

I support the proposed safe access zones in the Bill. I was a volunteer clinic escort at the MSI Belfast clinic and walked people through clinic protesters.

Often they blocked the entrance to the building; trying to divert people away from the building, handing out leaflets with graphic images and misinformation, and recording people accessing the building. While they may explain their actions as praying or street counselling they often shouted and followed people accessing the clinic, patients and those accompanying them as well as staff. They said they had 'christened' the 'dead baby' and said things like 'don't let them kill your grandchild'. This was not a silent protest. Even if it had been a silent protest, their presence would still have been intimidating.

As escorts we were targets for harassment, and on several occasions met the legal threshold of more than 2 occasions with these instances reported to the PSNI. There were also at least 3 instances of escorts being physically assaulted by protesters. We wore body cameras both for our safety and evidence gathering. The current harassment law was of no help to most people accessing the clinic as it was easy to get around 2 occasions by the same person, protesters kept records of who spoke to which person on the way in so another would attempt to engage them on the way out.

The 2019 Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act includes the CEDAW recommendation that safe access zones are implemented, this is a legal duty on the NI Secretary of State. If the NI Assembly doesn't act, hopefully Westminster will.

The rights to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly are important, they are also qualified rights. I have organised many rallies and marches, these have had to follow terms laid out by public bodies. Safe Access Zones would only limit these rights in designated zones.

The sentence of a fine proposed in the Bill will not be a deterrent to the groups who organise most of the clinic protests.

Safe access zones would protect abortion seekers, people accompanying them, and workers. They must be introduced to fulfil the terms of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act. In order to meet the terms of the Act, and to realise human rights obligations, there must be accessible abortion.

I am happy to share my experiences as a clinic escort with the committee.