



Response to - Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill -
Committee Stage
Call for Evidence

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Prepared by

Danielle Roberts
Senior Policy and Development Officer
HERe NI 1st Floor
Belfast LGBT Centre
23-31 Waring Street Belfast BT1 2DX
Telephone: 02890249452
Web: www.hereni.org
Email: policy@hereni.org

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We give full and informed consent to the disclosure internally and to the general public of
this consultation response in full, and are prepared to give evidence to the Committee.

HERe NI (previously LASI), established in 2000, is a regional organisation that works across all areas of Northern Ireland (NI) and the border counties to support lesbian and bisexual (LB) women and their families. We advocate for and support LB women and their families and improve the lives of LB women across Northern Ireland. We do this in lots of different ways; through providing information; peer support; facilitating training; lobbying government and agencies on LB women's issues; offering a community space for meeting and much more. HERe NI is the only women focused organisation within the NI LGBTQ+ sector.

We have contributed to the detailed Women's Policy Group response and endorse that submission and clause by clause comments. We support the provision of safe access zones, as recommended by CEDAW and enacted by the NI (Executive Formation etc.) 2019 Act. There are longstanding examples of anti-choice protests outside abortion clinics and family planning centres in NI, including harassment and violence as well as the display of graphic images and misinformation.

While the presence of anti-choice protestors may be intimidating for anyone accessing the clinic, accompanying patients, and workers, some groups will be more vulnerable than others. Those pregnant as a result of a sex crime or abuse are likely to be particularly vulnerable, as are minors, LB women are likely to be overrepresented in both groups. LB women are more likely to experience sexual violence than their heterosexual counterparts, and consequently a pregnancy as a result of a sexual crime. The Guttmacher Institute¹ found in a 2018 US study of people who had had an abortion, 15% of Lesbians said their pregnancy was because of forced sex compared to 1% of heterosexuals and 3% of bisexuals. Bisexuals (9%, 7%) and Lesbians (33%, 35%) were also more likely to report that the man who impregnated them had physically or sexually abused them, compared to 4%/2% of heterosexuals. It is likely that there are similar trends to those consistently identified in international research in the UK, as ONS² research highlights that Bisexual women in particular experience proportionately higher levels of domestic abuse. A systematic worldwide study³, including reports from the UK, found that there was a statistically significant higher rate of pregnancy in adolescent lesbians and bisexual women. This was particularly found in bisexual adolescents where the rate was twice that found in the heterosexual adolescent cohorts.

HERe NI frequently organises and participates in protests and similar actions. We recognise the importance of the right to free speech and freedom of assembly. However we are also aware that these are not unrestricted rights. Exercise of these rights must be weighed with adverse impacts on other rights. Gathering at clinic entrances and using language such as 'murderer', photographing and recording people accessing healthcare, and spreading misinformation is not exercising these rights, it is interfering with another's right to privacy and health. Safe access zones would not prohibit such behaviour entirely, but would exclude this behaviour from certain areas – immediately around the entrance to healthcare premises. In our view, safe access zones are a proportionate balancing of rights.

¹Jones, R. K., Jerman, J, and Charlton, B. M. (2018) Sexual Orientation and Exposure to Violence Among U.S. Patients Undergoing Abortion <https://doi.org/10.1097/AOG.0000000000002732>

² Women most at risk of experiencing partner abuse in England and Wales: years ending March 2015 to 2017 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/womenmostatriskofexperiencingpartnerabuseinenglandandwales/yearsendingmarch2015to2017#characteristics-of-women-who-are-most-at-risk-of-experiencing-partner-abuse>

³ Hodson, K. Meads, C and Bewlet, S (2017) Lesbian and bisexual women's likelihood of becoming pregnant: a systematic review and meta-analysis <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5299536/>