



ARTICLE



Critical education in the Irish repeal movement

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ABSTRACT

This article is written from a pro-choice perspective. Through a radical, inclusive feminist lens, I examine educational aspects of the Irish repeal movement; a 35 year long, grassroots movement that forced the hand of reluctant politicians into calling a referendum to repeal the eighth amendment. I draw from websites and media interviews, my own experience as an academic-activist, and aspects of comprehensive mixed methods research I carried out over a three-year period (2018–2021). I maintain it was the independent (non-state funded) nature of pro-choice groups that enabled them to determine their own structures and tactics including participative, dialogic, hands-on, adult education. As the Irish reproductive rights movement enters a new phase of seeking to improve one of Europe's most conservative laws, I argue for a reproductive justice approach that expands its demands far beyond the single issue of abortion access. An ongoing critical pedagogic dimension is crucial as part of this struggle.

KEYWORDS

The eighth amendment; reproductive justice; critical pedagogy; adult education; and social movements; Ireland; grassroots activism

Introduction

Affordable, legal abortion saves lives. Every year, around 23,000 women and girls of reproductive age die from unsafe abortions worldwide because 41% (or 700 million) live under restrictive laws (Centre for Reproductive Rights 2021). Before 2018, abortion was prohibited in Ireland except where the life of a pregnant person was at imminent risk. This changed in 2018 when the Irish electorate¹ voted to remove a controversial constitutional clause that gave equal legal rights to a foetus and a woman. Commonly called *the eighth amendment*, this 43-word long passage didn't stop abortions rather around 15 people travelled overseas each day, mostly to England. Others broke the law by buying abortion pills online which they took without medical supervision. These were the lucky ones. Those without money or papers to travel, or who didn't know how to seek out pills carried unwanted and/or unviable pregnancies to term. The criminalisation of abortion outside of exceptional circumstances also led to tragedies for some women many of which were alphabetised when anonymously reported to the public. There was the X-Case where a 14-year-old rape victim was initially prevented

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by the courts from travelling despite being suicidal; Miss Y, a young asylum seeker, again suicidal, who was forced to endure a pregnancy against her will; and Miss P, a woman who was declared brain-dead but was kept on life support for four weeks because of a foetal heartbeat. These are just a sample of many preventable, often horrific, injustices that included the death of Savita Halappanavar in 2012. She was miscarrying but was denied the abortion she repeatedly requested because a foetal heartbeat could be detected. When she died of septicaemia in a Galway hospital, her death shook Ireland to its core. Mass demonstrations were held under the slogan ‘Never Again’.

Although the eventual removal of the eighth amendment from Ireland’s constitution is sometimes framed as something initiated by the main political parties who just happened to be in power at the time, the real architects of change was a 35-year long, grassroots ‘repeal movement’ which was mostly led by women and which exerted sustained pressure on the political establishment (Browne and Calkin 2020, De Londras 2020, Fitzsimons 2021). As the former Socialist Party TD (member of Irish parliament) and activist Ruth Coppinger (2021, p. xiii) puts it:

A major movement from below won a vital health and civil right, inflicting the most serious defeat on the catholic church in a country where it once held sway. For women and anyone who can become pregnant, the significance of winning this bodily autonomy in your country can’t be overstated. Years of taboo, years of expense, years of secret, illegal journeys were over.

The repeal movement wasn’t the first time grassroots activists fought against reproductive oppressions in Ireland. It was feminists who pushed forward the legalisation of contraception, created supports for victims of sexual violence and rape, and successfully destigmatised lone parenting (Connolly and O’Toole 2005). Much of these earlier actions were part of a transnational movement for women’s equality that mobilised from the 1960s onwards and that was characterised by high levels of solidarity across boarders (Briggs 2022). Built around the motto that ‘the personal is political’ this global feminist movement had a strong pedagogical component. Ireland was no exception and adult educators have identified and theorised a nationwide mushrooming of grassroots women’s groups that had a strong consciousness-raising dimension (Connolly 2005, Fitzsimons 2017). Rosita Sweetman, of the Irish Woman’s Liberation Movement describes her own participation in this sort of education in the 1970s as ‘arguably the most personal, and most political and the most life-changing act of all’ continuing:

In sessions everyone had an equal right to speak. And there were to be *no* men. Women, the early sisters argued, had been systematically separated from each other by the patriarchy, imprisoned in the patriarchy’s belief that it was right and proper for men to rule the world and for women to serve men while they were doing so ... consciousness raising was their safe space, a space women desperately needed to examine their oppression, to get to the root of it, the why of it and, from there, the how to change it. (Sweetman 2020, p. 184)

The so-called ‘second wave’ these feminists are sometimes described as being part of sought to destigmatise abortion by highlighting how people have always terminated pregnancies, including in Ireland (Jackson 1992) in fact the often deeply entrenched

stifling moral arguments advanced by anti-abortionists were only introduced in the early 1900s (Doan 2016, Kissling 2017).

My decision to study *critical pedagogy* within a social movement is part of a long tradition within scholarship on adult education (e.g. see Lovett 1975, Kirkwood and Kirkwood 1989, Crowther *et al.* 2005, Newman 2006, English and Irving 2015). Much of the theory that underpins this work revolves around ideas attributed to Paulo Freire, perhaps best known for his assertion that education is never neutral and his insistence that the education system should be revolutionised. Critical pedagogy argues traditional education operates in a way that is anathema to critical thinking instead ‘schools become easy spaces for selling knowledge which corresponds to capitalist ideology’ (Freire and Shor 1987, p. 8). In other words, schools (and colleges) domesticate rather than liberate and in doing so, maintain what bell hooks (1994, 2004, 2013) repeatedly refers to as ‘the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’. In response, ‘Freirean’ educators (like me) actively invite people to think critically and passionately about the circumstances of their life. We do this by facilitating a dialogic process that asks questions instead of providing solutions and that unequivocally set out to politicise people. The resultant learning doesn’t stay in a classroom or on the pages of an essay rather is channelled towards a collective, cyclical process of praxis ‘with *reflection* and *action* directed at the structures to be transformed’ (Freire 2005, p. 126).

The pre-repeal status of women in Ireland and the growth of a movement

There was much unlearning to be done. Post-colonial Ireland had a particularly domesticating Catholic run education system (Cullen 1987) including in relation to reproductive rights. Reflecting on her own experience in an Irish convent school, Ailbhe Smyth, the founder of the Coalition to Repeal the Eighth, once wrote:

... In my convent school when I was about fourteen or fifteen, a nun told us, in all seriousness, that if we met boys (and we did, of course we did), we should keep our berets and gloves on all the time. For me, and for so many women of my generation and generations before me, you had to learn on the job. Trial and error. The consequences of the errors were always left to us, the women, to bear. These were the wages of sin, because sex (outside marriage) and sin were synonymous. (Smyth 2015, p. 116)

Smyth’s schooling wasn’t an isolated experience rather control of the education system was just one feature of a now well-documented patriarchally driven, cosy coalition between successive Irish governments and the Catholic Church. This alliance began soon after the establishment of the Irish State in 1922 and in many respects culminated in a revised 1937 Constitution of Ireland which formally gave a ‘special position’ to the Catholic Church. Although this particular clause has since been removed, article 41.2, which enshrined a woman’s role as a stay-at-home mother, remains intact to this day.² Many laws were passed that erased women from aspects of social life. These included laws to discourage jury service (1924–1975) and to bar women from the workplace (1935–1973).³ The sanctity of heteronormative, procreative marriage was protected by outlawing divorce from 1925 to 1996 and banning contraception from 1935 to 1985. Rape within marriage wasn’t criminalised until 1990 (although the first conviction wasn’t until 2002). These factors touched virtually every aspect of Irish life creating an

environment where by the mid to late 1900s ‘the ideal for an Irish woman was to be married, a homemaker, fertile and largely silent’ (Fitzsimons and Kennedy 2021, p. 46). As a result, most women endured multiple pregnancies whilst labouring under difficult conditions in the home. Where they strayed outside the vision of the stable traditional family so cherished by patriarchal, catholic Ireland, tens of thousands of ‘fallen women’ were enslaved through an interlocking system of religiously run Mother and Baby Homes and Magdelene Laundries (Hogan 2019), the last of which closed in 1996. This is the context within which a small but dedicated anti-abortion movement successfully conspired with politicians to introduce a constitutional ban on abortion, despite a tide of pro-choice reforms happening across Europe (Fitzsimons and Kennedy 2021).

The social movement that eventually overturned this constitutional amendment began before the eighth was inserted. This was through the work of the 1983 Anti-Amendment Campaign (AAC) whose membership included the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, the Women’s Right to Choose group, left-wing revolutionary parties, and some high profile legal experts including the former President of Ireland Mary Robinson. Pro-Choice activism continued throughout the lifetime of the eighth through such groups as the Women’s Information Network, the Pro-Choice Campaign, Choice Ireland, Action on X, Parents for Choice, and professional groups, such as Doctors for Choice and Lawyers for Choice. Many groups who played a significant role in repealing the eighth amendment remain active today. These include Termination for Medical Reasons (TFMR, est. 2012), the Abortion Rights Campaign (ARC, est. 2013), for Reproductive Rights against Oppression, Sexism and Austerity (ROSA, est. 2013), Migrants and Ethnic Minorities for Reproductive Justice (MERJ, est. 2017), and the Northern Ireland based Alliance for Choice (est. in the 1990s). There were also smaller local groups across the length and breadth of Ireland including Kerry for Choice, Pro-Choice Galway, Rebels for Repeal, and Repeal the Eighth Dun Laoghaire to name just a tiny few. Together, these voluntary, non-funded groups worked alongside human rights organisations, such as Amnesty Ireland and the Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL), reproductive healthcare providers including the Irish Family Planning Association and the Well-Woman’s Clinic, trade unionists, and the state funded National Women’s Council of Ireland (NWCII). In 2013, The Coalition to Repeal the Eighth (the Coalition) was convened by Ailbhe Smyth and Sinéad Kennedy uniting over 100 groups across a broad platform for repeal.

Research methodology

This paper shines a light on educational aspects of this movement. I draw from three sources (1) information on events as advertised and reported on via websites, social media platforms and media interviews with activists; (2) my own auto-ethnographic self-reflections and experiences (Crawley 2012) as a pro-choice academic-activist and an adult educator; and (3) aspects of extensive longitudinal, mixed methods research I carried out from April 2018 to April 2021. Specifically this paper draws from an opt-in online anonymous questionnaire that was circulated via 75 voluntary groups affiliated with the umbrella referendum coalition Together for Yes and completed by 304 activists in the ten-day period prior to the referendum.⁴ I home in on the question—‘did

you attend structured canvass training sessions?’ (with a 100% response rate) and a follow up question that asked, ‘If you answered yes, please use the space below to tell me as much as you can about that experience’. I also draw from one-to-one interviews carried out in 2019 and 2020 with purposefully selected activists from ARC, Parents for Choice, MERJ, The Alliance for Choice, and ROSA. Some interviews were face-to-face and some were via telephone and email both of which are viable alternatives (Meho 2006). Finally, I share from a targeted online questionnaire completed by 30 pro-choice groups who were still active in 2021.⁵

All findings have been collated and analysed through a series of recursive and reflexive steps that were led by my ontological outlook as a critical researcher (Kincheloe and McLaren 2005) and the externally defined research objective (Silverman 2011), i.e. a specific focus on educational aspects of the Irish repeal movement. Filtering the findings in this way is advantageous in illuminating pedagogic dimensions but limiting in terms of isolating one aspect of a complex topic that is rooted in a particular socio-historic context. The bulk of results from the mixed-methods study (including a second anonymous survey completed by over 400 activists in 2020) are reported on in the book *Repealed: Ireland’s Unfinished Fight for Reproductive Rights* (Fitzsimons 2021).

As with all social research, this study is deeply informed by researcher positionality, in my case as a critical feminist-researcher who adopts a ‘reproductive justice framework’ as first formulated in the US in 1994 by Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice (now SisterSong). A reproductive justice (RJ) approach merges ‘reproductive rights’ with ‘social justice’ and focuses on three expansive rights—the right *not to have children* through birth control, abortion or abstinence; the right *to have children* under the conditions we choose, and *the right to parent* in safe, healthy environments, all alongside sexual and gender freedom (Ross *et al.* 2017, p. 171). To achieve these rights activists must expand their focus beyond the single issue of abortion and highlight the wider dimensions of reproductive oppressions many people endure as a direct result of capitalist-led, structural inequality (Siliman *et al.* 2004, Briggs 2017, Ross and Solinger 2017).

Reproductive justice—an anti-neoliberal perspective

Consistently proponents of an RJ framework are clear about the need to reject neoliberalism—a socio-economic model that promised entrepreneurialism and free-market economics would trickle wealth downwards. In pursuit of this vision, successive governments across the globe have privatised, rationalised, and commercialised a range of public supports including housing, health and welfare. However this for-profit marketised logic hasn’t worked instead neoliberalism has made things worse for millions of people, especially working-class and migrant women and children who are more likely to live with financial poverty, multiple care responsibilities and precarious work, housing, and citizenry (Rubery 2017, Sweeney 2020). These are the very factors that can create massive uncertainty around a person’s capacity to have and raise children. Ireland embodies many hallmarks of neoliberalism. Whilst championing tax-breaks for global corporations (O’Boyle and Allen 2021) a series of austerity budgets have hollowed out and severely underfunded public supports leaving many women to shoulder addition

care burdens. Our largely privatised childcare system is one of the most expensive in Europe and our policy-led housing and homeless crisis have left many thousands of people in unstable, inadequate accommodation (Hearne 2020).

Some feminists separate the fight for reproductive rights from these stark socio-economic realities, something Ross *et al.* (2017, p. 21) describe as ‘a sly neofeminist version of trickle-down economics’ where the achievements of privileged women are presented as proof that gender-equality can be incrementally achieved without changing the socio-economic status quo. Ross *et al.* (2017) thus reject a ‘liberal’, or (neo)-liberal model of feminism (sometimes known as white feminism) perhaps best summed up Sheryl Sandberg’s (2013) call for women to *lean in* so they can infiltrate the spaces where men have traditionally held economic, legal, and political power. Instead these reproductive justice advocates rely on an intersectional analysis that maintains progress for some women only happens because these same women *lean on* the efforts of low paid, working-class women who carry the burden of care and who are often migrants and/or women of colour (hooks 1982, Lorde 1986, McRobbie 2009, Rottenberg 2018, Arruzza *et al.* 2019).

Critical education and the movement for repeal

Given Irish feminism’s rich tradition in consciousness-raising education most distinguishably within women’s community education, it seems reasonable to assume that the grassroots Freirean groups that sprung up from the 1970s onwards would have been well-positioned to create the counter-hegemonic politicising spaces that formed a central part of the Irish Repeal Movement. However this was not the case rather the neoliberalisation of Irish society included the co-option of many such groups by a state-led drive for managerialist, outputs-oriented service delivery (Fitzsimons 2017). One starting point for this domestication was when many once voluntarily groups became limited companies with charitable status so they could apply for funding through recurrent state-grant aid which became available in the 1990s. Although government funders were initially supportive of the counter-hegemonic actions of a national network of community and voluntary groups that included women’s community education, this didn’t last. Instead, policies that regulated the actions of the community and voluntary sector took a sharp neoliberal turn in the mid-2000s (Bissett 2015). Some groups with an openly radical agenda were suddenly closed as their funding was stopped. Others were compulsorily absorbed into State structures, their assets were sequestered, and their independent boards of management were disbanded. They then had to tailor their work to deliver education for employability and not education for politicisation (Magrath and Fitzsimons 2020). Where groups retained independence, severe limits were placed on what they could do and some opted to close. To give an example, the feminist organisation Banúlacht (1990–2012) cited ‘a number of factors that have combined to make it impossible to continue to do our work according to our feminist ethos’ including a directive that funding could not be used for campaigning or advocacy work (Smith and Begley 2012).

It would be disingenuous to imply that all women’s community groups were radical in fact many state-funded groups were members of the liberal feminist organisation the

NWCI who have always had close connections with mainstream neoliberal political parties. Although constantly pro-choice and eventual co-leaders of the referendum campaign to repeal the eighth amendment, the NWCI didn't actively pursue oppositional tactics in seeking to improve reproductive rights. It is also not the case that all women's groups were pro-choice in fact there were a number of community-based women's projects who were established by religious congregations and who retained close connections with the catholic church.

However it is true that, in the absence of opposition to the eighth amendment from a now co-opted community and voluntary sector, a new layer of grassroots feminist organisations emerged in every county in Ireland. Alongside activists within the arts, the revolutionary left, and a number of journalists, these non-state funded pro-choice groups engaged in a sustained campaign of protest much of which was supported by a critical pedagogic dimension. The Abortion Rights Campaign (ARC), the largest voluntary organisation campaigning for repeal, has always had a strong educational focus and one of their first actions in the early 2010s was to create learning environments that sought to normalise and destigmatise abortion (Sheilds 2021). This was through a series of structured values clarification workshops which created participatory, dialogic conditions where members could build a sense of community and solidarity as they unpacked their own ethical dilemmas and unspoken assumptions. Monaghan (2021) a former convenor of ARC explains 'it was essentially about examining your own values, examining your own biases and examining your own stigma and the whole idea of it was, as activists to get you in a room and to be honest about the things that make you uncomfortable about abortion'. Their pedagogic ambitions weren't solely directed at its membership rather ARC designed materials for public dissemination including the fliers—'8 reasons to repeal the 8th', '5 facts about Abortion in Ireland' and 'They say, We Say' (ARC 2016a). In 2015, ARC designed a six-week education programme for delivery within community and voluntary organisations and other civil society groups. The purpose of these workshops (which I designed) was not only to create non-judgemental spaces where women could discuss their reproductive health and identity, but to examine the wider status of women and girls in Ireland. ARC consulted with a range of groups including the Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, student's unions and some local women's groups. The curriculum created was led by critical pedagogic principles and practices where group members were considered experts in their own lives. The educators who took on to deliver the programme were instructed to adopt a facilitative, problem-posing, Freirean approach that allows people to 'step-back from and analyse their own lives so they can decide themselves how best to respond' (Fitzsimons and Connolly 2015, p. 12). ARC were involved in other educational work too, such as their regular 'Speak Out' events where people with personal experience of abortion could come together and share their story. These workshops were typically advertised like this:

All year, we hear politicians, media workers and others who call themselves experts talk about a subject they have no direct experience of. This event is entirely dedicated to the voices of abortion seekers of all ages who have been silenced or censored. The Speak Out is an opportunity to connect with experiences like yours and support one another in our everyday attempts to work towards change in Ireland. We do not tell our stories as victims but as survivors and change makers. This event will be celebratory in tone and will close with creative contributions by live performers. (ARC 2017a)

Another example of ARC's work was the 'Share Your Abortion Story Project'. This involved deeper engagement across four writing workshops where participants artistically found meaning in their narrative so they could regain power over some of the helplessness that was foisted upon them at the time (ARC 2016b). There were also public workshops for anyone who considered themselves pro-choice that provided space for attendees to discuss Irish laws and reflect on their own attitudes towards abortion. One such 2017 'conversations about choice' workshop recruited participants by asking 'ever wondered how to talk about abortion with your granny/mammy/colleagues? This will be a great workshop to reflect on attitudes towards abortion and build confidence in teasing out issues with friends/family' (ARC 2017b). In one final example, there were banner and prop-making workshops and stalls training workshops in the lead up to ARC's annual March for Choice which began in 2012 with c2,500 people and swelled to as many as 45,000 protesters by 2016.

Although the work of ARC was perhaps best known, several other groups also delivered consciousness-raising, educational workshops that sought to challenge anti-choice narratives and broaden people's understanding of reproductive oppressions more broadly. The Northern Ireland (NI) based Alliance for Choice (the Alliance) have been running placard and banner writing workshops and stigma-busting sessions for many years. This is because despite abortion being legal in all other parts of the UK since 1968, it was only decriminalised in NI in 2019 and services are yet to be fully commissioned by a reluctant Northern Ireland Assembly (McCambridge 2021). The Alliance were possibly the first to design and deliver structured critical pedagogic interventions. One of their convenors describes their six-week consciousness-raising programme like this:

It was about teaching abortion to women in working class communities, it went out via women's Community Centres - the ones that would support us anyway. It was a whole course about feminism, you know, we couldn't just go straight in, especially at that time, we couldn't just go straight in and talk about abortion, they needed to start from the birth of feminism and so forth, the birth of the women's movement and really the whole course was about feminism and rights. (One-to-one interview, 2019)

Parents for Choice (est. 2014) also had a strong pedagogic dimension. Its convenors explained:

Parents for Choice, while not a space to debate the validity of our rights, was always intended to be a learning space for those who perhaps had not yet had the opportunity to discuss fully the ethical and moral case for free, safe, legal abortion access for all who need it. The group aimed to help people who were part of the way along their journey to supporting the call for free, safe, legal to fully understand why abortion rights activists fight for this, and eventually to become abortion rights activists themselves. (Email interview, 2019)

Parents for Choice were using virtual spaces as a way to connect with people with childcare responsibilities long before many of us embraced online learning as a result of the Covid19 pandemic. These online workshops focussed on myth busting. As their convenor explained 'putting language around our experiences and views' and working to gently move people from 'an uninformed or concerned "pro-life" position to pro-choice and often encouraging those people to become activists themselves in their own

lives'. One participant of one of these workshops described their engagement with Parents for Choice like this:

Parents for Choice gave me the confidence to share my family's experiences with the 8th Amendment during our three miscarriages and two high risk pregnancies. It was a safe space to discuss the referendum and to educate myself and equip myself with the facts so I could properly advocate for a yes vote when talking to friends and family. (Email interview, 2019)

Another member equally shares 'having in-group discussions and listening to people who have had experiences with people who needed full access to reproductive health care gave me the confidence and motivation to physically do something locally and I set up my local group' (email interview, 2019). Whilst Parents for Choice had a national focus, other community-based groups also ran workshops. To illustrate, Galway Pro-Choice facilitated workshops on self-managed abortions and on de-stigmatising and de-mystifying abortion and Limerick Feminist Network ran consciousness-raising open dialogue sessions where pro-choice feminists could share experiences and explore what equality means to them. Their co-convenor explains:

Our methods include raising awareness on issues of inequality, holding regular meetings, community engagement and activism, running campaigns and promoting discussion and open dialogue with our members. We believe it is paramount to create a safe space for feminists to express themselves and explore what feminism and equality mean to them. (Email interview, 2019)

The socialist feminist network ROSA also ran regular public meetings and educational events that centred around high impact stunts including the Bus 4 Repeal (in partnership with the doctor-led Women-on-Web) which travelled around Ireland offering consultations and distributing abortion pills. They also held meetings in the run up to the 'Strike for Repeal' which was held on International Women's Day in 2017. Ruth Coppinger (2021, p. xvii) describes Strike for Repeal like this:

In the daytime, a 'strike for repeal' was called by a new ad hoc group of activists. Walkouts took place in colleges and by some workers and the main bridge in Dublin city was occupied, bringing traffic to a halt. That evening thousands took part in a march called by the repeal Coalition, with many school students clearly attending their first ever march. What strike for repeal showed was the way in which young activists were borrowing and lending tactics being used internationally, in this case, from Poland, and pointing to mass, collective struggle and strikes as the means of achieving change.

Strike for Repeal is just one example of how grass-roots activism extended far beyond educational work rather critical pedagogy was just one small part of a sustained movement that included the aforementioned March for Choice, social media campaigns, sticker bombing, public meetings, coffee mornings, and street theatre all of which reminded the public that every-day women's lives were being put at risk and that people were travelling or illegally buying pills.

Simultaneous to much civic disobedience, a small number of left-wing politicians, both independents and members of the revolutionary coalition Solidarity-People before Profit, supported actions outside the Dáil (Irish parliament) by bringing forward bills inside the Dáil in 2012, 2014, and 2016. Despite now seeking kudos for repealing the eighth amendment, all the main political parties either voted against these bills or

abstained. There was international pressure too. In just one of many examples, the Irish government were forced to apologise and withdraw statements made to the UN Human Rights Committee when, in 2014, it defended the eighth amendment arguing a person's human rights could be curbed once the majority of the electorate supported this curtailment. Referencing Ireland's ban on abortion where a person has been raped, the Committee's chair Sir Nigel Rodley admonished the Irish State for its stance accusing it of treating women 'as a vessel' and nothing more (Cahill 2014). Eventually, a Fine Gael led government gave into the barrage of domestic and international pressure by initially outsourcing the decision on whether or not to hold a referendum to a Citizen's Assembly⁶ before finally announcing a referendum in January 2018. Soon after, Together for Yes (TfY) was convened. This umbrella coalition was co-led by The Coalition to Repeal the Eighth, ARC and the NWCI and consolidated all groups calling for repeal around a united message of 'Compassion, Care and Change'. Many groups rebranded (e.g. Parents for Choice became Parents Together for Yes and so on) and everyone distributed centrally produced leaflets and posters. TfY was hugely successful in mobilising large numbers in support of repeal but was arguably the most conservative phase of the movement in terms of its messaging. Many activists struggled with a toned-down individualist medicalised approach and an obliteration of working-class, disabled, LGBTQI+ and migrant voices (De Londras 2020, Fitzsimons 2021). Migrants and Ethnic Minorities for Reproductive Justice (MERJ) responded to this perceived conservatism in real time by running inclusivity training with ARC members that sought to bring the very specific challenges faced by migrants and ethnic minorities to the fore and raise awareness on how the repeal campaign might better include their voices and experiences.

Pro-repeal canvass training

Despite the ubiquity of TfY who were publicly endorsed by a transformed pro-choice political establishment, many state-funded women's community-based groups didn't canvass for change. In part this was because groups that were connected through the National Collective of Women's Community Based Networks (NCCWN) were sent a written directive by the government body that manages their funding telling them to adopt a neutral stance. Although the exact reasons for this directive are unclear, it was likely influenced by a fear that commenting on repeal could result in sanctions from the Charities Regulator. There was no guarantee this would happen but there was precedent. In the spring of 2018, the Charities Regulator forced the Project Arts Centre to remove a 14-foot-tall red-and-white Repeal mural by the artist Maser on its outer wall, an action the Irish Council for Civil Liberties link to high levels of self-censoring within other groups (O'Rourke 2018).

No such limits were placed on a now thriving repeal movement who from late 2017 onwards had turned their educational attention to pre-canvass training that was delivered by ARC, Parents for Choice, ROSA, some local groups and some non-government political parties. These were mostly once-off, participatory workshops that were held across the country in pubs, community centres, people's homes, or anywhere else willing to offer space. Following the formation of TfY in March 2018, promoting the

campaign message of Care, Compassion and Change became the central focus of much pre-canvass training. Fifty-three percent of the 304 canvassers I consulted attended canvass training, 26% would have liked to but didn't have the time and 14% didn't realise they were happening. Others didn't feel they needed canvass training with many arguing the best way to learn is through doing. To illustrate: 'I am not sure about the value of the long training session, pairing experienced and non-experienced people together plus real on-the-door situations is the best training. Trust people'. Others too referred to 'on the job' training, or the opportunity to 'shadow other campaigners at the doors on my first evening out' as the best way to learn. Of those who did attend, a significant majority found the training extremely beneficial and appreciated the opportunity to collectively allay trepidations. For example: 'It was very helpful, it allowed canvassers across the county to meet and begin to form networks, it went through the main arguments for repeal, it allowed us to practice using role play and it helped build confidence'. Another woman talked about a session upstairs in a Dublin pub which 'really helped to shake off the apprehension I had about the idea of going door to door'. For others, 'very informative, reassuring and helpful' and 'we took time to workshop knocking on doors, and there was a real buzz of excitement in the room. It was inspiring!'. Another described Parents for Choice canvass training as 'very helpful in terms of messaging and 'arming' myself before going out to persuade and influence'. And on training by the local group Kilkenny for Choice: 'very detailed and a great way to meet like-minded people'. In one final example this young canvasser described the training as 'a very useful experience. I learned a lot, and it made me less scared to go canvassing'. A minority were less enthusiastic and complained the training was either too long, top-down, lacked detail on countering anti-repeal arguments and was too focussed on a medicalised, individualist message that didn't sit comfortably with them. A perceived Dublin-centric focus was also relayed. One attendee was unhappy that those delivering the workshop had, in her mind, unnecessarily travelled many miles as they didn't understand the challenges many rural groups faced in communities where there were high levels of antagonism towards pro-repeal canvassers. She describes the training as 'appalling' maintaining the TfY representatives had 'no understanding of even the basics of running a campaign'. Another, in a different part of Ireland complained, 'It was useful, but I felt even with my limited experience I knew more about canvassing rural areas than the Dublin-based trainer'. Others attended training organised by political parties with mixed experiences. One non-party member described training by the Socialist party 'which not only provided us with brilliant training but effectively gave people the chance to sign up to volunteer and become more heavily involved in the local campaign'. By contrast, another complained that training by an unnamed political party 'was very well structured and informative. However, one of the facilitators repeatedly promoted her own political party who are pro-choice obviously, but which was very off putting'.

After repeal, the ongoing need for critical education

In the end, over 66% of the electorate voted to remove the eighth amendment from the constitution of Ireland and the *Health Regulations (Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018*

allowed for the introduction of abortion services in January 2019. However, the work of the pro-choice movement continues. Certainly, things are better and many people now avail of abortion care on demand. But abortion is still criminalised outside of strict parameters that include a gestational limit of 12 weeks and with a mandatory 3-day wait both of which are contrary to best practice advice by the WHO (2012). After 12-weeks termination is only available for *fatal* foetal anomaly or where a person's life or health is at imminent risk; both of which must be certified by at least two doctors. Although not in the same numbers, people continue to travel when they have the capacity to do so.⁷ Irish law is also trans exclusionary and it supports conscientious objection where the rights of the objector supersede a person's right to access a procedure they are legally entitled to. Many believe this has contributed to a situation where only 10% of GPs are openly prescribing abortion pills and only 10 of Ireland's 19 maternity services are offering full abortion services (Kennedy 2021) leaving large geographical areas without services. As was the case with the eighth amendment itself, these barriers disproportionately affect poor people, vulnerable migrants, those living with violence and/or with heavy care-loads, people who can't take time off work, as well as disabled people and those with irregular periods which may be because of illness or addiction.

These restrictions form part of a much broader and ongoing international assault on reproductive rights that is beyond the scope of this contribution and three years post-repeal, Ireland still had a vibrant, independent reproductive rights movement with a strong educational dimension. In 2021, 55% of voluntary groups I engaged with reported a pedagogic dimension to their work. These included letter writing workshops, social media and communications workshops, self-managed abortion and doula (non-medical companion) training, and sessions to encourage doctors to sign up to the government scheme. Some of this work is overtly political. The Carlow Choice and Equality Network (formally Carlow pro-choice and Carlow Together for Yes) explain:

We run workshops and host public meetings about campaign issues in the local community. At these we explain the situations in more detail and ask experienced activists/experts in these areas to address the room. We make people aware of how our elected representatives vote, particularly if it impacts key issues.

In another example, this ROSA representative shares:

Our regular political meetings are educational in the sense that they seek to analyze and understand the context we live in, so we are best able to take the necessary initiatives. By understanding how capitalism, misogyny, transphobia, racism, workers exploitation is all linked, and by analysing the mood we are able to create a core of dedicated and collaborative activists and take bold initiatives sometimes aimed at raising awareness.

Some radical feminist groups central to the repeal campaign have extended critical pedagogic actions in other ways including MERJ, a group that openly adopts a reproductive justice framework. In 2020, one of their convenors described their post-repeal work like this: 'the focus has been mostly on political education ... we've been, like, internally, we've been discussing books that we're reading ... for internal political education'. From this inner work, external work emerges including a well-attended 'Beyond Carceral Feminism' series of workshops that focussed on what Kim (2020) describes as contradictions between relying on the criminal justice system to address social problems (including reproductive, gendered and racialised oppressions) when

these very same justice systems are shaped by neoliberal logic and are more likely to be adversarial rather than supportive.

Critical education continues to this day. In 2022, ARC designed and delivered a series of dialogic workshops for new volunteers and also hosted a four-week programme on reproductive rights and reproductive justice. This programme openly adopted a critical pedagogic perspective described by Michael Newman (2006, p. 3) as having the courage to instill ‘rebelliousness, defiance, consciousness and choice’ as we ‘teach people to make up their own minds and take control of their own lives’.⁸ In its post-course evaluation, many participants commented on the adult education, feminist pedagogy employed. This participant echoed wider sentiment when they shared:

My primary aim in coming on the course was to get an overview of reproductive justice through the lens of feminist history and fill in the huge gaps in my knowledge. What I got was so much more - the ease with which trust was nurtured and maintained allowed for much listening to other’s experiences and finding it easy to contribute personal insights or experiences also.⁹

Closing comments

The Irish reproductive rights movement has proven that, amidst neoliberalisation processes that rendered many women’s groups neutral, and an education system that to this day remains largely in control of the Catholic Church,¹⁰ radical voices can and do emerge in alternative spaces that understand that change only happens through struggle. Critical education forms part of this struggle and was made possible within the Irish repeal movement because certain volunteers understood participative, dialogic, hands-on, adult education methodologies. Since 2018, many state-funded women’s community-based women groups have abandoned their neutral stance and embraced a pro-choice identity that now mirrors government policy. This is a welcome development. However, can state-funded groups be relied on to authentically advocate a reproductive justice model that asks fundamental questions about how capitalism organises our world? Some liberal organisations remain close to the political establishment (including the NWCI) and regularly sidestep the anti-capitalist nature of reproductive justice despite performatively using the language of intersectionality that underpins it. These state-funded feminist groups are thus best understood as instruments of (neo)-liberal domestication and not liberation.

An authentic reproductive justice approach means genuine intersectionality and not what Sara Salem (2018, p. 404) describes as ‘the stretching of intersectionality so that it becomes a ‘catch-all’ feminist theory that can be used by all feminists, and the sanitizing of intersectionality by liberal feminism’. This politicised ideology is only possible if the Irish reproductive rights movement maintains its non-funded independence so it can call out government policy and expansively address all reproductive oppressions. As was the case pro-repeal, many of these independent groups do continue to focus on issues that confront the neoliberal state, such as protesting against the ongoing involvement of the Catholic Church in Irish maternity services, reparations for survivors of Mother and Baby Homes, adequate funding for domestic violence services and a

fundamental overhaul of Irish policy on housing. Speaking about their work in the post-repeal period, I leave the final words to this ARC representative who shared:

I wish there was more understanding of how interconnected all these issues are. That the choice to continue or end a pregnancy is affected by more than just if you want (more) children. The security of your housing, the stability of your relationships, your physical and mental health, your migration status, your cultural context, your education - all of these matter. How we think about abortion and reproductive justice ties into how we think about sexuality, about gender, about health, about women's rights, about sex work, about morality. We need to stand for the most marginalised, as well as those outside our borders. In terms of work we do, I wish we could do more. It can be hard to prioritise when there is so much to do. It can be hard to give ourselves permission not to respond to everything. I think we'll be fighting for reproductive justice, in some form or another, for the rest of our lives. The work never stops. (Online questionnaire, 2021)

Notes

1. I am referring to the Republic of Ireland. Abortion was also largely prohibited in Northern Ireland despite being available in all other parts of the UK until it was introduced through Westminster in 2019.
2. This article reads 'In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home'.
3. Although the marriage bar only formally applied to civil service work, it was replicated by many other employers also. Meanwhile many working-class women continued to work in low-paid work such as factory work, domestic servitude, and agricultural work.
4. Eligibility was through the consent statement 'I confirm that I am interacting with the general public by knocking on doors as part of a team, distributing leaflets at static stalls (such as at shopping centres or train stations), and/or interacting with the public as a website moderator or social media organiser'.
5. These were identified through their social media profile on Facebook and Instagram, through word of mouth and through my own knowledge of the Irish reproductive rights movement. The inclusion criteria was to consent to the statement 'we are a grass-roots, community-based/local groups that are solely reliant on people volunteering their time'.
6. The citizen's assembly of 99 randomly selected members of the public sat from November 2016 to March 2017. It reviewed over 13,000 public submissions and listened to expert groups and people campaigning both for and against repeal before recommending a referendum be held to repeal the eighth.
7. In 2020, 194 people gave an Irish address in England and Wales www.gov.uk/government/statistics/abortion-statistics-for-england-and-wales-2020 (retrieved 28 July 2021). Others will have travelled to other countries.
8. I designed and facilitated these programmes.
9. Participants on this programme consented in writing to have their anonymous evaluations shared in academic papers and publications such as this.
10. Although there are some alternatives most notably 'Educate Together' and a growth in secular state-run post-primary schools, over 90% of primary schools remain under Catholic patronage. Source: <https://www.thejournal.ie/divestment-catholic-primary-schools-stalemate-part-one-5463812-Jun2021/>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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