

## **Introduction:**

The Pro Life Campaign (PLC) is a non-denominational human rights organisation committed to upholding the right to life and respecting human dignity. Since its foundation in 1993, the PLC has campaigned for the protection of human life and greater state supports for pregnant women and their babies in the public sphere whilst also providing pro-life education and resources to expectant and recent mothers.

In this important pro-life work, the PLC has been at the forefront of public debates within society, advocating for a human rights-based pro-life ethic and offering its research findings to public authorities, policy advocates, and other interested parties. The PLC have made various submissions to the United Nations, the Oireachtas (Republic of Ireland legislature), the Medical Council (Ireland), and other bodies.

## **Preface:**

This submission is made in response to the Call for Evidence issued by the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Health in relation to the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill. The Pro Life Campaign the Committee to reflect upon the three key points critiquing the Bill as introduce.

Firstly, the Bill is incongruous with the democratic and liberal principles of the freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, as guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights and implanted through the Human Rights Act 1998.

Secondly, the Bill denies the option of information and support on positive alternatives to abortion for potentially desperate women during the nadir of their vulnerability. This is backed up by the personal testimonies of countless women helped by pro-life organisations such as 'Be Here For Me'.

Thirdly, the Bill allows a creeping totalitarianism which characterises all pro-life activity within the vicinity of abortion facilities as criminal under the veneer of protecting women from 'harassment'. In truth, extensive powers are already provided for the police to deal with cases of harassment under current legislation. As such, the penal provisions of this Bill are unnecessary to combat cases of harassment, which are an extreme minority within the broad sweep of positive pro-life activity.

### **1. Violates civic liberties:**

The Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill as introduced before the Northern Ireland Assembly is incongruous with the principles of freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and the right to protest. The Bill would significantly limit civic liberties by specifically targeting those peacefully expressing pro-life views, particularly in contexts believed to be life saving or important.

Whilst the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum to the Bill claims that it seeks to criminalise 'harassment' of people within censorship zones, the proposed legislation singles out innocuous activities such as providing information or distribution of pro-life literature as

coming under the grounds of criminal activity under the penal provisions of this Bill. This deceptive interpretation sidesteps the guarantees provided by the European Convention on Human Rights, as incorporated in the Human Rights Act 1998, such as freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. The right to privacy (Article 8, ECHR) is not violated by the existence of pro-life vigils or activities.

As a consequence of the Bill's ambiguity in defining the nature of what is to be considered criminal, any pro-life activity which may influence a 'protected person', whether directly or indirectly, is to be criminalised. This would have the effect of criminalising pro-life vigils, peaceful protests, or other activities which may be regarded as influencing a woman's decision to proceed with abortion. Thus, the Bill essentially forbids citizens to offer pro-life information or advice, whether directly or indirectly, to women within the broad vicinity of abortion facilities.

## **2. Denies women positive alternatives:**

The Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill is not genuinely 'pro-choice' as it denies women the ability to receive pro-life information such as alternatives to abortion or other supports. Organisations such as the London-based 'Be Here For Me' have showcased the experiences of countless women who have been helped by pro-life vigils and activities near abortion facilities. Alina Dulgheriu from 'Be Here For Me' shared her personal experience with members of the Oireachtas (legislature) in the Republic of Ireland in February 2019. Ms Dulgheriu spoke of the positive impact of receiving pro-life support and information at an abortion clinic in Ealing, London and how this experience encouraged her to continue with her pregnancy and have her daughter. These life-saving experiences would be impossible under the proposed legislation. This denial of full information to women promotes a singular path towards abortion.

This legislation would also have the effect of preventing women with similar experiences to Alina Dulgheriu from giving back the same kind of help which they received. It denies countless women the opportunity to help others who may be in desperate situations and in need of support. Effectively censoring the perspective of these women is not consistent with a free and fair democracy which respects the views of others.

## **3. Gratuitously provides for draconian powers:**

It is claimed that this legislation is urgently required to combat 'harassment' of women and staff at abortion facilities arising from pro-life 'protests'. In truth, the number of pro-life vigils/protests which engage in activities which may be deemed 'harassment' are an infinitesimal minority. This legislation casts all pro-life activity within the general area of abortion facilities to be criminal, ignoring the positive and democratic outcomes of pro-life vigils.

The Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill is not required to deal with extreme minority incidents of harassment or breaches of public order, as wide-ranging powers are already in

place to deal with such cases as they arise. Existing legislation already allows the police to prosecute cases of harassment and assault. Thus, the legislation proposed is not required to criminalise the extreme minority cases which its advocates have cited, but in fact would have the draconian effect of suppressing peaceful vigils and diluting democratic freedoms.

**Conclusion:**

Members of the Committee and all Members of the Legislative Assembly are asked to uphold and affirm the right of all citizens to freedom of speech and freedom of assembly as acknowledged in the Human Rights Act 1998 by rejecting the sweeping draconian provisions of this Bill.

The PLC further requests MLAs to reflect upon the positive experiences of women whose encounters with pro-life activists outside abortion clinics encouraged them to make a life saving decision. By allowing women the option to receive pro-life information and alternatives to abortion is fully consistent with the principle of choice and informed consent.

**ENDS**