

Background

One Family is Ireland's organisation for people parenting alone, sharing parenting and separating. We were established in 1972 as Cherish, Ireland's first organisation for single parents. We have a long history of providing support services to women with unplanned and crisis pregnancies, most of whom were unmarried. The story of how and why Cherish was established is detailed in *Single Issue*, written by our founder Maura (O'Dea) Richards.¹ Up to and including 1970s Ireland the solutions to pregnancies outside marriage were generally either enforced marriage or enforced adoption of the baby. Women's experiences included separation from their families, submission into Mother & Baby Homes², reluctant and painful relinquishing of their children to adoption in Ireland or overseas, forced emigration, shame, abuse and frequently lifelong negative consequences for their mental health, relationships and family life.

In the 1970s the women's liberation movement resulted in the formation of various key organisations such as Cherish, the Irish Family Planning Association, the Rape Crisis Centre and a parallel expansion of thinking in society about the situation of the 'unmarried mother'.

One Family now works with a broad range of families and parents from all types of backgrounds who experience a range of challenges including separation, relationship breakdown, conflict, abuse, poverty and stigma. We also have continued to work with women, their partners and families who experience unplanned or crisis pregnancy. We have been funded by the HSE for several decades for this work and we provide hundreds of crisis pregnancy counselling sessions every year.

One Family employs senior and extremely experienced professional counsellors to run and deliver our crisis pregnancy and post-abortion counselling service. We have provided both formal and informal training and professional development to other crisis pregnancy counsellors for many years. We sit on Maynooth University's Crisis Pregnancy Skills Course Board also delivering modules on abortion and we deliver Masterclasses on abortion.³

Our Crisis Pregnancy Clients

Due to the nature of our work many people who attend One Family for crisis pregnancy counselling will continue with their pregnancy to parent, but we also regularly receive referrals from professionals for very vulnerable clients with complex needs who need support to travel abroad for abortion services. Here are some typical examples of real-life clients we have seen although names and specifics have been changed:

¹ https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B009OJ8YGA/ref=rdr_kindle_ext_tmb

² Part of the work of the Commission into Mother & Baby Homes is to develop a social narrative which is relevant as background to how Ireland's current treatment of single parents was developed:

<http://www.mbhcoi.ie>

³ <http://www.crisispregnancy.ie/support-for-services/training/>

Joanne is from Waterford, aged sixteen; she lives in foster-care based on a voluntary care order and is nine weeks pregnant. She would like to terminate her pregnancy. Her foster-mother and social worker seem supportive of her wishes but her mother is not. The challenges she faces include how her wishes can be reconciled with that of her mother particularly given she is in care on a voluntary order. Will her social worker and foster mother support her practically, financially and emotionally to travel? If they cannot afford to pay for the abortion in England, how will this cost be covered given she is in the care of the state? If she is not allowed travel, how will she be practically, financially and emotionally supported through her pregnancy and most likely through parenting on her own?

Mary is an asylum seeker from Ghana living in one room in Direct Provision with her three year old son.⁴ She is seven weeks pregnant and desperately does not want to have another pregnancy and child. The challenges she faces are significant as typical timelines for the acquisition of all the necessary paperwork from the Dept of Foreign Affairs and the British Embassy can take ten weeks. This results in increased emotional and physical stress for Mary; increased costs for the abortion procedure; and decreased locations that can deliver a second trimester operation. Mary will also need to arrange childcare for her son while she travels and recuperates. The alternative for Mary is to order and pay for the abortion pill which is illegal and which One Family are unable to assist her with or advise her on.

Cathy is a student in UCD, she has been in a relationship with her boyfriend for the past three years and is twelve weeks pregnant. Her parents and boyfriend all think she should have an abortion. She believes abortion is wrong and she would like to get married and have the baby. Having met with Cathy and her boyfriend it seems unlikely that their relationship will survive this crisis irrespective of what they do.

Finola is married with one child, she is 40 years old and is 14 weeks pregnant following a sexual encounter/assault by a colleague after a work party. She was drunk or possibly drugged and does not clearly remember what happened with him. Her husband does not know she is pregnant; she is finding work incredibly stressful and she wants to have an abortion as soon as possible. She is trying to process the fact that she has been assaulted by someone she knows but her priority is to organise a fictional trip to London for the abortion and pay for it at a time when money is tight at home.

⁴ The weekly payment to someone living in Direct Provision is €19.10 for an adult and €15.60 for a child.

Recommendations to the Citizen's Assembly

The presence of the 8th Amendment causes real harm to the women and families whom we support. It leads to the greater likelihood of later and less safe abortion; of women self-aborting with pills on their own in isolation; of poorer physical and mental health; of increased shame, stigma and stress.

This amendment and subsequent legislation including the 1995 Information Act and the 2014 Protection of Life in Pregnancy Act has resulted in an extremely regulated environment for women who need to access abortion services, for those of us who provide crisis pregnancy counselling and for those providing medical and health care to pregnant women. These legislative measures do not support women's health care and a client-centred approach.

Based on our 44 years of work with vulnerable women our focus is always on the well being and safety of our clients. This is severely compromised by the various laws in relation to abortion and the regulation of pregnant women in Ireland.

One Family strongly recommends that the 8th Amendment is removed from our Constitution, that abortion is decriminalised and that the provision of an abortion becomes solely a health matter between a woman and her doctor.

Ends.