



Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill **Call for evidence**

Reclaim the Night Belfast (RTN) in an annual march against street harassment and gender based violence, held as part of the global 16 days of Activism against Gender Based Violence since 2014. We are happy for our response to be published.

We support the proposals for safe access zones for women and pregnant people accessing abortion care, those accompanying them, and workers in these premises.

The current harassment law is not suitable to tackle these interactions. As there must be two or more instances of harassment by the same person it is easy for organised anti-choice protesters to avoid meeting this legal threshold. Additionally the responsibility for reporting harassment lies with the victim, who may then have to appear in open court, requiring them to speak publicly about a private and often stigmatised decision.

We have personally witnessed and encountered anti-choice protestors. The behaviour of protesters includes blocking entrances, recording or photographing people, distributing misinformation, displaying graphic images, praying or reciting scripture, and shouting targeted phrases such as 'murderer' and 'you're the mother of a dead baby'. All of these actions can cause distress for anyone accessing the premises, with particular negative impacts of those pregnant as a result of a crime, with an SFI or FFA diagnosis, minors, and those who have experienced miscarriage.

One cannot know what behaviour an anti-choice protester will engage in. This means their very presence is intimidating, even standing silently, as at any stage their behaviour could change to harassment or even violence. Safe access zones would remove this intimidation and uncertainty.

As organisers of marches and rallies, often political in nature, we understand the importance of the right to free speech and the right to freedom of assembly. We also understand that these are not absolute rights, there are laws which restrict both when they may impinge on other rights – for example hate speech offences. Protests at clinics which interfere with accessing legal abortion services and cause distress may constitute a breach of the rights of those accessing premises in relation to privacy and health. Safe access zones do not mean there would be no anti-choice protest allowed, they just would not be able to take place in a limited zone.



We would note that the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 incorporates certain CEDAW recommendations into domestic law. These recommendations include the provision of safe access zones. Should Stormont not enact this protection, Westminster has a duty to. We would welcome action on this issue at NI Assembly level.

The sentences outlined in the Bill seem relatively lenient, a fine is only a deterrent to people, or organisations, who cannot afford it. Any conviction should include mandatory anti-harassment education to avoid re-offending.

We would also take this opportunity to recommend the use of telemedicine be adopted, including home use of the second set of pills. This would avoid the majority of those who need an abortion ever coming into contact with clinic protesters.

We endorse the lengthy responses and clause by clause comments submitted by Alliance for Choice and the Women's Policy Group.

On behalf of Reclaim the Night Belfast
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