

UN Says Ireland Abortion Laws Lead to 'Inhuman' Treatment of Women



Geneva, June 10 (RHC)-- The UN Human Rights Committee has called on Ireland to "amend" its abortion laws and if necessary, its constitution to protect patients and health workers who fear criminal punishment for even providing information about terminating a pregnancy.

In November 2011, during her 21st week of pregnancy, doctors told the woman that her fetus had congenital defects and would die either in the womb or shortly after birth. To terminate the pregnancy, the woman, who was not identified, paid her own way to Britain and returned to Ireland 12 hours after the procedure because she could not afford to stay longer.

"The ashes (of the fetus) were unexpectedly delivered to her three weeks later by courier," a statement from the UN rights office said. The experts found that the woman should have been able to abort the fatally ill fetus in Ireland and "under the care of health professionals whom she knew and trusted."

Additionally, the woman's suffering was compounded by the difficulties she faced in getting information about her medical options, the UN experts said.

Irish law allows health workers to give patients information about abortions, but they face punishment if they are perceived to be promoting the termination of a pregnancy, including in the case of a dying fetus. This "has a chilling effect on healthcare providers, who struggle to distinguish 'supporting' a woman who has decided to terminate a pregnancy from 'advocating' or 'promoting' abortion," the UN experts said.

The UN committee investigated the case following an individual complaint. The complainant was not named in the statement. Ireland has some of Europe's most restrictive abortion laws, and the issue is deeply divisive in the majority Catholic country. Termination is allowed only when there is risk to the life of the mother, rather than just her health.

Approximately 177,000 women and girls have travelled from Ireland to England and Wales for an abortion since 1971.

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