

Ireland to hold abortion referendum in May

January 30 2018

Ireland will hold a referendum at the end of May on liberalising its restrictive abortion laws, a highly sensitive issue in the traditionally devoutly Catholic country.

Leo Varadkar, who as the country's youngest ever prime minister is regarded as relatively liberal on social issues, made the announcement late Monday, accepting it would be a difficult decision for Irish voters.

"This is a decision about whether we want to continue to stigmatise and criminalise our sisters, our co-workers, and our friends," he told a press conference in Dublin.

The [referendum](#) will ask voters if they want to keep the constitutional restriction on abortion or repeal it and allow the Irish parliament to legislate on the issue.

The plebiscite would come three years after a referendum in which Ireland voted by a landslide to legalise same-sex marriage—a seismic change in Ireland, where the Church has historically been a powerful force.

It would also take place shortly before Pope Francis visits the island of Ireland in August.

"This evening, the cabinet gave formal approval to the holding of a referendum on abortion, which will be held at the end of May," said Varadkar, who is also the country's first openly gay prime minister.

Advocating a Yes vote, Varadkar said he believed the time had come for the public to make a decision on some of Europe's toughest laws on pregnancy termination.

'Personal, private issue'

Abortion has always been illegal in Ireland and in 1983 an eighth amendment was added to the constitution after a referendum, giving equal rights to the life of the unborn child and the mother.

The law was changed three decades later to allow terminations when the mother's life is at risk, following public outrage at the death of a [pregnant woman](#) in 2012 who was refused an abortion.

The referendum would ask voters whether they wanted to repeal the eighth amendment and allow parliament to legislate on abortion. Ireland's constitution can only be amended by a plebiscite.

Varadkar said debates and votes on a referendum bill would be held in the lower and upper houses of parliament in the coming months, after which a precise referendum date could be set.

The Irish Times newspaper said its research in recent weeks found comfortable majorities in both houses in favour of a referendum.

An Ipsos/MRBI survey for the same newspaper found 56 per cent in favour of access to abortion up to 12 weeks and 29 per cent against.

The prime minister said if people voted to repeal the eighth amendment, his government would then table draft laws that would allow for unrestricted abortion up to 12 weeks into pregnancy.

In Britain, terminations are legally allowed up until 24 weeks or at any

time during pregnancy if the mother's health is at risk or if the child would be born with a severe disability.

"I know this will be a difficult decision for the Irish people to make," said Varadkar, who leads the centre-right Fine Gael party in a minority government.

"It is a very personal and private issue and for most of us, it's not a black and white issue; it's one that is grey. A balance between the rights of a pregnant woman and the foetus or unborn.

"And it's a matter for people to make their own decision, based on the evidence they hear, compassion and empathy."

Abortion abroad, internet pills

Varadkar, a former medical doctor and health minister, said abortion options for women in Ireland were "unsafe, unregulated and unlawful".

Thousands of Irish women currently travel abroad for abortions every year, mainly to Britain, while around two thousand others use medical abortion pills bought online.

"The saddest and loneliest journey is made by Irish women who travel to foreign countries to end their pregnancies. That doesn't have to happen," said Varadkar.

"We cannot continue to export our problems and import our solutions."

Minister for Children Katherine Zappone told the press conference: "I hope we will live in an Ireland someday soon where [abortion](#) is safe, legal and rare."

Ireland's May 2015 referendum in favour of gay marriage showed how the country had dramatically changed, confirming its emergence from the shadow of the traditionally powerful Catholic Church.

Although the majority of Irish people still identify themselves as Catholic, the Church's influence has waned in recent years amid growing secularisation and after a wave of clerical child sex abuse scandals.

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Citation: Ireland to hold abortion referendum in May (2018, January 30) retrieved 14 July 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-01-ireland-abortion-referendum.html>

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