

As a health professional who has worked for the NHS for the last 21 years, I wish to voice my opposition to the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill brought by Clare Bailey MLA. May I say from the outset that it is concerning that this 'Call for Evidence' was not well publicised by the Committee. As a result, those who are opposed to abortion in Northern Ireland were left with very little time to respond; I can't help but wonder whether that was deliberate.

Abortion by its very nature is the premeditated killing of an innocent human life. It is therefore murder - I make no apology for using that word. It is clear that there is a concerted effort taking place to quash any opposition to abortion from pro-life/abolitionist groups at the present time. The freedoms of assembly and of expression are fundamental human rights which, as I understand, are both given protection under Articles 10 and 11 of the Human Rights Act. Not only is Clare Bailey's Bill oppressive, it is overtly discriminatory since it singles out pro-life people/abolitionists for criminalisation.

Contrary to Clare Bailey's narrative based on supposed intimidating and harassing behaviour (which she was at some pains to push in the Assembly during the Bill's most recent reading at Stormont on 12 October 2021) pro-life vigils are peaceful. It is a known fact that the abolitionist group, Abolish Abortion – Northern Ireland, informs the PSNI regarding the dates and times they will be outside any abortion clinic. Adequate powers already exist giving the PSNI the wherewithal to deal with any activity deemed to be against the law. Therefore, why do the PSNI not have any evidence to substantiate Clare Bailey's claims? Why have no arrests taken place if it's true that harassment is being perpetrated to the extent claimed by Clare?

As I understand it, the Bill will criminalise any activity outside an abortion clinic, "which might influence a person in their decision to attend". The people standing outside abortion clinics offer compassionate support (financial, psychological and spiritual) to women, silently hold signs, distribute leaflets and pray. The Bill means that such activities will be, "punishable on conviction by fines", perhaps up to £2,500. This is a blatant attempt to rid society of any trace of Christian influence in the public square.

These 'Safe Access Zones' essentially deprive women (whom every right thinking person acknowledges are vulnerable in this situation) of being given hope, support and an alternative to killing their unborn baby. That is not real choice and it is definitely not facilitating women to make an informed choice. Women have decided to keep their babies because of the very presence of pro-life people/abolitionists outside clinics and they are entitled to be made aware that such help is available for them.

At a time when our NHS waiting lists are at an unprecedented high, I feel that it is foolish at best and reprehensible at worst to potentially impose further costs on the Department of Health via the implementation and review of 'Safe Access Zones'. Apparently, two such zones that exist in England have cost the taxpayer hundreds of thousands of pounds due to legal costs incurred from resisting appeals to convictions. Clare Bailey's Bill acknowledges that this could potentially end up being the case in Northern Ireland. I know only too well about the unrelenting pressures faced by our health service; taxpayers' money should be spent tackling our waiting lists instead of paying for these unnecessary zones.

In conclusion, I would like to make it clear that I would never condone the actions of anyone that would truly fall under the definition of harassment or intimidation. Laws already exist to deal with such behaviour, as is right and proper. Due to the lack of any evidence and the lack of

arrests at clinics, it can be said that the truth is that harassment and intimidation is not taking place. Any argument to the contrary by Clare Bailey is an appeal to people's emotions and everyone knows that it isn't difficult to whip up emotions when it comes to the issue of abortion. In addition, Clare's examples of the verbal abuse she claims to have suffered whilst acting as an abortion facility volunteer are at least a decade old.

In a free society, everyone's right to voice their opinion must be protected, irrespective of what side of the aisle they're on. This is far from being an insignificant issue. It is factually correct to say that it comes down to whether or not an innocent human being lives or dies. Of supreme importance is the fact that God says, "You shall not murder". Our government would do well to remember that their powers are instituted by God to begin with.