



**Submission prepared by Zig Zag Young Women's Resource Centre
for the Health, Communities, Disability Services and Domestic and
Family Violence Prevention Committee for the *Abortion Law
Reform (Woman's Right to Choose) Amendment Bill 2016***

June 2016

Zig Zag Young Women's Resource Centre Inc welcomes the opportunity to provide a written submission to the Health, Communities, Disability Services and Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Committee for the *Abortion Law Reform (Woman's Right to Choose) Amendment Bill 2016*. We respectfully submit recommendations relating to specific areas of expertise based on our extensive knowledge and experience in providing sexual assault support and prevention services to young women who have been victims of violent crime, specifically sexual offences.

Organisational Details

Zig Zag Young Women's Resource Centre Inc. (hereafter referred to as 'Zig Zag') was established in 1988 to respond to specific identified needs of young women, namely sexual violence, accommodation, and the provision of a safe and confidential place for young women to obtain information, advice, and support. Zig Zag is an incorporated community managed organisation that currently receives funding from the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services (DCCSDS) and the Department of Housing and Public Works (DoH) to provide two programs to young women in the wider Brisbane region:

1. *Sexual Assault Support and Prevention Program:*

This program provides direct support services to young women aged 12 years to 25 years who have experienced sexual assault at any time in their lives. Services include:

- Information, referral and advocacy;
- Individual counselling (including crisis support);
- Court support (limited availability as this is not directly funded);
- Therapeutic group work; and
- Community education to prevent and reduce sexual violence.

2. *Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program:*

This program provides direct support services to young women aged 16 years to 25 years who are experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness. Services include:

- Information, referral and advocacy;
- Supported medium term accommodation; and
- Practical assistance to access emergency accommodation and long-term, secure, and affordable housing.

Zig Zag greatly values its joint service capacity to respond to the needs of young women survivors of sexual assault *and* young women who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Sexual violence within the home has been found to be a major cause of homelessness for young women. In fact, 50 - 90% of young women who are homeless are homeless due to sexual abuse. It must also be noted that a lack of secure housing will, quite obviously, place young women at a far greater risk of subsequent and repeated sexual assault. A survey of homeless young people in Sydney found that 76% of females reported having been sexually assaulted since becoming homeless.

Submission Details

Zig Zag has significant experience in providing direct therapeutic support services to young women who have been victims of violent crime namely sexual offences against children, young women, and young adults under the age of 25 years. Zig Zag respectfully submits recommendations relating to the following specific aspects of the *Abortion Law Reform (Woman's Right to Choose) Amendment Bill 2016*:

1. The need to modernise and clarify the law (without altering current clinical practice), to reflect current community attitudes and expectations; and
2. Provision of counselling and support services for women.

1. The need to modernise and clarify the law (without altering current clinical practice), to reflect current community attitudes and expectations

"Attitudes in our society about women require fundamental change"
Not Now, Not Ever: Putting an End to Domestic and Family Violence in
Queensland Taskforce Report, 2015

The Queensland Government recently made a commitment to changing culture and attitudes in our society about women and integrating effective support services and justice services to address domestic and family violence. Changing legislation such as the *Abortion Law Reform (Woman's Right to Choose) Amendment Bill 2016* aligns with that commitment. It shows that the government is actively implementing the recommendations of the Not Now, Not Ever report with a comprehensive understanding of women's needs and the change in attitudes towards women.

Our key points include:

- Abortion is safe and effective.
- A pregnant woman has a right to choose abortion, adoption, or parenting.
- Part of a woman's right to choose is informed consent. Women should be made aware of all options without judgement or bias. Information should be accessible, easy to read, and professional interpreter services must be provided for women as required and/or as preferred.
- It is a human right to have safe access to reproductive health.
- No contraception is 100% effective.
- Young women are more likely to encounter unwanted pregnancy and have more barriers to accessing abortion services.
- Incest or rape are not grounds to access a legal abortion under the current law.

- Evidence based reproductive health information should be part of a well implemented 'respectful relationships' education to young people in schools.

2. Provision of counselling and support services for women

Our key points include:

- Unwanted pregnancy can be a result of a sexual assault. Funding and appropriate specialist services to address rape-related pregnancy are essential.
- Unplanned/unwanted pregnancies occur under a variety of situations including complex situations which impact on women's psychosocial wellbeing.
- The intersection of sexual violence and domestic violence indicates that unplanned/ unwanted pregnancies often occur in violent relationships. It is imperative that appropriate care including the option of abortion as part of an integrated response is essential to support women who are experiencing domestic violence.
- Some groups of women including young women, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disabilities, and those living in regional / rural areas have further barriers to accessing appropriate reproductive care. Abortion should be legal, accessible and affordable.
- We support the implementation of Safety Access Zones that make it illegal to harass a person entering a health services that provide abortions. It should be illegal to harass, intimidate, hinder, obstruct or interfere with people accessing an abortion clinic.

Sexual assault has significant impacts on survivors' physical and mental health and include, but are not limited to, physical injury, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion, mental health issues including shame, post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety. Access to appropriate and immediate clinical care, delivered by appropriate accessible services is essential to begin a survivor's physical and emotional healing (Smith et al, 2013).

Rape-related pregnancy may occur with higher prevalence among some subgroups of women seeking abortion than others. Funding and appropriate specialist services to address rape-related pregnancy are essential. (Perry et al., 2016). Abortion clinical care settings should be well trained in sexual assault disclosure and/or provide appropriate accessible referral pathways to support women to make informed choices.

Unintended pregnancy among adolescents is an ongoing issue in populations not just in Australia but around the world. Among other factors, coercive sex and lack of access to and use of contraception contribute to pregnancy in younger women. Young women face additional challenges in accessing safe abortion care. Often young women do not disclose to parents or know where to seek support. A review of randomized controlled trials and observational studies comparing effectiveness, safety, acceptability, and long-term outcomes of abortion care between adolescent women and older women indicated that abortion is safe and effective among adolescent and young women. It recommended that clinical health services should promote access to safe abortion for adolescent women (Renner, Guzman & Brahmi, 2014).

Cochrane Reviews are systematic reviews of research in health care and health policy. Cochrane reviews are internationally recognized as the highest standard in evidence-based health care resources. They are published online in the Cochrane Library. A Cochrane review of abortion found that abortion is safe and effective.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1. Zig Zag recommends that S224, S225 and S226 of the Queensland Criminal Code be omitted to reflect current community attitudes and expectations.

Recommendation 2. Zig Zag recommends that evidence based reproductive health information be implemented in 'respectful relationships' education to young people in schools.

Recommendation 3. Zig Zag recommends that abortion services be provided free of charge to women through the public health system.

Recommendation 4. Zig Zag recommends that abortion provision by medical practitioners be regulated under medical guidelines not through the Criminal Code.

Recommendation 5. Zig Zag recommends that women facing an abortion be offered counselling and support through specialist services such as Children by Choice or through the Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS).

Recommendation 6. Zig Zag recommends that women should not be required to receive counselling to access an abortion.

Recommendation 7. Zig Zag recommends that women, particularly young women under the age of 16 be screened for sexual assault and be referred to specialist services for trauma counselling.

Recommendation 8. Zig Zag recommends that conscientious objectors do not interfere in providing timely response and provide an appropriate and timely referral.

References

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