

I am writing as part of your call for evidence on the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill. As someone who has had personal experiencing of being confronted by clinic protestors while trying to access abortion counselling, I would like my story to be included in the evidence that you are gathering.

In 2016 I was seeking an abortion and had made arrangements to travel to England for services. Given that there was no financial support for women from Northern Ireland at that time, I was told that if I attended an initial consultation and counselling session at Family Planning Association (FPANI) I could save a significant sum of money as the consultation fee at the clinic in England would be waived. I was extremely conflicted about this as I knew that the FPANI premises would have protestors outside and I was not sure how this experience would affect me mentally and emotionally.

Deciding to have an abortion is a deeply personal and life-altering experience. No one makes that decision lightly. It might be an 'easy' decision in the sense that the person knows straight away what is right for them in their circumstances. But it always brings with it complex emotions, difficult conversations with loved ones, and a lot of careful reflection. Like most women, I had already made up my mind in the privacy of my own home in discussion with my partner before taking the step of accessing services. That being said, I was in a state of raw emotion. I was stressed about the upcoming trip to England which I was set to be making on my own as my husband was needed to stay at home with our 2 children. I hadn't told any other friends or family due to the fear of their reactions. I knew that accessing counselling at FPANI would not only help alleviate the financial burden but would be a welcome opportunity to talk to someone about everything I was going through. I really wanted to make use of this important support but had to consider the potential impact of walking through a gathering of people trying to speak to me and tell me that abortion is wrong. I had no idea if it would wash off me easily or if it would leave me hugely distressed. I was concerned about my privacy – the only person who knew about my plans to travel for an abortion was my husband and I did not want to be filmed and risk my family finding out.

These were the risks I had to carefully weigh up.

In the end I decided that I wouldn't let anyone stop me from accessing a service that would be helpful to me. I made a counselling appointment at FPANI by telephone and attended the next morning. I had my sleeping 8 month old baby in the pram as I arrived at the offices and approached the door. There were 2 protestors present with some signs with images propped against the wall. One of them had a clipboard in her hand and a bundle of flyers. As I approached I kept my eyes down. They were flanking either side of the doorway. I had to say 'excuse me' as I tried to maneuver my pram past them. They hesitated a moment and then one started to speak to me. She asked me 'do you know what an abortion really involves?' and tried to hand me a leaflet. I said 'no thank you' and began to struggle with the heavy door. She seemed to sense my emotion and began to ramp up her rhetoric, talking at me about how harmful abortion is for women, how it kills a baby, how it is barbaric. Ironically while in the process of saying these things she also held open the door for me as it was proving too difficult for me to get my pram in by myself. I couldn't look at

her. She continued with her speech as I entered the building and the door closed behind me. She spoke passionately but not aggressively. Even so, I was shaking.

The lift took me upstairs to FPANI reception and when I went inside to report for my appointment my breathing was rapid, my head and face were flushed and my legs felt like jelly. There was a mix up with my appointment time and it turned out I'd have to come back another day. I was disproportionately angry about it. I raised my voice but discovered it was shaking. Tears jumped into my eyes. I clutched the handle of my pram and tried to breathe through the rush of emotion. I lowered my tone and said to the person behind the desk, 'I'm sorry; I've just had to listen to the protestors on my way in. I'm feeling pretty shaken.' The receptionist apologised profusely. He gave me a date to come back that wasn't one of their usual counselling days. 'The protestors won't be here then as they only come on the days our counselling sessions are usually on. You shouldn't have to deal with them again.' He was right. When I came back two days later the doorway was clear.

I am sharing this story with you, mindful that my encounter would be considered quite mild compared to some that I have heard of. There were only two of them, not a crowd. The language they used was emotive and had strong negative moral judgements in it. But they were passionate rather than aggressive in their tone. They said 'abortion kills a baby' but they didn't use the word 'murder'. They did not physically obstruct me, in fact they politely helped me access the building even while mentally and emotionally trying to persuade me not to. Only one of them talked to me while the other prayed quietly.

To all intents and purposes, this experience might be held up as a model of 'good' clinic outreach. I know that some MLAs and other stakeholders feel the Bill goes to far and that legislation should only deal with those nasty protestors who are aggressive, who harass, intimidate or pursue someone. However, I want to emphasise that I do not agree with this assessment at all. My experience was not at all benign. Before I had even decided whether or not to attend FPANI, the fear of this encounter almost stopped me from accessing the counselling service at all. The encounter itself did not leave me with lasting damage but in a temporary sense, it cause me harm in the form of emotional distress and stigma.

I want to stress that I don't wish to deny people the chance to air their views on abortion. As someone with personal experience of abortion I accept that it is a very stigmatised act in Northern Ireland. I'd like to see that change but I accept that it still is extremely stigmatised. I can cope with seeing anti-abortion imagery and rhetoric in public spaces. I don't like it but I know that it exists and I adopt my own strategies to manage how it makes me feel. I know that I might turn on the radio and hear people describe me as someone who has committed 'murder' or 'child sacrifice'. I've even put myself forward to debate some of these people in the media and so I'm not asking to be protected from everything that might cause me offence. But the one place and the one time I should not have had to deal with this stigmatisation is while attending a healthcare facility in the middle of accessing a service. It is precisely because of the highly stigmatised social context around abortion that a seemingly minor interaction like this can have such a significant impact on the person who is subjected to it – when our whole life we are surrounded by negative moral judgements about abortion in our families, communities, schools and churches, then the process of

actually obtaining an abortion when we need one is unnecessarily fraught with emotions of guilt and shame that are socially constructed. It is just inexcusable that there is no legal framework that could have effectively protected me from being confronted by another person's judgement of this most intimate part of my life while accessing a healthcare service.

I want to briefly comment on the view of some MLAs that strengthening existing anti-harassment laws would be a better way to regulate the activities of anti-abortion groups outside clinics. In my experience this is totally disingenuous. Harassment law might be effective for people who work in healthcare facilities and are faced with the same protestors regularly. However, as a one-off service user it would be impossible to have my experience included under the definition of harassment. It is also ridiculous to expect that the burden would be placed on people using healthcare services to make a complaint and prove that harassment had taken place. The burden should be on the statutory service providers as part of their duty of care to ensure that these encounters do not happen in the first place. That is why I fully support this Bill as we need legislation that is designed to properly address the circumstance and not an adaption of law that isn't a good fit.

I appreciate the committee taking time to read my story and hope that it will help you in your deliberation of this Bill.