who helps them liable to face lengthy prison sentences.

This is because the eighth amendment to the Irish constitution gives the life of an unborn child equal status to the right to life of the mother, meaning those who do challenge the law can end up involved in distressing and lengthy litigation with different legal teams ordered to represent both the woman taking the case and the unborn baby separately.

For the law to be changed, a referendum is required — something both the United Nations (<http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/health/un-says-ireland-should-hold-a-referendum-on-restrictive-abortion-law-31322360.html>) and human rights group Amnesty International (<https://www.amnesty.ie/sheisnotacriminal>) have called for over the past year.



The "abortion pill bus" parked in front of Galway's St. Mary's on the Hill church. (Photo by Sally Hayden/VICE News)

Ireland's stringent laws have directly led to deaths, the most infamous of which occurred three years ago next Wednesday. Indian-born dentist Savita Halappanavar (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-20321741>) died from septicemia after being told by a doctor in a Galway hospital that — even though she was already miscarrying — he couldn't perform a termination because "under Irish law, if there's no evidence of risk to the life of the mother, our hands are tied so long as there's a fetal heart[beat]."

However, the majority of Irish women do still have access to abortion — as long as they're able to pay for it. Between 10 and 12 women travel to the UK every day to get a termination, according to Amnesty figures (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2015/06/6-outrageous-facts-about-abortion-in-ireland/>) released in June.

Related: [Gay Marriage Is Legal but Abortion Is Still a Crime in Ireland — Even in Rape or Incest Cases](#) 

Since gay marriage passed (<https://news.vice.com/article/ireland-just-became-the-first-country-to-approve-gay-marriage-by-a-popular-vote>) by referendum with 62 percent approval last May, a host of notable figures have come out in favor of changing Ireland's constitution and subsequently the abortion law — seen by many activists as the next (<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/06/09/uk-ireland-abortion-idUKKBN0OP1Z120150609>) great hurdle. Last week, Graham Linehan, an Irish writer for the British comedy series *Father Ted*, was the most recent to add his voice, as he revealed (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/19/graham-helen-linehan-ireland-abortion-amnesty-international>) his wife Helen had an abortion in Britain after discovering their unborn child wouldn't survive after birth.

"I have always been very proud to be Irish but I am embarrassed by Ireland's abortion laws," he stated. "This is just something you can't be proud of. It's barbaric."



Pro-life campaigners beside the "abortion pill bus" on Claddagh Road in Galway. (Photo by Sally Hayden/VICE News)

However, those who can't travel include young people in the care of the state, migrants without valid visas, and women without the financial resources — activists estimate the cost of travelling comes to 1,500 euros (\$1,652).

The abortion pills have cost the activists about 80 euros (\$88), including postage.

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"An abortion with pills is very safe and effective to do at home until 12 weeks of pregnancy," Rebecca Gomperts told VICE News, adding: "Millions of women have done abortions at home in United States and Europe and it is standard practice there."

Gomperts is a founder and director of Women on Waves, a Dutch pro-choice non-profit organization that helps women who live in countries with restrictive abortion laws gain access to pills. A qualified doctor, she was also offering Skype consultations to women who boarded the Irish bus on Friday or Saturday this week.

She added that complications are of course possible. "Like with a spontaneous miscarriage, in very rare cases there can be too much bleeding or an infection. However, this is never an acute emergency and women have time to go to a doctor if they experience too much bleeding."

To safeguard against this, Gomperts said she always advises women that there should be somebody with them when they take the pills.



Pro-life campaigners on O'Connell Street in Limerick, Ireland's southwest. (Photo by Sally Hayden/VICE News)

While Women on Waves sends the medication to women abroad, the organization has stopped posting them to the Republic of Ireland because authorities regularly seize the shipments.

These seizures were confirmed by a recent Department of Health document seen by VICE News, which stated that between 2011 and 2014, at least 2,577 abortion pills were confiscated by customs officials.

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The "abortion pill bus" set off from capital city Dublin on Friday morning, crossing the country to reach the cities of Galway and Limerick the same day. On Saturday, it will arrive in Cork in the south, before finishing the roundtrip with a rally back where it started.

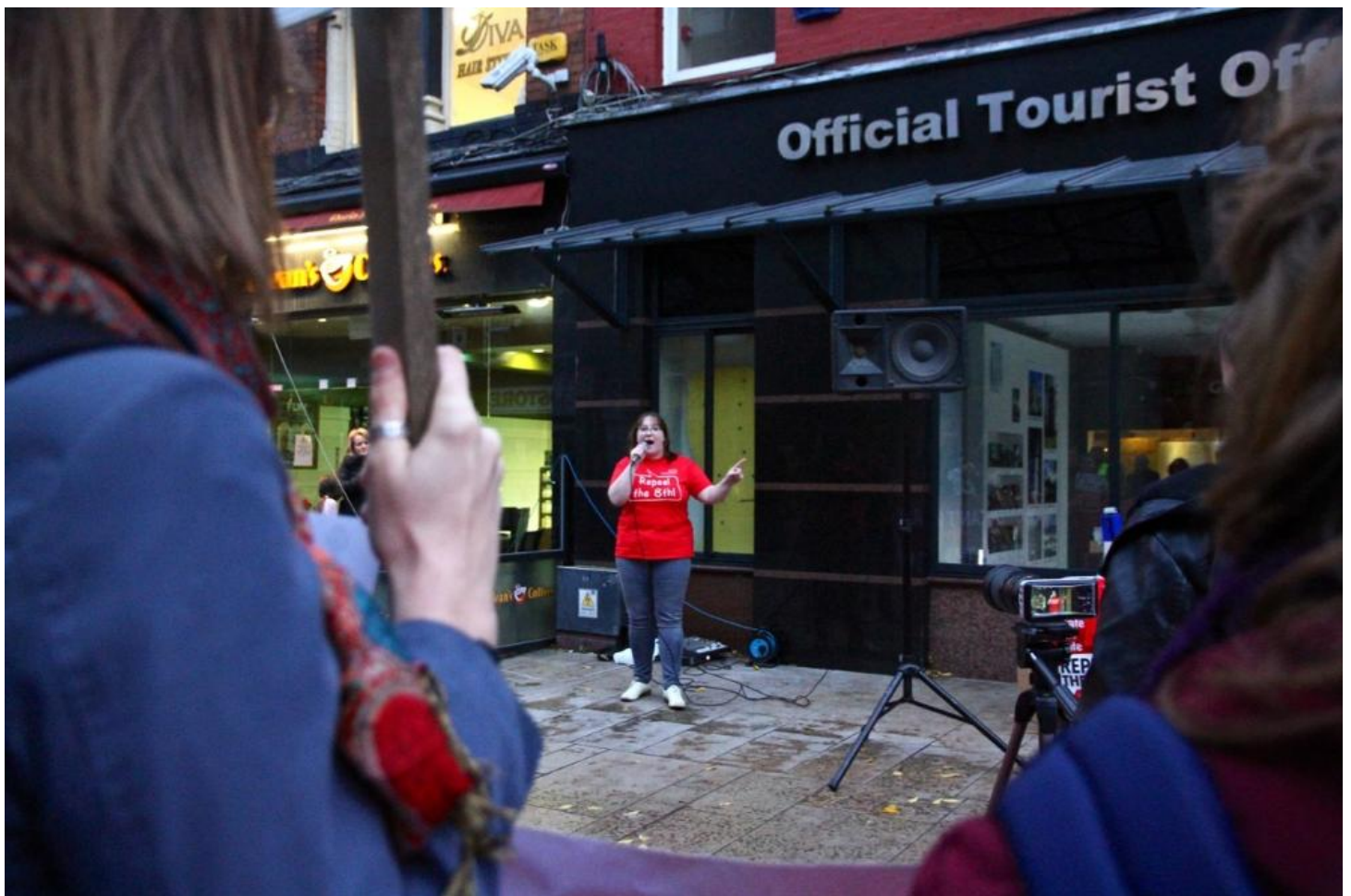
Both supporters and dissenters have emerged along its route. Those who have spoken in solidarity with the action include student politicians, migrant workers, and an 18-year-old rape victim.

Cora Sherlock, deputy chairperson of the Pro-Life Campaign, came out to see the bus off from Dublin. She told VICE News she thinks the action is "completely irresponsible" and "just the latest in a number of publicity stunts."

Sherlock added that she is concerned about the "integrity of the debate" around abortion, which she feels has become "one-sided."

"This pill is dangerous," she said, before accusing activists of "playing hard and fast with women's lives."

"Anyone who supports this bus has no credibility," Sherlock concluded.



ROSA campaigner and "abortion pill bus" organizer Rita Harrold speaking in Limerick. (Photo by Sally Hayden/VICE News)

Ruth Coppinger, a member of parliament for the Irish Socialist party who is traveling on the bus, said there were two reasons to wilfully break the law in this manner: to highlight the option of safe, medical abortion, and to encourage broad political action and eventually a repeal of the eighth amendment of the Irish Constitution, which says the right to life of an unborn child is equal to that of its mother.

She said the bus was proving that the current law is out of sync with practice, and that the government would not dare prosecute those on board because they "welcome that there is an escape valve."

"If we didn't have Britain in close proximity and if we didn't have the abortion pill online we'd have backstreet abortions and we'd have casualties arising from that," she continued. "You can see that they have no interest in prosecuting people unless they really have to."

Coppinger later noted that no one of child-bearing age in Ireland has ever voted on whether abortion should be illegal — the last full (<http://www.thejournal.ie/abortion-referendum-1983-what-happened-1225430-Dec2013/>) referendum being 32 years ago.




Pro-choice supporters come to watch the speeches in Limerick. (Photo by Sally Hayden/VICE News)

The trip got off to a slow start: the bus inching to a halt in heavy traffic along Dublin's quays.

Those inside were in high spirits though, with one woman joking: "Didn't St. Brigid perform abortions?" while another noted that the Irish language word for masturbating is *trualliu fein* — which translates directly as "self-pollution."

A third laughed wryly that the Irish word for abortion, *ginmhilleadh*, literally means "destruction of the fetus."

Then the discussion became more serious. Laura Fitzgerald, chair of ROSA, talked passengers through what to do if the group got arrested. "Say nothing. No comment, no comment, no comment," she said, "because you have the right to do that, you have the right not to incriminate yourself."

Related: [Ireland Just Became the First Country to Approve Gay Marriage by a Popular Vote](#) 

However, when the bus finally arrived in Galway — an hour late — the local police force had their minds focused on other things: parking in particular.

Two police officers directed the bus driver away from the city's "Spanish Arch," where a rally was initially planned. It eventually came to a halt outside the St. Mary's on the Hill church on Claddagh Road.

Speaking to VICE News, one of the police officers later admitted they weren't under any instruction to arrest those on the bus, and his only briefing was to look out for "public order offences."

The man — who refused to give his name — said abortion pills weren't an illegal substance under the Misuse of Drugs Act and would instead be a matter for the Health Products Regulatory Authority, which deals with the regulation of medicines. "We don't even know if there are any pills on board," he added.



ROSA campaigners watch speeches on Limerick's O'Connell Street. (Photo by Sally Hayden/VICE News)

A few dozen supporters had turned up to greet the bus, as had some protesters.

Imelda Brophy, a middle-aged woman from Galway, told VICE News she thought the inflexible laws had "gone on too long now."

"I think women should be entitled to free, safe abortion," she said.

Behind her, leaning on a stone wall, Johnny, 24, didn't join in with the ensuing chanting, but said he felt compelled to offer his support. He told VICE News that his sister traveled to the UK for an abortion after getting pregnant in an abusive relationship. "Seeing how much that damaged her" greatly affected him, he said. "It's ridiculous. Women can't make decisions because of the choices of men."



A 17-year-old campaigner looks out at Limerick while on board the bus. (Photo by Sally Hayden/VICE News)

The turnout in Limerick's O'Connell street was much larger than Galway, with a noticeably more vociferous group of pro-life activists on one side of the road, while the pro-choicers had a substantial audio system on the other.

Paddy Scully, from Cork city in Ireland's south, told VICE News he was "very upset" by the bus. "If they are promoting something that kills children I'm against it."

The middle-aged man said that if Ireland adopted similar laws to the UK's, "thousands more children would be murdered every year."

However, his ideal legislation had limits too: he wouldn't support any attempts to ban women journeying to the UK for terminations.

"We still have to be a free country," he said. "I believe in the freedom to travel. I don't believe in locking people up."



A pro-choice activist argues with a pro-life activist in Limerick. (Photo by Sally Hayden/VICE News)

Meanwhile, the abortion pill bus' bemused driver appealed to a passer-by for his opinion on the best place in Limerick to find food. A 65-year-old from Tallaght, west Dublin, Willie hadn't been warned in advance that he'd be at the helm of a bus stocked with contraband. In fact, he'd never really considered abortion law that much before, he told VICE News readily, but would definitely support terminations in "extreme cases."

"I think women should have the right. If a woman is raped by her father I don't think she should have that child, or [even if it's by] some scumbag," Willie proffered, before heading off to get a burger and chips.

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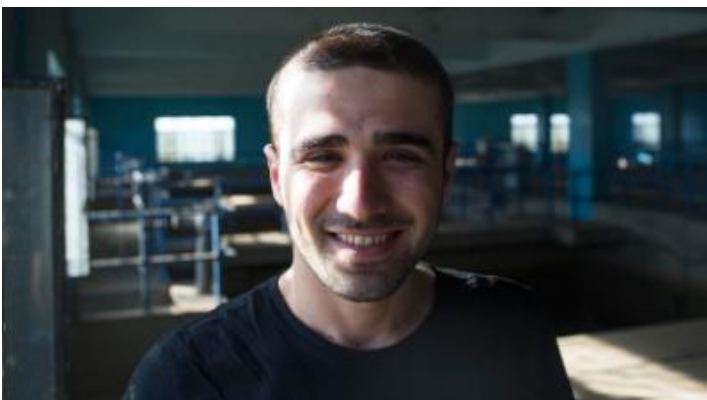
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