

REAL STORIES OF ABORTION

my body
my life

‘I want to be able to stand up and tell people it’s not such a big deal and we should be slightly less judgmental of each other.’

Rosa’s story on:

[www.alliance4choice.com/
trust-women-campaign/#/
womens-stories-1/](http://www.alliance4choice.com/trust-women-campaign/#/womens-stories-1/)

ONE IN THREE WOMEN

IN THE UK WILL HAVE AN ABORTION
DURING THEIR LIFETIME.¹

This booklet shares some of their stories. These stories have been gathered from a number of different sources, they are in different styles, but they are all stories from real women who have had an abortion. The stories show how different women make decisions about having an abortion, and what the process was like for them. Above all they show how easily an unintended pregnancy can become a part of people's lives. Abortion is one of the most commonly performed gynaecological procedures in the UK. Most women will have over three decades of fertility to manage, and an unplanned pregnancy can happen at any time. For some people, for all sorts of reasons, an intended pregnancy can later become unwanted. All too often, though, abortion can be shrouded in secrecy and silence. As these stories show, all kinds of women have abortions, and since one in three will have an abortion in their lifetime, it is likely that some of your friends or family members will have one too.

ERIN, 19 ¹

I started having sex at 13 and went on the pill pretty much straight away. I had a number of short, casual relationships until I was about 16 when I met my first long-term boyfriend. Because it was quite a serious relationship I decided to have the implant put in and I kept it for 3 years. Then I had it removed. I had to have treatment for ovarian cysts and was advised not to get new contraception until after my next period, but in the end I didn't seek any contraception at all. I think my current partner and I got a little bit stupid and careless. I fell pregnant at 18 and kept the baby.

After the birth of my daughter, I suffered from post-natal depression and it took me a long time to bond with her. Following her birth I started taking the pill again but on one occasion that I had sex, I forgot to take it on time and so took it later on in the evening instead. I knew I was at risk and I really didn't want to become pregnant again so I went and took the 'morning after pill' just in case. I hadn't had a period since I'd given birth, so as a precaution I did six pregnancy tests. They were all negative. I went to the doctor and the doctor also did a test, which was positive.

'Coping with two children under the age of one was just not an option, so I decided to terminate the pregnancy.'

When I found out, I was so upset – I felt like I had taken every precaution I possibly could and yet I was pregnant again for the sake of a few hours when I forgot to take my pill. Considering the post-natal depression I'd had with my first pregnancy, I really hadn't wanted to become pregnant again. Coping with two children under the age of one was just not an option, so I decided to terminate the pregnancy. After the procedure I felt fine. I kept expecting to feel sad or guilty but those feelings just never came. I feel I made the right decision for me at that stage in my life. I had just started to form a bond with my daughter, and that was the most important thing to me.

VAL ⁴

We are a family of 6. My husband had a vasectomy 10 years ago so we were not using contraception. When I didn't come on I took a pregnancy test which was positive although I didn't feel pregnant. A second test was also positive. My doctor referred me to the clinic. Although extremely shocked my husband and I were in agreement that our family was complete, and that termination was our chosen option.

My experience was very swift and professional. As my gestation allowed, I was able to have treatment on the same day as my consultations.

‘My husband and I were in agreement that our family was complete, and that termination was our chosen option.’

DARCEY, 38 ²

I had been seeing a chap for a good couple of months and quite casually. And yeah, we basically had been using condoms and we didn't that night and I'm pretty clear when I'm ovulating and.... and was just an absolute idiot. I had a very, very stressful couple of days and at the back of my mind I did think, you know 'I should go and take the morning-after pill, I'm slightly concerned' and I didn't. And literally by the day that my period was due I knew I was pregnant. I'm pretty bang-on with my period and my ovulation and, I mean, I'm 38 so, you know, I know my cycle quite well. So it was an absolutely idiotic thing to do. And I knew straight away. I basically knew very, very, very soon afterwards, yeah, that I should have got the morning-after pill. So yeah, it was very, very foolish. And I was very stressed-out about something else so I didn't focus on that and, you know, by the time I sort of thought really I should have dealt with it and gone and got the morning-after pill 72 hours had passed so I kind of knew probably straight away actually, to be honest with you.

HILDA (NOW 77) ⁵

I was 21 years old the first time I experienced an abortion. My main method of contraception at that time was the cap; although I did have 'adventures' when I wasn't always ready with my cap and that did cause me to worry. In those situations the best I could do for contraception was the cold douche method, because there was no one really to talk to about these things.

So, I was 21 and living in America when I became pregnant by my boyfriend at the time. We were in a very intense and active relationship, and often used the withdrawal method for contraception. But by the time I knew I was pregnant he had left the country, so I went to have a backstreet abortion. This woman pushed something up inside me, and I didn't really know what was happening, it was terribly black market. A couple of weeks later I was at work and I suddenly experienced incredible pain and bleeding. What I didn't realise at the time was that I was miscarrying. I went to hospital, and came out not really taking anything in, that I'd had an abortion or miscarriage. My boyfriend was gone abroad, and I felt very alone. I had nobody to talk to.

'All we knew was that we were desperate and had to end the pregnancy.'

The next time I had an abortion was in London in 1962. I had a boyfriend at the time, who was very supportive and concerned. We didn't know what to do, and we didn't have much money. All we knew was that we were desperate and had to end the pregnancy. He and my flatmate together resorted to using the coat-hanger method, to pierce my cervix. I don't remember if I felt pain or bleeding, but I do remember feeling humiliated that she had to be a part of this awful thing. That's how I ended up in an isolation hospital for fever patients in Coppett's Wood, I wasn't told it had anything to do with abortions. I remember this beautiful young female doctor came to me and asked me what had happened, trying to get information out of me. I didn't want to involve my boyfriend or my flatmate so I just kept quiet.

RHONA ³

I had an abortion nine years ago. I don't remember the exact date but it was summertime and it was unbearably hot in the hospital, even with the window open and the fan on. I do, however, remember the kindness and compassion of the staff at the hospital and that I never felt judged, or shamed, for the decision I made. Everything about the procedure was explained to me and any questions I had, even the silly ones, were answered professionally.

I was told that all of the staff who would be there with me had chosen this; they had chosen to be there to help women through what can be, for many, a very difficult and emotional time and I think that is incredibly important. I respect that some healthcare professionals can have a personal viewpoint on abortion but if this impacts on their ability to deliver appropriate care then they simply shouldn't be performing that particular role. So to those doctors, nurses and therapists who have actively chosen to help me and other women like me ... thank you.

I have exactly zero regrets about the decision to have an abortion. This is not because I am flippant, horribly irresponsible, or some kind of monster with no regard for human life. It is simply because it was absolutely the right decision to make at that time.

I was in a very bad place at that point in my life. My husband had committed suicide just over a year beforehand and I was not coping well. In short, I was completely broken and I was engaging in a downward spiral of self-destructive behaviour including harmful and excessive drinking, suicide attempts, and other risky behaviour. Preventing a pregnancy would, of course, have been the most responsible thing but mental ill-health, alcohol abuse, and good decisions are often not such close bedfellows.

My daughter was four years old at this time and I struggled so much with daily life that my sister had to look after her for over a year. It took 18 months (and an actual intervention, US style, by my friends and family) for me to begin to pull my head out of the dark, booze-fuelled hole of depression, anger, grief, guilt and self-loathing. It was a difficult and painful process and there was absolutely no way I was able to safely carry and then care for a baby at that time. I'm absolutely certain that attempting to do so would have had a catastrophic effect on both my physical and

mental well-being, not to mention that of my daughter, my wider family and importantly, that as-yet-unformed life I had accidentally brought about.

Access to this relatively simple yet essential procedure means that today I am happy, stable, successful, mentally healthy, and now have a grand total of three wonderful, if boisterous, kids. It was one small but important part of my care which helped to facilitate my recovery. I think this is the first time I've thought about my abortion in several years but, as someone who was already a mother, I firmly believe that adoption would have played on my mind to this day. Now recovered, I would always wonder and I doubt I could have processed the experience of pregnancy and birth as well as I did the simpler experience of a medical abortion. I would have silently carried my guilt and never been able to move on from being such a terrible mother who gave a child away for good.

‘I have exactly zero regrets about the decision to have an abortion.’

Having the abortion meant that I didn't have to deal with that additional trauma and could focus on getting myself together enough to be a mother again to my already existing, and much loved, child. I shudder to think of the ramifications for my life if I did not have access to a safe and supported abortion, but one way or another it is entirely possible that I might not be here today.

There are a thousand of variations of my story; a thousand women who have trodden the same path for their own unique reasons. Each one a testament to dedicated and caring healthcare professionals providing a basic service to women in need; to back-alley disasters averted; to women making a difficult but positive choice while being properly supported to do so; and to thousands of lives healing and moving forward. These doctors and nurses save actual lives, sometimes figuratively and sometimes literally, by preventing loosely potential ones. Long may they continue to do so and, for their dedication, compassion, and skill, they have my most sincere and heartfelt gratitude.

ONE

IN

SIX

pregnancies among women
in Britain is unplanned ⁱⁱ

MARTHA, 22 ¹

I was told it was unlikely I would ever have children because of hormonal imbalance. So when I fell pregnant at 18 I felt couldn't terminate the pregnancy even though my partner at the time did not want me to continue with the pregnancy and left me after our child was born. When I fell pregnant again I knew the dad wouldn't be around this time either. I'm already a single parent and I'm scraping by week to week.

I chose to have an abortion because I didn't want to jeopardize my daughter's quality of life. Financially, mentally, and emotionally it is a lot to take on and I'm obviously aware of everything it involves, having already been through it. I just thought really, it was for the best. I definitely made the right decision, no doubt about it. My daughter is my number one priority and it means that she can continue to have a good quality of life and we can get by comfortably.

‘I would love to have a family, but I want to be happy when I find out I'm pregnant.’

FIONA, 28 ⁶

I didn't suspect it at all. Throughout the holidays I had really bad constipation. And I couldn't get a doctor's appointment over the holiday. So I finally got a doctor's appointment, saw the doctor. My stomach was swollen, but I genuinely thought it was because I was really constipated, and I was in quite a bit of, like, it was just uncomfortable. So the doctor felt my tummy, and I could just tell by her face. Then she said: "are you sure you're not pregnant?" And I said: "definitely not." And she had a feel around and she said: "I don't want to push too much but I would reckon that you could almost be at the twenty week mark." And I just couldn't, I couldn't believe it, because I'd only just met my boyfriend, and my ex was from months before, and I thought, 'that's not possible.' And I didn't want to resent my child, you know? I would love to have a family, but I want to be happy when I find out I'm pregnant.

MONIKA, 19

My pregnancy did not come at a good time. I know that an unplanned pregnancy rarely comes at a 'good time' but the timing of mine was particularly bad. I had just dropped out of university and my partner's mother had cancer, and this put a massive strain on our relationship. We had only been together for 2 months and I don't think our relationship was very stable.

I have always been very careful with contraception. The first time I had sex I was 15 and I used condoms until I was 17, when I went on the pill. When I got pregnant I was actually taking a break from the pill but my partner and I still always used condoms. Because I have always been so careful and conscientious with contraception, I was really upset about becoming pregnant and having to have an abortion. I did look into adoption at first, but eventually I decided to terminate the pregnancy. I felt quite alone and like I couldn't talk to my family because I thought they were angry with me for dropping out of university. In addition my partner wasn't very supportive. I went to the clinic alone and opted to have a medical abortion. I felt very emotionally drained by the whole experience but I found reading about other women's experiences helpful. Abortion is a very controversial topic and a lot of people have very strong opinions about it. However, I feel that it isn't something you can understand unless you have been through it.

ALEXIS ⁴

I had a daughter 11 months ago, her father left us because he wasn't the family type and didn't want us. I was diagnosed with postnatal depression the week after he left.

I met my current partner a few months later, and contraception never crossed my mind. Really stupid because I was told how fertile women are after pregnancy. I stopped having periods and my boobs started getting sore and heavy and that's when I took a test and saw two fat lines staring into my eyes. Now isn't the right time. My partner doesn't know and I think it's best that way. I'm physically and mentally not ready, and that's ok because it's my choice to have an abortion.

TARA ⁴

My story is fairly straightforward – I’m childfree and always have been. My ex husband knew that but when he found out I was pregnant, his reaction was ‘if you carry this baby to term our marriage is over’. That wasn’t especially nice to hear because while I wanted an abortion I felt that it was a choice that was not in my hands.

Having to travel to England, from Glasgow, was simply awful. It’s a long journey, at the time I was on Job Seekers Allowance and out of work, so the additional costs of getting around London, food, paying for a private prescription, stuff like that was a real burden.

On the plus side of it (and I know this sounds nuts but everything has a silver lining) I got to see my ex husband for the profoundly unpleasant individual he is, both then and in the coming months after. I also realised that I needed to go to University and get a decent job, so as to avoid being in a financial position like that again.

‘That’s a tremendously liberating thing, knowing the freedom to have an abortion has given me that sureness of knowing my own mind.’

I’m now going through the process of being referred to be sterilised and being pregnant made me see just how certain I am I don’t want children, ever. I guess I’m a little unconventional because I don’t fit the typical narrative of wanting kids, but having an abortion made me more certain than ever that I don’t want kids and that this is the life I want, and that certainty made me feel able to take some extremely hard choices and decisions since then, like leaving my ex husband, seeking a divorce, and then moving 300 miles away to go to University, and that’s a tremendously liberating thing, knowing the freedom to have an abortion has given me that sureness of knowing my own mind.

ONE IN

SIXTY

WOMEN

in Britain will experience an
unplanned pregnancy in a year ⁱⁱ

FRANCES, 25 ⁶

We were officially together a week, I ended up falling pregnant. So I was thinking that we don't know each other yet. So that's when I had my first termination. And then six months down the line I fell pregnant again. But by that time he'd started getting really bad. He was really controlling and he started getting quite violent. So I was like: 'I can't do this', do you know what I mean? So I thought I had to try and get him out my life, I couldn't continue the pregnancy. So I had my second termination.

'We were officially together a week, I ended up falling pregnant.'

GAIL, 23 ²

I am 23 years old, I graduated last year. I've actually had to have an abortion twice. So the first time that it happened it was because I wasn't taking my pill properly and I ended up having, like, two periods a month, and I got really confused and suddenly I was still bleeding but I was pregnant and then I wasn't. It was all very confusing. So after the first time I got the coil put in, and then a year later, almost to the day practically, I got pregnant again, probably because the coil was sitting too low in the cervix, which reduced its effectiveness.

I would say, considering that it's such an emotional, horrible, stressful thing to have to go through, the clinic have been really fantastic about the whole thing. All the nurses were really lovely, even the people who weren't that chatty were all kind of quite nice and sympathetic and that sort of thing. From the nurses you get a sense of 'don't panic, you have no idea how many women I've seen about this alone this week', sort of thing. You get the feeling that you're not alone, it's not just you who's going through this, there will be hundreds of other women who are going through the same things that you are. Yeah, that's my biggest thing about it is the awareness, the fact that people are still not quite sure about something that's been going on for so many years, you know.

I had an abortion 5 years ago at 23. I had taken a couple of pills from my monthly packet very late and had missed one entirely, but after relying on that particular method of contraception for years without incident I thought I would not need to worry. My next period was late so I took a pregnancy test, believing wholeheartedly that there was no way it could possibly come back positive. It took 3 tests for me to finally realise that I was in fact pregnant and I knew instantly that I was not ready to be a mother.

I discovered that I would need the approval of two doctors before I would be able to take control of the situation and that my reasons for wanting a termination had to fall within the acceptable motives outlined in the 1967 Abortion Act in order for the procedure to be legal. I did far too much research on the legislation surrounding abortion in the UK and scared myself half to death at the thought of a doctor turning me away if my circumstances were not dire enough. I made an appointment with my GP and spoke to her about my history with depression. I told her that having a child at this moment in time would put my mental health at risk, a factor I knew was listed in the Abortion Act.

My GP gave her consent for me to have the termination and then informed me that a second doctor would need to speak to me before I could go ahead with the procedure. I had discovered I was pregnant at 2-3 weeks, the earliest possible time it could have been detected, but by the time I was actually able to schedule a date for the abortion, I was approaching 7 weeks.

I informed my manager that I was having the procedure, as I needed to take time off to do so, but also because I wanted her to know what I was going through in case I had seemed a little distracted at work. My manager then told me not to tell anyone in the workplace what I was doing, as there were sure to be differing opinions on it. She then informed me that I would need to take the time off for the procedure out of my annual leave as she did not consider it sick time. I explained to her that I would be undergoing and recovering from a medical procedure which my GP had referred me for, but her mind remained unchanged. It was only after speaking with my HR department that I was able to have my sick leave.

I opted for a surgical procedure, as I did not want to risk the medical pill failing. I went to a clinic in my home town and I sometimes get quite emotional when I think about the staff there and how much they helped me. I felt respected, listened to completely, free from the judgement and unwanted opinion that had blighted the past couple of months for me. The relief as I left that clinic was overwhelming.

5 years later I have become a pro-choice advocate, participating in various forms of activism across the UK. My experiences opened my eyes to a struggle for reproductive rights that I was previously unaware of. I feel passionately that the right to control my own body is fundamental to my humanity, and that must translate into legislation.

KATIA ⁴

I got pregnant for a lot of reasons. We were young and naive. We thought it wasn't that easy, we thought it wouldn't happen to us. We were weak willed in the moment. Most of all, I was tired of contraceptives messing with my mind and body, so I was taking a break.

I learned a lot of things when I got pregnant. I learned not to take ovulation apps too seriously. I learned that pregnancy tests aren't as easy as they look in films, and that sometimes a combination of it being too early to confidently detect and a hysterical disbelief can make a test look neither positive or negative. I learned that the fact that the more people told me it was my decision, the more alone I would feel in deciding the fate of my life and another potential human being's. I learned that the only person who would judge me was myself. I learned that I would need another person with a womb, particularly my mum, to be there for me more than ever before. I learned that my mind would feel controlled by hormones telling me to be maternal. I learned that the thing I would be most terrified of was making the wrong decision. I learned that I would think about nothing else but the bean growing inside my womb for every second of the painful weeks I waited for my appointment to come. By the time it did, I was so mentally and physically exhausted that putting the pills inside my own body couldn't have been easier.

ANNA, 23 ⁶

We had been together for about a year, and we had our own place and he was at university and I was at university and we had a lovely flat, and there was an extra room and all that. We were planning that we were gonna get married and all the rest of it. But then our relationship started taking a sort of strange turn a couple of months before I was pregnant. He was diagnosed with depression and an eating disorder before I met him, so I knew about that. But there was this, sort of, compulsive lying going on, there was just sort of strange things happening, and basically it ended up that I was in an abusive relationship which I didn't even realise I was in. There were a couple of times that he got physically violent. It ended up in a really bad argument, a fight which ended up with me having my knee slit open with a knife and a door smacked in my face, which chipped my teeth.

BROOKE, 17 ¹

I got pregnant due to a split condom. It seems so strange that such a small thing can lead to such a big decision. I started having sex at 16 with my then partner and I used condoms and I was on the pill to be completely safe. The pill really didn't agree with me so I stopped it, but then starting dating another guy.

This was the guy who got me pregnant. He basically told me 'get rid of it' because he was leaving to go back to the army. He didn't want anything to do with me; this left me in a very vulnerable position because I was so young. I didn't want to raise a child in those circumstances. The fact that he was going to be away and wasn't going to be there to support me made me nervous about having his child. I mean he didn't want anything to do with me so who's to say he would want something to do with our child? I've seen people brought up in that scenario, where their dad isn't involved, and it's just horrible. I didn't think I was old enough and mature enough to be a mother yet.

Also, I wanted to further my career as a secretary, which wouldn't have been possible with a young child. I had such strong support from my family, and ultimately I think I made the right decision. The people at the clinic were lovely, and even though I felt very drained afterwards I was glad that I went through with it.

Approximately

1 80,000

1 80,000

1 80,000

1 80,000

abortions take place in England
and Wales every year ⁱⁱⁱ

CHRISSE ⁴

I am a mother of 3 children who live with their father. I had to fight in family court to have contact with them during the time I lost my home, my family, everything. My children's dad used my post-natal depression and anxiety against me. I was unable, due to losing my home, to provide a place for them to live so my partner and I moved in to a house share. In August 2015 I had my final court hearing and I was granted contact with my children.

My partner and I had one accident and 3 weeks later I discovered I was pregnant. We really didn't have any choice but to have an abortion. I had to put my children first. I had fought so hard for over a year for them, having a baby would have thrown that all away, they needed me. It killed me making that decision, I never thought I would have an abortion, but my children come first. I had a surgical abortion so that it didn't affect contact with my children. I don't regret my decision but it still makes me cry.

‘I will always defend my right to a safe termination and in no way do I feel guilty, though the grief remains with me.’

SUE ⁷

I have had two abortions. For me, both were sad experiences, but I will always defend my right to a safe termination and in no way do I feel guilty, though the grief remains with me. The second termination was for a very much wanted girl who was found to have Edwards Syndrome (described as “incompatible with life”). After much, deep thought I took the decision that it was kinder to her to have her life brought to a close while still tiny rather than either be stillborn or die a few days after birth. It was heart-breaking for me, but I am certain it was the best outcome for her, the most humane, to protect her from future pain. Some people may find this shocking - but it's none of their business. My great-grandmother died of an illegal abortion in 1901. My grandpa was an orphan at 18 months old. Safe abortion should be a woman's choice and right.

DIANE MUNDAY (NOW 86) ⁵

Diane Munday had an abortion in 1961, six years before it was made legal. She went on to become a pro-choice campaigner and was instrumental in establishing the 1967 Abortion Act, which finally legalised abortion in England, Wales and Scotland.

I was about 21 when I first heard the word 'abortion'. A local dressmaker was making me a party dress. She had three children and I remember a very happy family. One day I heard that the dressmaker had died from a backstreet abortion. I was utterly shocked. I was doing research at Barts Hospital and over lunch I mentioned this to the doctors I worked with and they looked at me in surprise and they said "Stay behind on Friday evening and we'll show you the reality of abortion which is common". And I then discovered that all the London teaching hospitals put whole wards aside every Friday and Saturday evenings (paydays) to treat the work of the backstreet abortionists with women admitted with septic bleeding, some of them dying. And this is what happened before abortion became legal.

I put it to the back of my mind. Then I became pregnant for the fourth time in four years – and I just knew I could not have another child at that time. I bought my abortion in Harley Street and when I came round from the anaesthetic I remembered the young woman who died and realised that because I had a cheque book I was safe and well. My husband had a wife, my three young sons had a mother, whereas this other woman who didn't have money left behind a grieving widower and three motherless children. And that was really the start of my campaigning.

I joined the Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA), and started speaking out about abortion. I made the decision to be open about my own abortion, and always said "I have had an abortion". I will always remember a Townswomen's Guild meeting when, in the tea interval, more and more women came up to me and told me that they'd had an abortion. That became my experience wherever I went and it dawned on me that women knew about it, they had networks where information was available but never did they talk about it.

Because I talked about my abortion, and campaigned for ALRA, I was refused service in a shop in the village where I lived. They told me my money was tainted because I gained it from doing abortions on the kitchen table. I helped many women in the period just before the law was passed, giving them information. I can remember one whose daughter I went to the clinic with because

she felt her husband couldn't know. And then when I was in the village shopping, she crossed the road, wouldn't talk to me. I now realise they thought that being associated with me would make other people think 'She's had an abortion'.

The work was so important as women were desperate. They would try to self-induce by drinking gin, having scalding baths and moving heavy furniture around. Later when ALRA needed money for its campaigning (it was run by unpaid volunteers) I approached the doctor who performed my own abortion to ask for a donation. I found out that he had been converted to doing abortions because when he was a young doctor he had refused a woman an abortion, telling her, as was the custom at that time, "Go home, have the baby and when it arrives you will love it". And she killed herself that night. And he said he felt that he had killed her as surely as if he had taken a gun and shot her with it. And from that time on he provided this service.

After much campaigning, the 1967 Abortion Act was passed. This was a great victory and a big step forward for women. But it was not enough, even then. I always believed that the only person qualified to make a decision about a pregnancy was the woman herself. The Act means that every abortion has to be approved by two doctors, and this was the price we paid for legalising any abortions at all. The benefits for women were enormous. The numbers of women admitted to London hospitals with "septic miscarriages" dropped immediately.

I'm really proud of what I have done and what we have achieved for women. However, the fact that we still need two doctors to permit an abortion a pregnant woman herself has decided on is unbearable.

One in three women have had an abortion but they will not say they have had an abortion, making it easier for younger women to accept it. I believe this is the main achievement of the anti-abortion lobby. Over the years they've talked about 'killing your baby', 'lack of maternal instinct' and women have taken it on board. And it is still not felt to be ok to say, 'I feel alright about having had an abortion'. Women keep quiet and there is still stigma. And that was why I never heard the word mentioned and it was prevalent when I was in my teens. It is prevalent today but it is still not talked about as being really a part of adult life.

Approximately

12,000

abortions take place in
Scotland every year ^{iv}

BETH, 31 ⁶

I was being sick and things like that. Just because I've got two children already I sort of knew right away. It was my own stupidity. I left it for a wee while, and I was going ahead with the pregnancy until it sort of sank in and I thought about it more. I was just thinking about the guy that I was with and my two kids that don't live with me, but live with my mum. My kids are thirteen and fourteen. And my guy now was twenty-seven. It would've been his first kid, but he was into his drink and everything like that. And he said that it was all going to stop. But he just didn't seem interested in the whole pregnancy thing. It was like, if he had a drink in him, he was all: "aww, I'm gonnae be a dad" and blah, blah, blah. But then when he never had a drink in him, you never got two words out of him.

So, I was just thinking that it isn't going to work. So it ended up as a last minute decision. Half of me didn't want to do it, and half of me did. One minute I was keeping it, even if I had to bring it up on my own, and the next minute I wasn't, and I just could not make my mind up. It was really hard. And they were saying if I didn't hurry up and make my mind up they would need to send me to London to have the procedure because there is a lack of provision for later abortions in Scotland.

YVONNE, 17 ⁶

I wasn't keeping anything down, so I got taken up to the hospital and kept in overnight and they asked me if I was pregnant. And I was like: "I don't think I am, no". Just, I wasn't sure. And then they'd obviously taken a pregnancy test and they came back and told me that I was and I was just shocked really. And I was scared to tell my mum but I told her and she was fine. So was my dad. And, I obviously told the guy I was pregnant with. And he was just saying "well I'm gonna obviously do my bit". So I thought 'well that's fine then', and that's why I planned on keeping it. But he ended up going out and getting other lassies pregnant as well. And I thought, like, 'I can't have this baby being brought up with a dad like that, and having step-brothers and sisters all over the world'.

'When I told her I was having second thoughts she was like: "well you're doing the right thing, if that's what you want to do, for your sake".'

And I'd be stuck on my own, even though I'd have my mum and that behind me, but you need a dad as well, don't you? Because I've not had my dad in my life and it's horrible. Like, I see him now and again but he's not always been here and it's not nice. My mum was getting the hang of it, knowing she was gonna be a granny. But when I told her I was having second thoughts she was like: "well you're doing the right thing, if that's what you want to do, for your sake".

On the day it just happened so quick, because I was falling asleep and waking up with the cramp, and then falling asleep again. So by maybe about eleven, twelve-ish it was done, and then I was back home by four-ish. I was still a wee bit upset and think I was just really tired as well, and I was glad to get it over and done with.

BLANKA ⁷

I have two children, aged 5 and 2, and a settled, happy marriage. I'd toyed with the idea about having a third child after my second was born, but my husband was fairly adamant that we were done, and as my son reached 18 months, I was beginning to see life beyond nappies and sleepless nights again.

One night is all it took to result in an unplanned pregnancy. We were careful, but we stupidly never thought we'd get pregnant without actively 'trying' (as we tried for a while to conceive both our children). Anyway, I had a hunch that I was pregnant a few days before my period (having been through two pregnancies I knew what the signs were, and they were prominent immediately). I waited until I was a day late though, and I didn't tell anyone that I thought I was pregnant, until after I took a few tests.

'I'd toyed with the idea about having a third child after my second was born, but my husband was fairly adamant that we were done, and as my son reached 18 months, I was beginning to see life beyond nappies and sleepless nights again.'

I was devastated, and shocked (despite 'knowing') – seeing those two blue lines was a metaphorical slap round the face. I told my husband that afternoon, and he was as gutted as me. No-one else knew. I didn't want the judgement, or any 'advice' from others. We spent a day umming and ahing – and I made the final decision. He said he would deal with the situation, and get on with life either way, but it was clear that he was struggling with the idea of becoming a dad again, as I was struggling with even being pregnant.

Some of our issues that we couldn't resolve were: 'How can we compromise our children's lives?' – we both work full time, and work hard to provide a good quality of life for our kids. They would lose out on so much, if we had another child. They would lose out on time with us, they would not be able to have opportunities I'd want them to have, we wouldn't be able to put three through university - and you can't deny one if he/she wanted to go. Also, my husband is an older parent. I won't go into the detail, but he came to fatherhood in his forties, and has really embraced it. He's a fantastic father and does his share of childcare, while I'm at work. But – it's not fair to expect someone in their mid-sixties to manage a stropky teenager, or to continue working because we have an extra mouth to feed.

The appointment on the day was very efficient. My initial consultation with the nurse involved a scan, a quick iron blood test, and blood pressure. The nurse was lovely, he did make me chuckle – he made me feel at ease! We discussed pain relief/ sedation. He encouraged me to have some, but after some more indecision, I stuck to my guns and decided on nothing (except some ibuprofen that I brought with me), no sedation, definitely no general anaesthesia.

I then went to another waiting room to wait my turn for treatment. My name was called, and I had to undress from the waist down in a private changing room. Two nurses then collected me and brought me to the theatre and helped me onto the stirrups and bed, and once I was in the correct position, the consultant (a lady) did the necessary procedure. Straight into it, no messing about.

I have to say – it wasn't a nice experience, but it wasn't horrendous. It was over really quickly – within 5 minutes, and throughout, the two nurses were squeezing my hand, they made lots of small talk, and I breathed through the worst of the pressure. Once it was over, I walked (with a little help from one of the nurses) to the recuperation area and laid on a recliner, partaking in a cuppa, some paracetamol and some (quite a lot of) biscuits. I did get a bit light headed once I sat down, but there are fans by each recliner so I turned that on for ten minutes.

I spent the rest of the day relaxing with my children and husband, and being thankful that I had the option to give myself, husband and my children a choice for a better life.

YASMIN, 22 ¹

I've always been quite good with being on the pill, but I stopped taking it for a while because I have really bad water retention in my ankles and in my hands so I wanted to see if the pill was the cause. I ended up getting pregnant instead of losing my water retention. It was very difficult to make the decision; my boyfriend wanted me to keep it. It was almost as though I wish it had been an ectopic pregnancy or something like that, just so the choice wouldn't be mine to make.

I chose to terminate the pregnancy because in the end I think you should do what is right for you. The baby's not harmed, I'm not harmed, and I don't think anyone has been hurt from it. I think it's better to make that decision than for maybe three people to suffer and struggle in the world. Because I would be struggling and the baby wouldn't be having a good life as I wouldn't be able to provide for it well.

‘I think it's better to make that decision than for maybe three people to suffer and struggle in the world.’

LAURA, 38 ⁸

I'm now 38, I'm a paediatric sister on a high-dependency unit. I had two abortions at 17 and 18 years old, they were both with the same partner, and the relationship ended after the second abortion. I now have a three-year-old daughter who I had wanted for several years – my husband and I had three attempts at IVF and we are very lucky. I have never regretted having the abortions. I still feel guilty but I know that I made the right decision 21 years ago. I do think about how old they would be from time to time, and they are in my thoughts at times.

SIMONE ⁹

My partner and I went for our 20 week scan. It was our first child and we were incredibly excited. The sonographer had immediate concerns. After a further scan, the Consultant told us our son had multiple fetal abnormalities. His brain had not developed fully and his skeleton was locked into, ironically, the fetal position and he couldn't move. I asked if it was a viable pregnancy. It was. But our son would be severely affected by his lack of brain and skeletal development.

I work with children and adults who have severe and complex medical needs. Each of them is a unique individual who deserves to be part of a society that I will move mountains to ensure their inclusion and quality of life. That's what drives me to get out of bed each morning. However on hearing and seeing my son's "abnormalities" (I hate that word), we immediately knew our decision. And it shocked me in all honesty. I knew in my bones that his body and brain were not well enough for the world and I didn't want him living a life of uncertainty, pain, and frustration. We knew that we wanted to end the pregnancy.

What a horrific thought and yet we knew this was the most loving decision for our son. I know that some people do not believe in abortion at all. They think it's selfish. But let me be very clear. I want my son. I am excellently placed to care for a child with complex medical needs. But at NO POINT did my needs come into the decision to have a termination for medical reasons. Our only thought was our son. Him and him alone. His life, his rights, his experience.

At his post mortem we found out that he had a condition called triploidy. Had I carried him to full term, he would have continued to grow and develop into a body which couldn't move. And most likely I either would have miscarried in my 3rd trimester or he would have passed away shortly after his birth. We could not have brought our son into the world, to let him experience death. We have taken the pain, in order that he may have known only love, warmth and comfort.

I am grateful for the Abortion Act, to allow us as his mum and dad, to act in his best interests. We are both very grateful for the staff at our hospital, for their faultless compassion and care that we

experienced. I'm very grateful for ARC (Antenatal Results and Choices) and the work they do to ensure it is recognised and understood that terminations for medical reasons, as awful as some people may feel they are, have a very relevant and necessary place in today's society.

I never thought I would be a woman who said "I have had an abortion". But I am proud that we able to make the decision. (I will never say that out loud to anybody.) Horrified, heartbroken yet proud that we had the strength to act in our son's best interests. We feel it is important to share our story, as it is a taboo subject, but hundreds of families are affected each year. I wish for a society open minded enough to hear these stories, without judgement.

'I wish for a society open minded enough to hear these stories, without judgement.'

LOTTIE ³

1988. Not the typical abortion scenario of the single girl in a pickle: I was married with a one-year-old, and that year had been hard work.

I'd been on a low-dose pill while I was feeding him, and my GP omitted to mention that when I switched pills I wouldn't be covered for a month. My understanding husband said it was my decision - we hadn't planned it, and I couldn't face it. I spent 36 hours in the clinic.

I'd love to say that all the staff were terrific, but I don't remember much of it; I do know that it was the most wonderful place where we could all talk freely for the first time in weeks, sharing our decisions and our lives. Yes, I have sometimes wondered what might have been, and how things would have turned out. But I've never felt guilty or ashamed, and I will always be grateful. Thank you.

DITA ⁷

My newborn was not even 4 months old when I found out I was almost 9 weeks pregnant again. Although having a child is a blessing as many would argue, I just knew how hard it would be to have another baby so soon. I needed to recover from the first pregnancy and enjoy time with my newborn as well as be ready both mentally and physically before having another one- so I decided to give the clinic a call. I didn't quite know what to expect but honestly from the word go I couldn't have been more pleasantly surprised. I'm not one to write reviews etc. but felt I had to share my experience so other ladies out there don't feel the pressures of the stigma attached to abortions. We all have our reasons.

‘Although having a child is a blessing as many would argue, I just knew how hard it would be to have another baby so soon.’

Firstly, the woman on the phone was ever so polite and caring, as if it was more than just a job to her and I genuinely felt looked after. The consultation over the phone not only saved me time from going in but also made me realise I won't be judged by the staff there, something I was afraid of. I was given an appointment for the following week and was greeted in a warm manner yet so professional in the way it was organised, from going into reception one person at a time for privacy issues, to getting changed, wrist band with my name on it, and observing the pretty decor, it didn't feel like a gloomy hospital.

Everything felt smooth and calm therefore I felt smooth and calm at ease a bit more if that makes sense. After being told about the procedures, I was swiftly seen too and got changed. I had the procedure, relaxed for a bit with a coffee and biscuits and even got called a taxi home by the lovely receptionist. I was home within a few hours of entering the clinic. I wasn't feeling anything how I initially thought I would've felt, but instead I was happy and normal, and I genuinely believe it's due to the friendly and professionalism of the staff and atmosphere.

MORE

THAN

50%

of women in England and
Wales who have an abortion
are already mothers ⁱⁱⁱ

SERENA ³

The man I was going out with was unbeknown to me a compulsive liar and had plans to get me pregnant so he could move into my home and make me marry him. He was superficially charming but under it all just wanted a woman to give him a home as he didn't enjoy working and was controlling and manipulative. I have no doubt he would have become violent once into my home. I already had an eight year old child from my first marriage. He said he was completely infertile following an accident so it was a massive "surprise" when I became pregnant. By this time I had an inkling all was not well so while he was out I went through his computer and the room he was renting. I found loads of letters and photos from women, naked and otherwise whom he was also dating at the same time as me and dating site applications. I also found more sinister things and was genuinely concerned for me and my child's well-being.

I decided instantly to get an abortion, I was not going to be attached to this man in any way or let him have any hold over me. I saw my doctor who was neither sympathetic nor keen and I had to threaten suicide to get him to refer me for an NHS abortion, I couldn't afford to go private. That was the worst part of it all was being judged and dragged over moral hot coals by a medical professional, he made me feel like dirt, however I got my way and was referred.

'It was not my fault and
I did what had to be done.'

On the day I went along, it all went well, I had no pain, nothing untoward happened, I rested, I went home. All I felt on the day and for a long time afterwards was the most overwhelming relief that I was free.

I broke up with this man straight away and never saw him again. I have never regretted it for one minute, to have had this baby would have tied me legally for years and probably for life to a despicable man and I didn't need that. Neither did my child. I am

only glad that I had that option, I didn't feel guilt. It was not my fault and I did what had to be done. I didn't see it as a child but as a group of unformed cells.

I waited for the grief to strike. It didn't. It did not change the love I had for the child I kept. Self-preservation was more important. This was 20 years ago and I hope medical professional attitudes have changed but I believe it should always be the mother's choice to decide whether they want a child or not.

SASHA, 22 ⁴

I first realised I might be pregnant at the age of 22 during a staff meeting when I suddenly had to run to the bathroom to vomit. It was awful and embarrassing as this was the second week of my new job, which was with an incredible company any newbie in my sector would have dreamed of working with.

I was in a relationship which was only 9 months old. We'd fallen for each other very quickly and very hard and had rushed to get a flat together so I could work. At that time, despite a lot of effort, he had not been able to find any work yet. He was really struggling with that. And our finances were taking hits, so much so that both of us were relying on our parents to help us out. We had no savings and were living payday to payday. But we were very happy and knew that everyone struggles out of uni - so what? We knew we had to pay our dues and loved being on our own in a great city.

But after vomiting at work I knew something was not right, as I also had missed my period. It was usually late, but not this much. I took a pregnancy test as soon as possible and of course it was positive. We had been using condoms, but to no use.

This was not a difficult or emotional decision or experience. Since we weren't registered with a GP yet (we had been in our new flat for a week) we made an appointment at a sexual health clinic. The NHS nurses were amazing. The doctor who saw me listened to my reasons and treated us both as adults capable of understanding the choices before us. I have never felt so happy. I have never regretted it.

‘In the end, despite feeling angry with myself for getting pregnant, I knew that the choice to have an abortion was mine to make. I feel like the choice was the right one for myself and for my child.’

CARLY, 24 ¹

When I found out I was pregnant the first time, I felt like a bit of a slapper. I mean it's not difficult - contraception is free. It's not difficult to come by; there are loads of places where you can get contraception. I used to judge other girls who would get pregnant and have babies at 18, and then there I was, in the same boat. I had been on the pill since I was really young because of problems with my periods, but for about six months before I got pregnant the first time I went through a bit of a naughty rebellious phase, and I just stopped taking it. That was why I got pregnant. The guy I was involved with at the time was really nasty about the whole situation — he just turned up at my door with £500 and said 'Just go private. Get it sorted.' So I decided to terminate. It wasn't just because of him, it was definitely my own decision; I knew I was too young.

‘It wasn't just because of him,
it was definitely my own decision;
I knew I was too young.’

After this I got a new boyfriend who I was with for the best part of 5 years. We decided to have a child, so I got pregnant and kept the baby. I was on lots of different types of the pill for most of this time; I had to keep changing because they kept disagreeing with me. After that relationship ended I stopped taking anything because I wasn't thinking about being sexually active with anyone. I had a reconciliation with my ex and that was how I got pregnant again. Deciding to have an abortion was easier the second time, so I booked in for one at the clinic. However about five days before I went to the clinic I started bleeding so by the time I got there they actually said I'd miscarried.

Looking back I can see that the abortions were an easy choice to make, it was just a difficult time. I feel that I have learnt my lesson and am so much more careful about using contraception now. In the end, despite feeling angry with myself for getting pregnant, I knew that the choice to have an abortion was mine to make. I feel like the choice was the right one for myself and for my child.

STORIES FROM
NORTHERN IRELAND

THE 1967 ABORTION ACT DOES
NOT APPLY TO NORTHERN IRELAND

‘In Northern Ireland an average
of 37 NHS abortions a year are
carried out, and about

1000

women travel to England for an
abortion. Unknown numbers order
the abortion pill illegally
online from providers such as
Women on Web and *Women Help
Women* and self-abort at home -
risking life imprisonment’^v

My husband and I got married in September, 2012. We were excited to start our own family. I have always loved children and couldn't wait to have kids of my own, I wanted a brood! I researched and read everything I could get my hands on in order to prepare for getting pregnant and having a healthy pregnancy. I started taking prenatal vitamins and convinced my husband to do so as well. I was determined to do everything right. I became pregnant 12 months later. When I first found out my heart felt like it could have burst with happiness. We were both so excited at the prospect of being parents.

Everything progressed well until the 20-week scan, when we were told that it appeared that the baby had a condition that was likely to be fatal. I was in disbelief and felt all my hopes and dreams come crashing down around me. I had thousands of thoughts whizzing through my head but couldn't focus on anything. All I could hear was the word 'fatal'. We were told that termination of pregnancy was illegal in Northern Ireland and that we would have to continue with the pregnancy to term. We were referred to another hospital for a second opinion.

We had to wait 11 days for the second appointment; we just focused on getting from one day to the next and hoped that the day would come round quickly. The specialist stated that the baby was presenting a lethal type of dysplasia. I asked him if there was any hope that the baby would survive and he replied it was unlikely. Any hope that I had managed to pull together was shattered. We were asked to return two weeks later for another scan when it was confirmed that the condition would be fatal.

The doctor then said that termination of the pregnancy would be a possibility. I was surprised at this because I had thought that termination of pregnancy for any reason was illegal in Northern Ireland. She assured me that termination would be an option for us. She made an appointment at our local hospital with us for the next day to discuss our next steps with the hospital that would be continuing my care.

During the drive home my mind was racing. We had been given some hope that we could end this ordeal and bring forward the inevitable death of our baby and start the grieving process properly.

We read and studied everything we could find about termination of pregnancy in the context of Northern Ireland. I read about the law as it stands, the proposed amendments, statistics on how many abortions were carried out in Northern Irish hospitals between 2012/2013 and any news articles I could find. We discussed and debated our options at length and decided that the best option for us would be to have a termination.

However the doctor we saw at our local hospital refused to consider a termination. She denied that terminations happened in Northern Ireland. I questioned this doctor about the law. I said that the law stated that if there was a significant threat to the mother's mental health a termination would be permitted, she said she had already spoken to a psychiatrist and that she wouldn't sign off for a termination. I was really shocked that they made that assessment without even meeting me.

The next few days were a blur. I did my best to get my head around everything that had happened over the previous 4 weeks and how the remainder of my pregnancy would pan out. I tried to come to terms with the fact that I would be stuck in this nightmare for the foreseeable future. I tried to go about my daily life. Some days were better than others. Some days I was able to get out and about, buy groceries, go for coffee with friends and family. On other days I couldn't bear to leave the house.

My life continued like that until I was 34 weeks pregnant, when my waters broke. The feeling of relief I had was massive. I also had an overwhelming feeling of calm. I phoned the maternity unit and explained that I thought my waters had broken and I was told to come in to be assessed. I also explained that we knew our daughter was not going to survive so this more than likely meant that her heart had stopped. When we went into hospital they did a scan and confirmed that the heart had stopped. I was calm, just so relieved that the end of this nightmare was in sight. My daughter Katy was delivered by 9p.m that night.

When I look back over my life now it has been split into 2 sections: before the 20-week scan and after. My naivety has been stolen from me. I can't take anything for granted anymore. I can't 'get back to normal' as so many people flippantly say I should do because I no longer know what normal is. I won't ever 'get over

it' either. All I can try to do is take what has happened and learn to live with it. I am terrified of being pregnant in the future. Not only will I have the 'normal' worries that many women do in early pregnancy, I am already worrying about what I would be forced to endure if any future babies are diagnosed with a condition that is incompatible with life if the law remains unchanged.

It was clear to me that the current legal framework takes no account of the circumstances that we found ourselves in. In the normal course of events, an abortion is not something that would have occurred to me. However, the serious condition that my daughter suffered from thrust us into a situation that no one could predict. My daughter was bound to die before, or close to, her birth. If she had survived, even for a short period, she may have suffered. In fact, she died before her birth.

This tragic situation was compounded for me by the apparent inability of the medical profession to offer me a termination even in these circumstances. If this had been available, I believe, it would have diminished our suffering. Being forced to continue with this pregnancy added to the tragedy. We were not able to grieve for our daughter even at the time of her actual death or to start to deal with our emotions. This was further compounded by the fact that the medical professionals could not even agree amongst themselves whether a termination was permitted.

GEMMA ¹³

I spent Christmas Day in casualty with my two children. My husband had beaten me to a pulp and had stomped so hard on me that his boot marks were visible on my chest and back. When my eldest child tried to intervene, he took off his belt and beat both children, leaving black and blue welts all down their little bodies from the back of their necks down to their ankles. He had repeatedly raped me. Six weeks later when I discovered I was pregnant I could not continue with the pregnancy. Knowing my husband would carry out his threats to kill me if he found out, I went to my GP who told me that abortion was illegal in Northern Ireland and refused to help. I had to contact the Abortion Support Network (ASN) in secret but at last I had found someone who would help me.

ELLEN (NOW 54) ¹¹

I was 19 when I became pregnant for the first time. I was newly married and very happy about it. My mother wasn't, she was quite insistent that I was too young, she pushed hard that I should get an abortion. This was not an easy thing to arrange back then in Northern Ireland. She was really adamant. I stood my ground and continued with the pregnancy. Some years later the marriage broke up and I found myself pregnant at the age of 27, at the start of a new relationship. It was completely the wrong time, we were just getting to know each other, we had nowhere to live.

I knew pretty much straightaway that I wanted an abortion, my partner agreed. I went to see a woman in another part of town who helped us make the arrangements to travel, these were in the days before the internet, we really relied on that woman helping us. I didn't tell my mum until the day I travelled, my partner came with me.

‘This is a health issue, and we should have proper access.’

The procedure itself was straightforward. I recovered well and we travelled home the next day. A few days later however I was haemorrhaging a lot, I went to the local hospital. I explained I had had an abortion the previous week. The staff were horrible to me, just so horrible, they made me feel like shit. I have never forgotten that.

I later went on to marry my partner and we had two kids. We are still together. My kids are all grown up now. One of my daughters thought she was pregnant recently, and she did not want to be. When I suggested she might consider getting an abortion she was horrified and it made me think where did that come from that hostility, not from how she was brought up. I explained I had an abortion and she began to see another perspective on it.

I find it really sad that still in Northern Ireland there is still so much stigma about abortion, still so much silence. Apart from my daughters and best friend I have never spoken about abortion. Why is that? Why are we stuck with this stigma? This is a health issue, and we should have proper access.

ONE
IN
FOUR

pregnancies worldwide
end in abortion ^{vi}

In 2004 I was seven years into an abusive, controlling and often violent twelve year relationship. I met a man who showed me a bit of kindness and wanted to 'save' me from my situation. After a couple of months I ended up having unplanned sex with this man, once, only once. I became pregnant and my life literally came crashing in on top of me. I had three young daughters, I'd had four miscarriages and my partner had had a vasectomy after my youngest daughter. I was absolutely certain that I could not bring another child into the situation I was in, I carefully considered all options including splitting up with my partner but no matter what scenario I imagined myself in I knew I could not have and did not want another child.

I was very lucky to have a cousin living in England who offered to lend me the money for an abortion. I would repay her afterwards and she accepted that it would have to be small amounts as and when I could afford it without my partner noticing. I phoned the clinic and made all the arrangements with them. I made my childcare arrangements and my travel arrangements. I told only one other person other than my cousin, my best friend and neighbour here in Belfast.

I went to England, my cousin collected me from the airport, I stayed with her, she accompanied me to the clinic, fought the protesters outside with me to gain access to the clinic and took me back to the airport the following day. I don't know what I would have done without my cousin. I was just so relieved that it was all over that it was all behind me and I carried on with my life, looking after my daughters and trying to survive each day with my partner.

A few months later I had a fall-out with my best friend, just a silly fall-out that friends sometimes have. Then at 8.30am on a Sunday morning in the cul-de-sac we lived in, my best friend banged and banged on my door and when I answered the door and in front of neighbours who had come to their doors to see what the commotion was, my best friend shouted and screamed about my abortion. I was devastated. I couldn't even respond. A neighbour came straight over to me, took me by the hand and walked me to her home. She told me that everyone already knew because my best friend had been telling everyone even when I was in England. She told me that what my best friend had just done was disgusting. She made

me feel supported. I then had to sit down with my three daughters and explain to them what an abortion was and what I had done.

My eldest daughter cried because I had had to keep it to myself and she felt sad for me. My partner, who came and went as he pleased and quite often wouldn't be home over the weekend, didn't find out until a couple of days later. He left me then and for a few weeks had another reason to be nasty and vindictive towards me and more controlling with money. Those few weeks were extremely hard and at times I wondered if having an abortion was worth it for the situation I was in now. My partner came back home. Financially I was in a slightly better position but he took every opportunity to bring up my abortion.

I walked on eggshells worrying if abortion would be mentioned on TV, in the news, talked about by someone while he was at work. Where I lived though it was a different matter. Everyone had heard about what happened that Sunday morning. People would stop me in the street, in the local shop, people I didn't even know very well to tell me what had happened to me was wrong and they hoped I was ok. I really felt supported.

I finally split up with my partner in 2010, a couple of years after moving to a different area. I was in a much better place, I was stronger than I had been for many years. I started being more open about my abortion because there was no one to stop me speaking about it and the more I spoke about it the stronger I became and the better I felt about myself.

It's easy to use the fact that a woman has had an abortion against her because it's all done in secrecy and with shame. That's why there's such stigma attached to abortion but as soon as you're open and honest about it people surprise you. They support you - their sister, their daughter, their aunt, their mother had had an abortion. You're not as alone in that situation as you thought you were. Now I volunteer for Alliance For Choice, I talk to everyone about abortion, about my abortion. I feel stronger than ever, my daughters are very proud of me, they have grown into beautiful strong women who make me very proud. I was luckier than most women but still I never ever want another woman to have my experience, not even a woman I don't know or don't like. I want every single woman to have access to free, safe, legal abortion services should she need it and choose it, no matter her reason or situation. My so-called best friend doesn't know it but she actually did me a favour that Sunday morning.

The estimated annual number of
abortions worldwide is about

56

MILLION

A

YEAR

I had been on the pill since after the birth of my sixth child. We had already decided not to have any more children and my husband was considering a vasectomy when I became pregnant again. He had just become unemployed. Our youngest was 10 months old and we were really struggling financially. We discussed our options and agreed we could not afford to have another child. I went to my GP who told me that abortion was illegal in Northern Ireland so I could not have one.

‘Our youngest was 10 months old and we were really struggling financially. We discussed our options and agreed we could not afford to have another child.’

The GP did not give me any information or offer to refer me to another doctor. He said he would book me into maternity services. I was stunned. We looked on the internet and rang a clinic in England. We were told the procedure would cost £600 and we would have to pay for our own flights and accommodation on top of that. When we checked flights the cost went up to over £1000. There was no way we could afford that. Even if I travelled by myself we could still not afford it. The most we could scrape together was £200. We did not know what to do, so we rang the clinic again and explained our circumstances. Then the clinic suggested we contact a support organisation which provided some support, but we still had to wait another two weeks and sell some items of furniture and some of our children’s toys to get the rest of the money.

I travelled alone to England and came back the same day contrary to the advice of the doctor at the clinic because I couldn’t afford the overnight stay. I had wanted to have my abortion in Northern Ireland, with my husband at my side, in a local hospital, without having to sell my children’s toys to pay for the operation.

I needed an abortion. I didn't want an abortion – I needed one. I have never met a woman yet who has had an abortion and 'wanted' one. Yes my circumstances were complicated, but then again for a woman who chooses to have an abortion the circumstances are always complicated, aren't they? If they aren't complex before she chooses, then the stigma, shame, secrecy and process of accessing an abortion, whether in the North or South of Ireland, will certainly complicate that decision for her.

When I sought advice on my options, the counsellor was extremely supportive and well informed. She wasn't coercive and didn't try to influence me in any way. She presented the facts, clarified the legalities and explained the costs. When I left the counsellor that day, I encountered the so-named 'pro-life protestors' for the first time. I was around 40 years old when I chose to have an abortion. As I left, one woman blocked my path and attempted to give me leaflets. I declined, at which point she told me that a woman of 'my age' was more at risk of getting breast cancer if I went ahead with an abortion.

I knew their claims were nonsense, but afterwards I wondered what other stories they had and did they have a range of tales for different 'types' of women? Did they take one good look at a woman and decide 'Ok she's forty, we'll use the breast cancer one'. Did they take a good look at another that day and decide 'Ok this one is young and vulnerable, we'll use the 'you'll regret this for the rest of your life one'. Did they look at the woman who was with her mother that day and say 'This is your grandchild your daughter is killing'. Having spoken to women who have accessed abortions, I stopped wondering – that's exactly what they do and it isn't protesting at all. It's clever, it's manipulative and it is interfering with a woman and her bodily autonomy. It is abuse.

I travelled to Manchester for my abortion a short while later and was accompanied by my partner. I lied to my employer. I planned my abortion for the Friday so I didn't have to take two days off work and could use the weekend to recover. I had a routine surgical abortion under general anaesthetic and the staff at the clinic were professional, caring and understanding. It was as straightforward as it could be and after a number of hours, it was done and I was out in good time to get the flight home. Throughout the day, I had noticed a woman with Northern Irish accent and another with Southern Irish accent and surmised they had made the journey in the same circumstances.

I travelled back to the airport and had to wait quite a few hours for the flight home. Not long after, I began to feel ill. The painkillers hadn't worn off, but I suspected that I might be reacting to the anaesthetic, as it was something that had happened in the past with a routine medical procedure. It was, and within a short space of time, I was vomiting profusely, had a high temperature and eventually fainted. For the next four hours, I sat in one of the airport cafes beside a bathroom, going between the two and trying not to draw attention to myself. One of the women I had seen earlier in the clinic came into the café and I saw her again on the flight home. We didn't exchange smiles or friendly glances as you might do in other circumstances, but we both knew the other had had an abortion that day and it was best forgotten.

The next day, I woke up and felt better physically, but was incredibly angry and that anger has never left me. I wasn't angry about the abortion, I wasn't angry about being unexpectedly ill – that's just one of those things and whilst unlikely, it happens. I was angry about what I was forced to go through to access an abortion. An unnecessarily complex, expensive process of secrecy, judgement and humiliation, all of which was compounded by the awful journey and being forced to travel. One where, following a surgical procedure I couldn't even go back to my own house without waiting for hours before boarding a plane, all the while trying not to mention the discomfort and pain I was in. But that's the thing – we don't mention it. It's an abortion. I thought about all the women who travel on their own and are forced to stay in hotels and hostels overnight. I counted myself lucky that at least I was accompanied and that I got home eventually.

A week or two later I listened to a male relative who travelled to England for a routine operation because he couldn't access the service here. The NHS paid for surgery, paid for his travel and three night's accommodation in a hotel for recovery. That was right, proper and the humane thing to do. I thought of the thousands of women who have or who will travel to England and elsewhere every year to access abortion and how their experience is so very different. Most of those women don't want to tell their story, they don't want to get on a flight, they don't want to stay in cheap hotels or hostels, they don't want to lie to their employers and their families, they don't want to complain and they don't want to talk about their pain or discomfort. They want to be able to access abortion in Ireland without the need to travel. Why is that so much to ask?

Stories from:

1. Constructed from an interview given in an Open University research project. oro.open.ac.uk/45139/1/MSI_quali-report_10-15_final_email.pdf A pseudonym has been used.
2. Extracted from an interview for a study funded by the Chief Scientist Office for Scotland, carried out by the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, University of Edinburgh. A pseudonym has been used.
3. Contribution to BPAS "Share Your Stories" project. A pseudonym has been used.
4. Written by the participant as part of an Open University and British Pregnancy Advisory Service (bpas) Anywoman story collection project. A pseudonym has been used.
5. Constructed from an interview given as part of an oral history project undertaken by the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare in partnership with University College London. These participants have given permission for their real names to be used.
6. Extracted from an interview for a study funded by the Scottish Government, carried out by the MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow. A pseudonym has been used.
7. www.maristopes.org.uk/women/abortion/abortion-facts/stories-matter
8. www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-38775641
9. Story donated via Antenatal Results and Choices (ARC). www.arc-uk.org/for-parents/arc-forum A pseudonym has been used.
10. Story collected at a My Body My Life event. Karen has given permission for her real name to be used.
11. This story has been collected by Ulster University. A pseudonym has been used.
12. This story has been constructed by Ulster University from Ashleigh's legal affidavit. Ashleigh has given her permission for the story to be used and for her real name to be used.
13. www.alliance4choice.com/trust-women-campaign/#/womens-stories-1/

Stats from:

- i. Stone N and Ingham R (2011) Who presents more than once? Repeat abortion among women in Britain, *J Fam Plann Reprod Health Care* 2011;37:209-215.
- ii. Wellings, K. et al (2013) The prevalence of unplanned pregnancy and associated factors in Britain: findings from the third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-3) *Lancet*; 382: 1807–16
- iii. www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/570040/Updated_Abortion_Statistics_2015.pdf
- iv. www.isdsotland.org/Health-Topics/Sexual-Health/Abortions/
- v. Bloomer, F. and O'Dowd, K. (2014) 'Restricted access to abortion in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland: exploring abortion tourism and barriers to legal reform'. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 16 (4). pp. 366-380.
- vi. www.guttmacher.org/sites/default/files/factsheet/fb_jaw.pdf

Abortion: the law

In most parts of the UK, most women are able to access an abortion if they need one. But, in law, it is still technically a criminal offence to seek or perform an abortion, under the 1861 Offences Against the Persons Act (OAPA) - passed at a time when women did not have the right to vote, let alone become an MP. The 1967 Abortion Act outlined exceptions to this law, allowing women to have a legal abortion in certain circumstances.

However, the 1967 Abortion Act never applied in Northern Ireland, where it is virtually impossible to access a legal abortion, and where the OAPA is used to prosecute women who end a pregnancy.

Even in England Wales and Scotland, where the 1967 Abortion Act applies, women cannot decide for themselves, as it is still a criminal offence to have an abortion without the permission of two doctors.

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This story collection has been selected and edited by Lesley Hoggart, Victoria Newton, Maria Lapavitsas, Carrie Purcell, Fiona Bloomer, Jayne Kavanagh, Clare Murphy, Olivia Marshall and Elektra Lapavitsas. For more stories please visit our website: mybody-mylife.org.

If you would like to contribute your story and help break the silence surrounding abortion please visit our website: mybody-mylife.org.