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Government called on to ensure Ireland's system of maternity care respects women's rights in birth

The UN Committee Against Torture has called for Ireland's system of maternity care to meet human rights standards. Chair of Midwives for Choice Philomena Canning said: 'we welcome the recognition by the UN Committee Against Torture that action is needed to bring Ireland's system of maternity care in line with human rights standards'.

'Consent to medical intervention in birth is key. Women have a right not to be subjected to routine medical interventions that are medically unnecessary. The government has now been called upon to affirm their rights during pregnancy and childbirth.'

During Ireland's examination by the Committee Against Torture, human rights expert Ms Felice Gaer indicated that the system known as 'active management', which underpins the management of labour in Irish hospitals, was problematic from a human rights perspective. 'Active management is an inherently coercive system that is designed to maximise throughput in the labour ward. The Eighth Amendment has, and is, being used to enforce women's compliance with unwanted medical intervention', said Ms Canning.

'Ms Gaer has now asked Ireland to state whether existing policies in maternity care are human rights compliant, that is, whether they reinforce women's right to consent to or decline medical treatment. We look forward to hearing the government's view on this.'

'The rapporteur for Ireland, who is Vice Chair of the Committee Against Torture, also asked the government to declare that "labour ward efficiency" cannot be used to justify [routine] interventions – done to accelerate labour – that are medically unnecessary. Such a declaration would have a major impact on the medical culture that currently predominates in the labour ward.'

Speaking on her return from Geneva, the Chair of Midwives for Choice concluded: "Midwives for Choice welcomes the Committee's timely recognition that non-consensual intervention in birth may constitute torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and that such involuntary intervention is facilitated by the Eighth Amendment. This is a critical contribution to a debate that is set to intensify in Ireland in the coming months'.

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Notes on MfC

Midwives for Choice is a voluntary Irish organisation which advocates for an Irish society and a world where the rights of all women and girls to be safe and healthy before, during and after childbirth are upheld. This is achieved by ensuring they can make informed choices in their sexual and reproductive lives, and have full access to high quality information, education and health services regarding sex, sexuality, contraception, safe abortion, sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy, childbirth and the postnatal period.

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