



Ulster University's Pro-choice Society

Submission

Abortion Services

(Safe Access Zones) Bill

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Who We Are

Ulster University's Pro-choice Society was established in 2020 in response to the decriminalisation of abortion and lack of commissioned abortion services in Northern Ireland with the aim to provide unbiased information and signposting to students.

We have over 60 members including members of UUSU student council and the student executive.

What We Believe

We believe in the right to choose.

We believe that abortion is healthcare and that everyone deserves safe access to healthcare.

We believe that no one should be harassed at their place of work.

We believe that free speech and freedom of assembly are both qualified rights that must be balanced with others' rights.

We believe that this bill can prevent harassment before it happens ensuring the protection of staff and patients.

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Protest and Free Speech

- Rights come with responsibilities.
- Rights should be balanced.
- There is a time and a place for protests.
- Protestors will still be allowed to protest in other places
 - this bill would only restrict protesting in a designated area keeping the access point to the clinic clear.
- Patients and staff have the right to privacy, autonomy, and self-determination.
 - Staff and patients have no choice but to be subjected to protesting or prayers. Protestors do not have the right to a captive audience.

Human Rights

- There is a binding duty on the NI Secretary of State to fully implement CEDAW's 2018 recommendation to the UK Government to "protect women from harassment from anti-abortion protestors by investigating complaints, prosecuting and punishing perpetrators" which is contained in S9 Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019
- To fail to provide safe access zones may constitute further human rights breaches as this could make lawful abortion prohibited in practice.

The Current Law on Harassment is Not Adequate

- This bill will act as a preventative measure to ensure no one is harassed outside a health care centre by creating a space for patients or staff to pass through without encountering protestors.
- The individuals that engage in this type of protest are aware of the current harassment law.
 - The current legislation requires the same individuals to approach the same patient on more than two occasions to avoid meeting the legal threshold.

Proposed offences and Sentence Level

- This bill currently asks for a fine following an offence which may not provide an adequate deterrent.
 - These protestors are often affiliated with anti-choice organisations who may be prepared to pay the fine. An effective deterrent may be providing anti-harassment classes for those who offend.
- The bill does not make provision for offences relating to photographing or recording patients and healthcare providers.
 - This should also be an offence patients and staff should have privacy and dignity accessing healthcare. Subsequent online harassment and sharing of images online may also pose a risk to vulnerable patients, particularly people who are in coercive or abusive relationships.

The Impact of Clinic Protests

- Clinic protests are a barrier to accessing lawful abortion care as they create an intimidating environment where one's safety is not guaranteed.
- The presence of protesters can attract negative attention and may create a hostile environment around the clinic.
- The impact of clinic protesters behaviour, language, and materials on the mental health of those accessing lawful abortion services can be very damaging. There are often graphic images of "abortions" and images of foetuses in the womb.
 - This is particularly distressing for people who have experiences still birth or miscarriage.
- Protesters will also use words such as 'murder' and 'kill'.
 - This language is particularly distressing for those who are terminating a much-wanted pregnancy after receiving a severe foetal impairment diagnosis.
- While clinic protesters may explain their behaviour as benign, praying or offering counselling it is impossible for someone accessing the clinic to know what the protesters behaviour will be. Their presence is intimidating for both patients and staff.

- Protests will cause distress and adverse mental health impacts to vulnerable people or those who have already experienced trauma such as minors, people in coercive relationships and those pregnant because of a sexual crime.

At Ulster University, the pro-choice society have supported students who have had abortions and experienced this traumatic time. One of our students provided us with this statement on their experience

The Experience of One Ulster University Student

“Within days of contacting Informing choices, my appointment at their Castle Street clinic was scheduled. On the day of my termination, I was greeted in the city centre location by ruthless protestors insisting I would “not get real healthcare in there.” I am lucky that this unwarranted and misinformed abuse from anti-choicers is something I know a lot about and prepared myself for such beforehand. For someone less seasoned to verbal abuse of this kind (like anyone would be used to it, anyway), this could easily change their mind and force them to continue with an unwanted pregnancy. Inside the clinic is a different story. Even in circumstances that feel like the end of the world, every person in the clinic was welcoming and comforting while still making you feel open to change your mind. After a tearful few minutes in the waiting area, a nurse escorted me to a treatment room where I received the first dose of tablets for a medical abortion. The doctor made the whole experience easy, not through her listing of options, side effects of medication or what to do next. The pure lack of judgement was a hug in itself and greatly needed – especially when you’re trying to grasp their opinion through a face mask. The appointment barely lasted 10 minutes and I was once again in the hands of protestors on the street. The reassurance from the clinic made it easier to turn away and refuse their leaflets practically punched into my hands. I could leave with dignity rather than regret and truly owe that to the caring workers devoted to providing safe abortions for people like me, in need.”

Recommendations.

- 1. Enact this bill before the end of the mandate.**
- 2. Commission high-quality abortion services laid out within The Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No 2.) Regulations 2020 before 2022. This includes providing education, funding and public health information on abortion.**
- 3. Roll out telemedicine so that people can consult with their health professionals privately.**