

Dear Sir/ Madam,

This letter is a response to the Health Committee's call for submissions in respect of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion Amendment Bill.

It is my understanding that the current legislation in Northern Ireland protects babies without a disability in the womb from the 24<sup>th</sup> week pregnancy – that is they cannot be aborted. That level of protection is not available to babies of the same gestation who have a suspected or diagnosed non-fatal disability. This differential gestational limit for abortion on the grounds of non-fatal disability is therefore highly discriminatory and eugenic in nature. It perpetuates stereotypes which CEDAW should be eliminated.

Accordingly, I would be very supportive of the "*Givan Bill*" in its aim to help foster equality, by upholding the rights of the unborn child with disabilities and help reinforce the understanding that everybody in the Province deserves equality, dignity, and respect. In our wider family circle and community, socially and through work in health and personal social services within Northern Ireland over three decades we witnessed the positive contribution people with disabilities make to our society. It is worth remembering that no one is perfect!

Over the years I have taken soundings from people with disabilities, and many have felt that they are "*second class citizens*" who are inadvertently and advertently discriminated against on a daily basis. The NI Abortion Framework and Regulations forced on the people of Northern Ireland took this discrimination and singling out of people with a disability to a new level. Previously they felt hidden, even forgotten but now they believe the law is making them feel that that "*they should not exist.*" There is no doubt that "*law shapes culture*" and what is now in place here has taken us back to the chilling eugenic environment of the 1920's and 1930's.

I am aware of the pressures put on parents to abort a baby diagnosed with conditions such as Down's syndrome. This stigmatisation and stereotyping have been frequently documented in Great Britain including the impact on medical treatment and support received while pregnant and beyond. Parents feel that the aim is to eliminate "*these sort of children*" from being born. This is surely not right in any way in a civilised and compassionate society, a mark of which is surely how it cares for the most vulnerable?

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a dark period for children and adults with disabilities which only started to be reversed when the horrors of what happened during World War II were uncovered. Locally attitudes towards disability have changed significantly in the last four decades. Such has been reflected by legislation in the area e.g., the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and the Disability Discrimination (N.I.) Order (2006). The whole thrust of these pieces of legislation was to foster and promote equality and introduce provisions against disability discrimination in Northern Ireland. The ethos underpinning these laws is the incontrovertible fact that every person, regardless of so-called disability, is of immense value and worth. The current Abortion Framework and Regulations radically undermine this.

Finally, it might be interest and helpfully for Members of the Health Committee to watch, if they have not already done so, the Channel 4 documentary series "*Baby Doctors: Delivering Miracles*". The first programme (1 of 3) was broadcast on 26 April 2021.