

'I WAS FORCED TO LET MY BABY DIE INSIDE ME'

Ireland's restrictive abortion laws pushed Claire Cullen-Delsol through every mother's worst nightmare. She opens up to **Hannah Tomes** about losing her daughter, the healing process, and life after Repeal the 8th

When her baby was diagnosed with a fatal foetal abnormality at 20 weeks, Claire Cullen-Delsol asked her doctor if she could be induced to terminate the pregnancy. But Ireland's strict abortion laws meant that her request was denied, even after her doctor said there was no medical reason to keep her pregnant. "In my head, an abortion was this gory, bloody thing, like you learn in Catholic school. I didn't realise that an induction would be considered an abortion," 33-year-old Claire tells me.

Her daughter, Alex, was diagnosed with Patau's Syndrome, a fatal chromosome disorder, after they were referred to a foetal medicine specialist. Alex had encountered significant problems with her growth, including issues with the development of her hands, heart, liver, and brain. She had a large cleft in the centre of her face, and had not developed a stomach. The specialist told Claire that her baby would not survive the pregnancy. "I asked to be induced, to have the baby early because I knew I wasn't going to cope with 18 more weeks. I couldn't imagine the thought of being pregnant, knowing that my baby was going to die," she says.

The mother-of-three says she considered travelling to England to end her pregnancy, but didn't out of concern for her eldest daughter, who was seven at the time. In Ireland, the 8th amendment to the constitution equates the life of the unborn foetus with that of the pregnant mother, effectively making abortion illegal – even in cases of rape, incest, or fatal foetal abnormality.

After she was denied an induction, Claire stopped leaving the house. "I was getting bigger and bigger because my baby didn't have a stomach, so she couldn't swallow the amniotic fluid. I had a huge, obvious bump, which to most people is a sign of health in a pregnancy. I just couldn't cope with people asking questions or speaking to me about the

baby, so I stopped going out, going to work, doing the school run. I even stopped washing myself."

Claire suffered panic attacks and prolonged, intense periods of feeling like she physically didn't exist, which she says came from a feeling of not mattering, not being cared about enough. And then there was the grief. "At times, I thought the baby had died when she hadn't," says Claire, tearfully. "I went through the mourning and the grief, only to find out that it hadn't happened. Hadn't happened yet."

Alex died three years ago, but the pain in Claire's voice is tangible, still.

On the morning of September 23rd, 2015, Claire woke up and knew her baby was gone. There was a stillness in her body that she couldn't quite describe, and maternal instinct told her something wasn't right. It took two days for doctors to get labour started, but after Alex was born, things changed for Claire.

"Even though she was dead, I was holding her and I was back in control. I knew how to be a mother even though she wasn't alive," says Claire. "As horrible as it is, baby loss is normal. But the way we treat pregnant women in Ireland? That isn't normal."

Her sadness turns to anger, the type of burning resentment that can only

'My daughter deserves better than this'

come from being treated the way she, and so many other Irish women, have been. "I had to wait for my baby to die inside me before I was allowed an induction, and the real kicker is: had I been living a few hundred kilometres away, in England, this would never have happened to me. It was an inhumane way to treat somebody in that awful situation, and felt incredibly cruel."

After Alex's death, Claire channelled her frustration into making sure that this wasn't going to happen to anyone else; she pledged to make Ireland a better place for her other children, something which she says she found "healing". She joined Terminations for Medical Reasons (TFMR), an Irish campaign and support group who lobby the government on abortion legislation and reform, and became a director when the group incorporated as a company in 2016.

"All I could think about was the fear that my daughter could experience what I did, and that nothing would have changed. I couldn't get over it." Claire continues: "She could be in a terrible situation, and this country would do nothing for her. They'd leave her in a state, let her die, let her kill herself – it could be anything."

"We always think great things about ourselves: that we're strong, capable, and that we could go through anything – but we wouldn't put our children through them. It could be anyone, but I just put my daughter's face on it. She deserves better than this. They all deserve better."

In May, Ireland voted to repeal the 8th amendment in a landslide victory – with 66.4% of the electorate backing a change to the law – disproving the predictions of multitudes of opinion polls and betting sites. The new law, which is expected to be introduced in January, will allow abortion on request for all women who are up to 12 weeks pregnant, and for later-stage abortions



– up to 24 weeks – in exceptional circumstances.

"The women I know who have had abortions – all for various reasons – felt absolutely vindicated after the vote. They felt like a weight had been lifted," says Claire, smiling now. "They're now not afraid to talk about their abortions as much because you'll likely be telling someone who supports your choice."

Although abortion continues to be a heavily stigmatised issue, the Irish referendum gave some respite to women who had felt compelled into silence for too long. Social media has become an oasis for women to share their stories and experiences, both during and after the campaign. Twitter account @InHerIrishShoes provided a platform for anonymous stories of women forced to travel from Ireland to Britain to access abortion services, and the hashtag #ShoutYourAbortion became popular to encourage the normalisation of abortions worldwide.

Claire and her husband Wayne with their daughter Alex in 2015



'We can't be a country which does this to people'

can access abortion services in Britain – although Irish women must pay – providing they can travel. Claire and her husband Wayne's first child was a "crisis pregnancy", and she is thankful they had options, and often thinks of those who don't.

"If I had wanted to go for an abortion, it wouldn't have been a big trauma. I could have borrowed money from my parents, I could have travelled easily. I've always had a roof over my head and supportive, loving people around me; I realised how rare that actually is when I was campaigning."

"I spoke to women in horrific situations because of the tragic, awful, complicated things that have happened to them in their lives, and those things could happen to anyone. There's no difference between them and me – only pure luck."

Women in Ireland who can afford to travel to Britain to access safe, legal abortion services must purchase flights, organise their transport to a hospital or clinic, and, in most cases, fly back the same day. The added cost of a hotel for the night is too high a price for many women, and cases of women beginning their abortions on flights, in the back of taxis, or on public transport are well documented and – sadly – common.

Equally, young women, those in abusive relationships or from strict

Catholic backgrounds – often, the most marginalised in society – are the people who end up being punished for their fertility. This class divide is only a small part of the tsunami of change that will engulf Ireland come January, but the restoration of dignity to women at their most vulnerable is anything but insignificant.

"The more of these stories that come out, whether you think abortion is right or wrong doesn't come into it, because whatever you think about abortion, this is not right. We can't be a country which does this to people."

In the end, she says, with a potency in her voice which suggests she's had this argument before, "it's not about whether you 'killed' a baby, it's about forcing women to stay pregnant against their will."

"Children should be wanted, and they should be loved, and I don't think any of those who voted 'No' would actually be able to force a woman through her pregnancy."

Claire gave birth to her third child – and second daughter – in June, and is slowly adjusting to her version of normality with Wayne and her family.

It's impossible to speak to her and not immediately sense the enormity of the impact that Ireland's abortion laws have had on her and her family. I look at the time, and we've been speaking for well over an hour; it has been fascinating to hear about the struggle for reproductive autonomy in Ireland first-hand, and is a conversation I won't forget.

"It's never going to bring Alex back, and it's not going to stop other people from having these experiences. People will always lose babies, it's not going to end. But now, we're not going to treat them like dirt while they're losing their babies, force them onto a plane or into hiding at home, punish them at the worst moment of their lives."

Claire breathes a sigh of relief, and says: "Now, there's going to be compassion. And it's going to make a massive difference."

'I RECEIVED DEATH THREATS. THE HATE WAS PALPABLE'

Campaigning for the introduction of legal and safe abortion to Britain was a long and difficult path. Hannah Tomes speaks to the voices behind the law, and chats about why they won't be satisfied until Northern Ireland has abortion equality

Diane Munday is like any other 87-year-old. She chats happily over the phone about her grandson, her weekend plans, life in Luton, and not being able to get Skype to work on her computer.

But Diane is a woman who has lived a remarkable life; one that has left an indelible mark on women's reproductive autonomy in Britain.

The first time she heard the word 'abortion' was as a young woman in the 1950s, at a time when it was a completely taboo – not to mention, illegal – subject. A young woman she knew had died after a backstreet abortion that had gone wrong, and she couldn't help but notice their similarities: they were both young and married, with three young children already.

Although abortion was illegal in 1961, the services of a good doctor could be bought if the price was right – and for those who could afford it, abortion was the less expensive alternative when finances were too tight to raise another child.

When Diane found out she was expecting her fourth child, she decided that she couldn't face the pregnancy. She talked it through with her husband – they had three children under the age of four – and they knew they couldn't afford another.

Coming around from the anaesthetic after her abortion, Diane said she couldn't stop thinking about the woman she knew who had died trying to terminate her pregnancy. In that moment, she knew she would dedicate her life to the fight for improving abortion access in the UK.

"Maybe I was befuddled by anaesthetic, or maybe it had just brought my campaigning nature to the fore, but I decided then that this was an unacceptable situation," says Diane, with a tangible strength in her voice. "Because I had a chequebook which I could wave in Harley Street, I was alive, my husband had a wife, my three sons had a mother, and this other young woman and many others like her had died."

After her epiphany on the operating table, Diane joined the Abortion Law Reform Association and describes herself as being one of its most "radical" members. Within a year, she was on the committee, then became vice-chairman and put her campaigning prowess to work.

Joining forces with David Steel – then a Liberal MP, now a member of the House of Lords – the pair led the campaign to change the law and make abortion safe

and accessible to women in Britain.

Lord Steel introduced the Abortion Act 1967 through a Private Members' Bill as the 28-year-old Liberal MP for Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles. Making the decision to take up the mantle of introducing such divisive legislation proved to have a lasting effect on his life, as it did – and does – for so many others who continue to fight for women's reproductive rights.

Modest about his part in the introduction of this life-saving act, the ex-Liberal Democrat leader tells me: "I still get a mixture of fan and hate letters as though I was solely responsible for the legislation."

'The village shop refused to serve me'

That he still receives hate mail for legislation he was instrumental in passing 50 years ago highlights the divisive nature inherent to any discussion on abortion rights and reform, and encountering this passionate dislike of abortion rights campaigners seems an experience universal to all who have been on the front lines of this particular battle.

When Diane began to speak openly about her abortion in the 1960s, she described the hatred towards her as "palpable", saying: "I received death threats, I had red paint poured over the bonnet of my car with notes left under the windscreen wipers saying it represented the blood of the millions of babies I'd murdered. The village shop refused to serve me."

The viciousness of the hatred she describes seems, to me, unbearable. However, from Diane at least, that same ferocity is mutual.

"If you look at people who picket abortion clinics, one almost has to feel sorry for them. I think they're gripped by a kind of insanity arising from irrationality. In many ways, they are sad individuals because they do nothing for the children who have already been born," she says, with a weary sigh signalling despair at those who do not share her worldview.

The Abortion Act was implemented 50 years ago, but both Diane and Lord Steel say they have regrets about the legislation – namely, that it has not been extended to Northern Ireland – but the pair have remained close friends and are still actively campaigning for change.

Jovial, but with a tangible hint of worry, Diane says: "I just hope that before I die we'll get abortion made available in Northern Ireland – I just keep telling them to hurry up about it!"

On 22 June, more than 170 British and Irish politicians and campaigners signed an open letter, published in *The Times*, to their respective governments demanding that the 1967 Act be extended to Northern Ireland.

Lord Steel was one of the politicians who signed the letter, which points out that the current situation is directly in breach of the Good Friday Agreement – a document which supposedly guarantees the same basic human rights for all UK citizens.

Diane Munday at her 'campaign headquarters' in the 1970s



A pregnant woman marches for abortion law reform in Belfast

'A woman who has an abortion following rape might get a longer prison sentence than the rapist.'

Ex-Liberal Democrat leader Lord David Steel



'Abortion, in my mind, is an extension of the maternal instinct'

Warily, he says he hopes Theresa May's reliance on the DUP won't cloud her judgement on pushing for change in Northern Ireland, but he fears the worst.

A commonly held view among most pro-choice campaigners is that one of the biggest barriers to real, lasting change in abortion legislation in Northern Ireland is the stigma that is associated with it. From when abortion was first legalised in Britain to now, it's the unwillingness of people to discuss it that seems to block understanding of women's needs.

Emma Campbell, co-chair of Northern Irish charity and campaign group Alliance for Choice agrees, and thinks the tone of the discussion around abortion needs to change: "I don't think there is enough focus on the fact that sometimes, people just need an abortion. We shouldn't be asking for their reasons, we shouldn't be expecting people to grovel or beg for an abortion, and there doesn't need to be a moral case for it."

"Sometimes, people just really don't want to be pregnant – if there had been more discussion around that, it really would have been de-stigmatising."

Diane agrees; part of the reason she has spent most of her life campaigning for abortion rights is because she has never wavered from her belief that "there is only one person who really should make the choice about terminating a pregnancy and that is the pregnant woman herself."

She continues: "Abortion, in my mind, is an extension of the maternal instinct. Women are safeguarding the child they might have from having a rotten life. Women who go to the backstreets and use knitting needles or boiling hot water are not stupid. They know what they are doing and they are so determined to end that pregnancy that they will take those risks. It's that instinctive drive to not have a child when the time is wrong for that child."

Speaking about a law which came into being 50 years ago may seem outdated, but that campaigners are still fighting to guarantee women's rights to dictate what happens to their bodies is something happening – with scary frequency – worldwide.

Last week, the Department of Health announced plans to allow women in England to take the early abortion pill at home, reducing their chance of miscarrying while on their way home from the abortion clinic – which is well-documented, and can be extremely uncomfortable and undignified.

This will bring England into line with both Welsh and Scottish laws. But in Northern Ireland, buying these pills from the internet and taking them at home is illegal, and can land a woman with a jail sentence if discovered.

Diane takes issue with this, her words highlighting the double standard within the UK in a stark light: "A woman who has an abortion following rape by buying pills over the internet might get a longer prison sentence than the rapist. It's utterly insane."

Only this year did both the Isle of Man and Ireland make the decision to legalise abortion. Equally, there are countries such as Malta and Argentina, where reproductive autonomy seems a far-off fantasy.

Women dressed in red cloaks and white hoods – mimicking the subjugated female characters from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* – marched at rallies across Argentina to protest at their strict abortion laws.

On 9 August, a motion to legalise abortion in the country was defeated in their senate 38-31. A week later, an Argentinian woman died trying to give herself a DIY abortion.

Women are dying because lawmakers are denying them access to professional medical treatment, and speaking to Diane and other campaigners like her really demonstrates the frustration that they feel, but also the depth of their conviction that something must change for the women who are consistently defined in terms of fertility rather than agency.

Diane summarises: "Abortion is real, it's here." Irish and Northern Irish women have been "voting for legal abortion with their feet by walking into clinics for the last 50 years," and it seems only inevitable that change is coming; here's hoping that Diane will get to see the real human impact of a life's work.