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Ireland

Is abortion a workplace issue?

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On 25 May, the long-awaited and campaigned-for referendum on changing Ireland's very restrictive abortion law – encapsulated in the 8th amendment to the constitution – will finally be held. The very broad-based Trade Union Campaign to Repeal the 8th launched a tabloid campaign newspaper on 1 May. You can see the publication [Yes Repeal here](#).

Upon posing the question 'is abortion a workplace issue?' the response is usually one of a puzzlement – the reactions include 'why would it be', 'it's not something I have ever thought of', writes Dr Fiona Bloomer, Ulster University, author of *Abortion as a Trade Union Issue*.

A ground-breaking study, funded by UNITE the Union, Unison, Mandate Trade Union, the CWU Ireland and the GMB set out to explore if abortion was indeed a workplace issue. The study, led by these unions and activist groups the Trade Union Campaign to Repeal the 8th and Alliance for Choice, also sought to gather union members' views on legislative reform in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Over 3000 trade union members took part in the study, which was carried out by a team of researchers at Ulster University. Participants indicated broad support for legal reform, with 80% supporting the view that women's health should be the priority in any legal reform. The vast majority, 87%, believed that a woman who had an abortion should not be criminalised.

Of those surveyed, 20% had direct experience of abortion as workplace issue. This included cases such as women unable to get time off due to precarious employment, stigma in the workplace, and a lack of support from employers.

"...my case was very complicated due to fatal foetal abnormality...I just told management I lost my baby when I was put under a lot of pressure to return to work...their response was what I expected. They told me they would get help and support for me but nobody to this day ever contacted me."

An online discussion forum that formed part of the study allowed participants to discuss their views and share their experiences. Hostile views on abortion were expressed by some participants, however after engaging with those with direct experience, changes were evident.

"Personally...although I abhor abortion itself, I think the woman worker is entitled to full union protection after she has finished her deed. There is no point in compounding a difficult scenario."

This perspective, highlights how recognition that abortion was a workplace issue led to the conclusion that unions had a role to play in providing policies to support workers who have taken the decision to have an abortion.

The study, the first of its kind in the world, provides clear evidence that unions can play a pivotal role in campaigning for reform and can lead the way in supporting those directly affected.

PS:

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