



Friday, 12 November 2021

Dear Committee Members,

This submission to your call for evidence on the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill is made on behalf of the group Faith Voices for Reproductive Justice. We support this Bill and want to express our gratitude to Clare Bailey for her tireless work in bringing it to this stage. In this submission we would like to offer a faith-based perspective on this Bill and the activities it seeks to address.

Introduction

Faith Voices for Reproductive Justice (FVRJ) is an initiative started by people from Christian denominations in Northern Ireland in early 2020. We are open to members of all religious communities whose faith has led them to support safe abortion access as a necessary part of society. We want to help build an interfaith community of people who have had abortions or who support the right of others to make that choice for themselves. We are clergy members, faith leaders and ordinary members of faith communities.

As we consider this bill we are mindful of the significance of faith or religious belief for many who might wish to assemble outside services that provide termination of pregnancy. Religious freedom is enshrined in law and human rights standards through a number of instruments. We all value this freedom and would oppose any legislation that attempted to coerce anyone into changing their religious or moral beliefs. We also value the freedom to practice our faith individually and collectively in private and public, and this includes reaching out to others who might be seeking comfort or community. These are important aspects of the freedom of religion for many faithful people in Northern Ireland and we acknowledge their protection in law.

In addition, at FVRJ our faith community is based on one underpinning value - love. For Christians, the commandment to love is our highest calling. Scripture is clear that all our rituals, practice, teaching, or good works mean nothing if we do not love our fellow human beings. It is for this reason that we embrace the limitations and responsibilities attached to religious freedom that are present in human rights law. These responsibilities to each other are expressions of love. For example, over the last 18 months all churches have curtailed our collective worship practice in line with covid-19 safety regulations. Why? Because we love each other and care about each other's safety.

The right to hold religious, moral or ethical beliefs is fundamental and absolute. No one can force you to change your views on God or abortion or any other issue. But there is no such thing as an absolute right to religious expression. At the point where our beliefs interact with the lives of other people we are bound as people of faith by two things: legal responsibilities not to interfere with the rights of others and the moral duty to love others and do no harm.

Defining Harm

Problems arise when people motivated by their own strongly held religious or moral beliefs perceive their actions towards others in a way that is different to how they are received. For example, we have all heard abortion-clinic protestors claim that they are acting out of love, with a belief that 'abortion harms women' and that they are preventing harm rather than causing it. We respect the sincerely held beliefs of those folk and do not seek to change their minds about abortion. However, it is not for them to define the impact their behaviour is having on those women and pregnant people they interact with. At FVRJ we have encountered many stories from women who were confronted by such protestors while accessing abortion services. All of these encounters were described to us as negative, distressing and unwanted. Some of our members have had their own organisations and places of worship targeted by the same groups who assemble at abortion providers. In the run up to our own conference held in September at Corrymeela we were informed by a prominent anti-abortion group that they intended to picket at the venue. We took our duty of care to the conference participants very seriously and had to plan for how to keep people safe from being exposed to signs, slogans or imagery that would be stigmatising and potentially triggering. Volunteers from the Corrymeela community supported us through prayer and attending on the morning in case they were needed to engage protestors in conversation and maintain a safe zone for conference participants to access. In the end, no protest took place.

With the question of intention vs impact in mind, we want to particularly draw attention to the fact that this Bill contains an important provision to address this issue. In seeking to protect those using abortion services, it specifically covers both behaviour 'with the intent of, or reckless as to whether it has the effect of' influencing, harassment, alarm or distress as well as any actions that prevent them accessing services. We believe that the word 'reckless' is extremely well chosen in this regard. The rhetoric of many of the groups and individuals that assemble outside clinics demonstrates a reckless disregard for the harm they might cause that most people would find unacceptable. To give you an example, we challenged the group that threatened to picket our conference as to why they protest outside clinics and use the extremely stigmatising and offensive phrase 'child sacrifice' when referring to abortion. Their reply contained the following:

"[W]e do not protest outside abortion clinics. We are instructed in Proverbs 24:11 to "Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter." Accordingly we go to clinics to plead for the lives of those being carried to their death. We share the gospel and offer financial, emotion (sic) and physical support to those using the clinics... You are also correct that we call abortion 'child sacrifice' and

'murder'. It would be good to explain the biblical and scientific basis for doing so... God hates the hands that shed innocent blood (Proverbs 6:17), He tells us that murder is wrong (Exodus 20:13), unequal weights and measures are an abomination to Him (Proverbs 20:10) and He hates it when we show partiality to the wicked (Psalm 82:2)."

We know that this is an accurate representation of the beliefs and motivations of many people who participate in clinic protests or 'rescue' actions. It is reckless to expose women, girls, pregnant people and their families to this rhetoric while they are in the process of trying to access healthcare services. Protecting service users from the harm that it causes to be called a murderer, accused of child sacrifice, called wicked, told that God hates you, or pleaded with not to slaughter your child should be within the remit of the Department for Health's duty of care.

Abortion Stigma

Since forming in 2020, one of FVRJ's key priorities has been to tackle abortion stigma in Northern Ireland. Termination of pregnancy is now a legally available healthcare service that serves an important role in the lives of many women - 1 in 3 of us in the UK will have an abortion by the age of 45. However, after 160 years of criminalisation there is a high degree of stigma associated with this procedure and Christian churches have significantly contributed to the creation of this stigma. Research carried out by Ulster University shows that many people of faith feel they could not talk to their faith leader about abortion due to the blanket condemnation that seems to be the only visible response to the issue. This stigma has led to a culture of secrecy and shame where those with personal experience are afraid to tell anyone in case of being ostracised from their church community or family members. Stigma has 3 main dimensions: internalised stigma, perceived or felt stigma from others, and enacted stigma whereby the stigmatised person experiences direct discrimination or mistreatment. Abortion stigma is extremely harmful. Negative judgements about abortion create a sense of shame around an issue that should be a matter of personal conscience. FVRJ wants to support people towards liberation from this experience.

Encountering hostile, condemnatory language and behaviour outside abortion services is a stark example of direct or enacted stigma. There is no other healthcare procedure which brings with it the experience of having to interact with people telling you that what you are doing is wrong. It is highly discriminatory, and has a negative effect on people's wellbeing. Even if the rhetoric is presented in a way that appears softer than those examples we've already given, the underlying intention is the same. With no regard for the individual circumstances of each woman, clinic protestors will often use emotive language, attempt to appeal to a mothering duty or try to scare women with inaccurate descriptions of abortion procedures. Even the act of publicly praying in front of clinics is a confrontational expression of one's belief that abortion is wrong. If prayer is directed towards God, He will hear it just as well from one's own home as He will on the street. Jesus had stern words for people whose prayer is a public performance.

All of these public displays of opposition to abortion are stigmatising and they have no place at healthcare facilities, whether for those who need these services or the courageous, conscientious staff who provide them.

The Place for Protest

As a faith-based group we respect the role of religious voices in public life. We wouldn't be engaging with this consultation if we didn't believe that a faith perspective is important as society grapples with complex social and ethical issues. However, we believe the place for this engagement is with the decision-makers, at the level of law and policy. If anyone wishes to resist the norms of the prevailing culture then they are entitled to try to shape that culture through campaigning, lobbying, and mobilising public support for a different vision. These challenges should be presented towards those with power to change things.

No Christian should consider it their right to express their opposition to abortion by interfering in the decisions of women exercising their conscience and moral authority over their own lives. That is not a challenge to power. It is merely antagonising those who are doing the best they can in the imperfect, unequal world that we currently live in.

Conclusion

We hope that the committee finds this submission helpful, and that it might offer something different reflecting the middle ground between the polarised rights based arguments this issue is often entrenched in. We are working hard to open up compassionate, non-judgemental conversations on abortion in faith spaces where people can bring all the complexity of their experiences and find freedom from the burdens of stigma and shame. That some in our faith communities choose to become producers of stigma for more and more women by their actions outside clinics, breaks our hearts. Our steadfast support for freedom of thought, conscience and belief applies just as much to those using abortion services as it does to anyone who disapproves of abortion. The difference is that only one of those sets of people is seeking to impose their view on the other. We commend this Bill to the committee as an important step towards protecting freedom of conscience, freedom from stigma and preventing harm.

FVRJ representatives would be happy to discuss our submission further with the committee at your request.

Kind regards,

Faith Voices for Reproductive Justice