

June 6, 2017

Dear Mr. Varadkar,

Congratulations on your recent election as leader of Fine Gael.

I write on behalf of Global Doctors for Choice (GDC), an international network of physicians from a range of specialties committed to improving women's reproductive health and rights. GDC is committed to the provision of high-quality medical care grounded in science and to the defense of human rights. We strive to protect and expand access to comprehensive reproductive health care through advocacy for evidence-based policy and medical research.

As you will be keenly aware, your new role comes with the challenge of taking immediate action on the Citizens' Assembly's recommendations on abortion legislation. GDC fully supports the Assembly's recommendations, and we would like to outline why they are so necessary.

The Eighth Amendment affects all aspects of obstetric care in this country. Since it is a constant barrier to women's equal rights, its removal will be a huge step forward for the rights of women, girls, and pregnant people in Ireland. On April 23rd, following several months of consultation from experts, service providers, service users, and rights holders, the members of the Citizens' Assembly voted overwhelmingly for choice and change. The members have voted not to put grounds for abortion access in the Constitution, and have made very clear recommendations as to the type of access they expect to see introduced.

We are asking you, if you become Ireland's new Taoiseach, to make sure the newly established Oireachtas committee recognizes the will of the Assembly's members. In good faith, the Citizens' Assembly voted in favor of abortion access with no restrictions as to reasons (with the vote split between up to 12 weeks and up to 22 weeks of pregnancy). Additionally, they voted for abortion access if the health (both physical and mental) of a pregnant person is at risk, if they have received a diagnosis of foetal impairment, and on socio-economic grounds.

The current law, the Protection of Life during Pregnancy Act (PLDPA), only allows abortion in extremely restrictive circumstances – it is not fit for purpose – and a new legislative model that follows the same pattern will not be good enough. The best way to meet the needs of those seeking an abortion in Ireland and to ensure access to those who need it is to decriminalize abortion and to introduce free, safe, and legal access. Thousands of people have marched on the streets over the past months and years to call for a referendum to repeal the 8th Amendment. 87% of the Citizen's Assembly participants believe that the 8th Amendment cannot remain in its current form. GDC believes this very clearly represents the feelings of Irish society.

Mr. Varadkar, we note that during the Fine Gael leadership campaign, you expressed the view that the Citizens' Assembly was "not a time-wasting exercise". We would ask that you take action consistent with this comment and ensure that no more time is wasted in delivering a referendum. People in Ireland have waited long enough for these basic human rights.

The Government now has a clear mandate to call a referendum and introduce broad legislation on this issue. As Taoiseach, you would be accountable for removing the barriers to a referendum. The Government must follow through with the process it insisted on introducing. Any delay is an attempt to undermine the work of the Assembly and the rights of women, girls, and pregnant people in Ireland.

We look forward to your reply assuring us you will take immediate and decisive action on this issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dick Van der Tak', with a horizontal line underneath.

Dick Van der Tak
Executive Director, Global Doctors for Choice
55 West 39th St, New York, USA