

I am disappointed to learn that the consultation period for this Bill expires today, since I only learned of this consultation earlier this week. In these circumstances my responses will be brief.

This proposed legislation is entirely unnecessary and disproportionate, in that it has the potential, for the first time ever, of criminalising someone for a simple offer of help. Let us make no mistake, that the intent of this Bill is to make it more likely that the number of abortions in Northern Ireland will increase, rather than decrease. That means that more young lives will be lost in Northern Ireland than before. That, in itself should be sufficient to make MLAs reconsider not only the effect, but the purpose, of this proposed legislation. Why would our legislators wish that result?

Those standing outside locations where abortions are perpetrated, do so because they realise what is actually happening within such facilities. They realise that pregnant women entering these premises frequently come out no longer pregnant. That means that two human beings enter the premises and one comes back out. Often the woman is in a state of high anxiety, confused and even bullied by those in her own family or friendship group, into seeking an abortion in the first place. Often too, if she sees a viable alternative to that abortion, she is all too ready to accept such help. Why should someone be criminalised for being that person?

It is also frequently the case that those opposed to abortion stand silently or in prayer outside premises providing abortions. It seems that such prayerful support would also be outlawed and criminalised by this Bill, which incidentally provides no indication of the limit of the area deemed to be a "safe access zone." This appears to be to be an unwarranted restriction on the practice of religion and free expression generally. To date in Northern Ireland the right to free assembly has been relatively uncurbed. If this Bill were to become law, the most stringent curb would be placed on the free assembly of those peace-loving individuals who value all life from conception, whether *in utero* or already born. It is ironic that in 2021, more than two decades after the Good Friday Agreement, that some parties which previously joined their traditional political opponents in promoting the protection of life at every stage, are now willing to criminalise those who see abortion for what it is- the unjust taking of life. MLAs who wish to show compassionate to women considering abortion would be much better placed in promoting ways of assisting these women and their babies, rather than facilitating them in the irrevocable step of abortion.