

I am writing in a personal capacity about my concerns over this Bill. I am happy for you to publish my name, but not my address or email. Though I live in Scotland, not Northern Ireland, I fear that if this Bill does become law in NI, it will set an unfortunate precedent which may well be followed in other parts of the UK.

My concerns arise from the fact that it will infringe the right of peaceful protest and the freedom to assist women, some of whom may be far from certain what abortion really involves and its moral implications. To designate such women as 'protected persons', even in a narrow legal sense, is a misuse of language. It means that these women are being discouraged from asking moral questions about abortion. They are being pushed by this Bill in the direction of ignoring their own consciences – always a dangerous course of action. These women are not being protected!

I understand that there are current laws in place like the Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, and the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, which provide the authorities with adequate powers to keep order and to protect women and other members of the public from genuine harassment and intimidation. These will apply outside abortion clinics and counselling centres as well as other places.

I note that under section 3 of the Bill – **'Premises where information, advice or counselling about abortion treatments are provided'** - for premises to qualify under the legislation it is necessary that 'information, advice or counselling relating to treatment for termination of the pregnancy is provided at the premises' (condition 2). I believe that this condition should be significantly enlarged. It seems to be standard practice now in the NHS whenever a patient goes through even a minor procedure, like receiving the flu jab, to receive written information of a medical nature about it, along with the possibility of counselling if so desired. If this is all that is being done in these premises, it is insufficient. These premises should contain places where some explanation is given of the psychological traumas and moral stresses of women who have undergone abortions. Women attending these centres should have available a variety of types of counselling agencies which they can access as they see fit. The result will be that people on both sides of the abortion debate would be accommodated inside the same building. I can appreciate that this may lead to some tension; but I suggest that ultimately it will cause fewer problems in wider society than to surround these buildings which give a very one-sided and partisan view of the issue with a ring of legal protection. Vulnerable women deserve a fuller picture of the issues than a totally amoral approach.

If such information and counselling centres were available inside these premises, I would have no objection to a safe access zone outside, as long as this was more carefully defined. This would help to balance the rights of different sections of the community who feel strongly on the matter. As it stands, the Bill wants to shut down debate.

I am also amazed at the lack of precision when it comes to the extent of 'safe access zones'. No geographical limits are prescribed; but all is being left in the hands of the relevant authorities, who are even given the power of moving the goalposts, or 'varying the safe access zone' as it is described. This is to give them far too much power.

I know the Bill says that 'it is a defence for D to show that D did not know, and had no way of knowing, that the person was in a safe access zone'. I wonder, however, just how effective such a defence would ever prove in a court of law.

I note also that one of the proposed categories of offence consists of 'influencing' a protected person directly or indirectly. The word 'influencing' is much too general. It could cover, for example, some accidental encounters. It should be removed from any serious legislation on this subject.