

'This is a Catholic Country': Birth, Death and Abortion in Ireland

by Julie MacArthur - Wednesday, November 14, 2012

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Savita Halappanavar is dead. She joins millions of women who die every year from complications with their pregnancies. What makes her case particularly tragic is that she was refused a medical procedure that may have saved her life. Why? Because the procedure was an abortion and she had the misfortune of being pregnant in the Republic of Ireland, a country with some of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world. Savita was admitted to hospital, informed that she was miscarrying and the fetus was not going to survive but [according to her husband Praveen](#) denied an abortion because the fetus still had a heartbeat. So the hospital staff waited until it didn't. And then she died too.

For a deeper glimpse into what anti-choice policies really look like in 'real life' let's trace the Titanic back across the Atlantic: to Ireland and its 100-year-old notions of women's reproductive rights. The most radical modern-day U.S. Republicans would find little to complain about in a country with a constitutional 'right to life' for the unborn and an 1861 act inherited from the UK banning abortion. More than 4,000 women are forced to leave Ireland's shores every year to deal with unwanted and dangerous pregnancies, [essentially 'exporting' this medical issue to other countries](#) and downloading the costs to women and their families.

It isn't like these issues haven't been raised before. In 1992, a fourteen year old girl raped by her neighbour had to [win the right to leave](#) Ireland for an abortion, fighting an injunction against her by the Attorney General in the process. In what is now called the X case, the Supreme Court of Ireland granted her the right to leave only after she threatened to commit suicide. They determined that Irish women (and girls) have rights to abortion when there are 'real and substantial risks' to their life. More than twenty years later there is no domestic legislation, however, that provides for abortions to protect pregnant women's lives.

So, just so we're all on the same page here: there is a 150 year old law banning it, a constitution saying fetal and mother's rights are due equal consideration, and subsequent constitutional amendments (but no

actual laws) allowing women who fear for their lives (or are suicidal) to obtain an abortion or leave to get one.

Of course, even with this extremely narrow exception for abortion in principle, what constitutes a 'real and substantial' threat is subject to often conservative decisions by doctors afraid of running up against the original legal prohibition. In 2010 the European Court of Human Rights (on the ABC case) ruled that Ireland's abortion framework is failing pregnant women, [particularly its lack of specificity](#). 'C' in this case had cancer and she was unable to find adequate medical information or treatment in Ireland and, as a result, ended up with a late-term abortion in the UK complete with prolonged bleeding and infection. In a strongly worded dissenting opinion a number of the judges went further, pointing out how out of touch the Irish treatment of pregnant women's right to life and health was compared to most European nations.

Republicans in the United States lost the November 6 election in part due to the wide range of disturbing and ill-informed comments about rape, the rights of fetuses, pregnancy and God's will. These attitudes form the nasty end of what is broadly—and mistakenly—called the 'pro-life' movement and it exists in many countries. It is particularly well-organized in Catholic Ireland. [This excellent blog post](#) by Libby Anne on the misogyny and contradictions within the movement from an insider's perspective is well worth a read. In it, she outlines how the actual policies of anti-choice advocates don't save babies, they punish women who have had sex (either forced or not). They also completely ignore biological realities of women's reproductive systems. Moreover, banning abortions certainly makes them more unsafe for women, but doesn't decrease the need for or rates of abortions. Ultimately, she concludes, as many have before her, that religious zeal and the desire to control women's bodies underpin these policies.

The fact that Ireland is a leader here shouldn't be that surprising given the problematic history of the Catholic church elites with issues of sexuality, misogyny and abuse. As the ever-brilliant Soraya Chemaly [argues](#) in the Huffington Post:

the Catholic hierarchy, men for whom reproduction is as alien as menstruation -- another fully human process they have no part in, really believes that women's bodies are the living manifestation of their inferiority and the way in which God choses to punish them for their original sin. This is not unique to Catholicism and this post is not an indictment of the faith -- just to its leadership's insistence on misogynistic interpretations of how that faith is to be manifested. I could say the exact same thing of any of the Abrahamic faiths in their conservative orthodoxy.



Thus in 2012, even for the most extreme medical cases, the Irish Bishops' Conference is doubling down. It held an anti-abortion month in October 2012 and in a letter to the Irish Times yesterday Bishop John Fleming: "calls on Catholics to make their opposition to abortion known to our public representatives so the safety of all children in the womb will be preserved in our country." These folks always seem to neglect that wombs are *in women*: actual functioning members of society with families, jobs and health claims of their own. In effect, they are prioritizing their decisions for a not-yet person—and in some cases a dying not-yet person—over a fully formed woman or a girl. One commenter on political blog Crooked Timber [compared church positions on this issue](#) with the child abuse endemic in the church:

It's hard to deny looking at the evidence that the Roman Catholic Church was among the worst offenders of [child rape], but at least it didn't *formally mandate that its followers should rape children*. Whereas it does formally mandate that its followers cause women to suffer preventable deaths in horrible agony.

It's not just church leaders though. In September an (ironically named) International Symposium on Excellence in Maternal Healthcare populated and led by 'pro-life' advocates was held in Dublin. They released a ['Dublin Declaration'](#) that "'abortion is not medically necessary to save the life of a mother.'" Umm, yeah. Ectopic pregnancies anyone? Cancer? Suggestions from these advocates on these fronts seem to centre on playing word games with 'direct' abortion and with urging more of a 'wait and see' approach until a fetus is good and truly dead. So, not only are you dealing with your own potential demise, you're waiting for the life growing inside you to die so that the religious sensibilities of others can be respected. Not to mention that the Dublin Declaration is in direct contradiction with what most medical professionals around the world acknowledge. In fact, the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists have [said clearly that](#):

... abortions are necessary in a number of circumstances to save the life of a woman or to preserve her health. Unfortunately, pregnancy is not a risk-free life event, particularly for many women with chronic medical conditions. Despite all of our medical advances, more than 600 women die each year from pregnancy and childbirth-related reasons right here in the US. In fact, many more women would die each year if they did not have access to abortion to protect their health or to save their lives.

The practical result of the cultural orientation in Ireland is that women who are worried about the effect of their pregnancy on their health are required to go from doctor to doctor until they find one willing to treat them. Failing that, they need to take it to the courts or fly to a country that actually deals with the realities of pregnancy head on. All the while the dangers increase as the clock on their pregnancy and medical issues ticks away. The National Women's Council of Ireland has pointed out that 79% of Irish people support exceptions to the abortion ban (and provides [a site](#) where you can contact your TD to lobby for change). Today 2000 people marched in Dublin to protest the state of abortion laws in the country. The political elites, however, seem more interested in defending what The Guardian's Henry McDonald [calls](#) a 'history of obstruction and denial' than actually making the procedure available.



A belief in God gives you every right *not to* have an abortion. Savita Halappanavar, however, didn't believe in that God and neither did her husband. As Jodi Jacobson [at RH Reality Check](#) argues:

Someone's daughter, wife, friend, perhaps sister is now dead. Why? Because a non-viable fetus was more important than her life. Because she was left to suffer for days on end in service of an ideological stance and religion she did not share. Because a wanted pregnancy went horribly wrong, and, because as must now be clear, there are people who don't care about the lives of women.

Savita asked to have the non-viable fetus removed from her body and was informed by medical staff that "This is a Catholic country". If Catholicism requires sacrificing women for zygotes and dying fetuses perhaps it is time Ireland shouldn't be one.