

Submission to the Committee reviewing the Abortion Law Reform.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit my views on the Abortion Law Reform (Women's Right to Choose) Amendment Bill currently before the Health, Communities, Disability Services and Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Committee of the Queensland Parliament.

I am happy to respond to any invitation from the abovementioned Committee to speak to this submission as I believe it is of the highest importance.

There are two considerations I wish to present to you:

1. The first is the correlation between domestic violence and abortion. For this analysis I have developed what I call a "domestic violence test" (DV Test). This test can be applied to a range of topics, I will discuss further down the test and its application in full.
2. The second is the autonomy of the mother and her exercise of decision making in the context of the family as a whole.

Domestic Violence:

I am very grateful to be living in a society and time where domestic violence is exposed for the crime it is. No longer is it being swept under the carpet. Instead prominent Queenslanders such as Dame Quentin Bryce are making a stand for the rights of women. They are sending out a message that the harming of one person by another is not acceptable, and the message is slowly being heard. Our legislators need to also hear this message and respond to it.

I believe that all bills that are presented to our State and National Parliaments should have to pass what I term the DV test. This test would ensure that if it were considered that the passing of a bill could, in effect, put women at risk of greater domestic violence then the bill is not passed. I believe that Mr Pyne's Abortion Bill does not pass the DV test.

Currently, a woman in Qld can easily have an abortion in the first trimester of her pregnancy. Over 12,000 women do each year. All that is required is for a doctor in an abortion clinic to determine that it is in the woman's best interest not to proceed with the pregnancy. Here, there is a difficulty, and seemingly insurmountable conflict of interest. How can we expect a Doctor, in his or her provision of a service which is provided for a fee, to be expected to give independent advice solely in the best interest of the patient?

It might be a point for further discussion that we need policy in place that makes it mandatory for a woman to receive independent counselling and advice from a service other than an abortion clinic. As the law stands, women are not directed to independent counselling to assist them to choose the right outcome based on their best interests alone.

When making the decision to abort a child, a woman will have several spheres of influence. In the domestic setting this might come from partners, parents, siblings, and other extended

family and friends who believe for whatever reason that their advice is right. In circumstances, where the birth of a child brings with it financial and labour costs or, at least a perceived reduction in education or lifestyle opportunities, these advices when they become too strongly given can be defined as harassment. It would be naïve to think that such a weighty decision would not create conflict in the domestic setting for a woman.

Research suggests that many women are in fact being coerced by the fathers of their unborn babies and/or other family members to abort their child. Fathers at present, have a financial obligation born solely from their genetic link to the child. The fear of this financial commitment that would extend for 18 years, is in many anecdotal stories I have heard, been sufficient for the fathers to become aggressive and demanding in their want for the mother to abort the child. At present, the mother has a safeguard under the current legislation. Should she be the recipient of such pressure, she only needs to withstand it for the first 13 weeks of gestation, after such time it is illegal to abort a child and such illegality provides the mother a legitimate umbrella.

If this Abortion Law Reform Amendment Bill is passed then women are potentially at risk of being harassed and pressured into aborting their babies right through to the ninth month. A pregnant woman is vulnerable. Not only are there hormonal changes occurring but bodily changes as well. It is a time when a woman needs to be protected and not exposed to undue harassment. It is hard during this vulnerable time to withstand pressure and many women succumb, often living with grief and regret for the rest of their lives.

Surely it is the duty of government to enact legislation that protects the most vulnerable in our society, to care for those that are unable to care for themselves. It is certainly not to pass laws that would expose our citizens to greater abuse and harm than they are already exposed to. Pregnant women and the babies they carry in their wombs deserve to be protected and supported by the society they live in. This Abortion Law Reform would reduce that protection and support.

A few years ago I did some voluntary work for a charitable organisation that works to support 'impoverished' pregnant women. For the purpose of remaining a-political, and maintaining their charitable status, this organisation has asked me not to name it specifically. As a volunteer with this agency I visited pregnant women who contacted us because they were vulnerable, often they were being pressured to abort their child and had no-one to turn to for help or support.

Through my experience working with this agency I came to understand that the word 'impoverished' is used mainly to describe those women who are unsupported. Some of these cases can be incredibly complicated. For example, I recall a 28-year old immigrant who had come to Australia, supported by her then boyfriend. Once she arrived, she discovered she was already pregnant to another man in her home country. She initially sought help from the agency because without the support of her boyfriend in Australia, she was destitute. She explained to me that she was hiding the pregnancy, she feared her only option was to have an abortion and she suspected the man she was in a relationship with would not support her pregnancy. We encountered a number of practical difficulties right from the start even

confirming her pregnancy, as she was unable to access medicare to see a doctor. Centrelink was another minefield and only after several visits were we able to secure her the family support she was entitled, as a result of the 4-year old child that was living with her. I find it difficult to believe that this woman would have been supported or encouraged to make an independent decision regarding her pregnancy had she not had the help we gave her through this organisation. She decided to keep her child and her partner was counselled into supporting her and accepting the new family dynamic. In fact, he grew to love this child as his own.

Not all women receive the type of practical help I, and many other volunteers like me, are able to offer them through this wonderful agency and others like this one, set up specifically to care for pregnant women impoverished and in crisis because of their pregnancy. Sometimes pregnant women are abandoned by angry partners and family members because their desire to maintain the pregnancy and birth their child, is considered the troublesome option. When the pressure becomes too great they choose to leave or escape their home and surrounds and become impoverished; in need of shelter and food.

Other times the woman becomes 'impoverished' because she has had to escape from the domestic violence in her home situation. When she will not succumb to the demand to abort her child she becomes the victim of domestic violence. Such domestic violence includes: hitting, shoving, yelling, intimidating threats, ridiculing and name calling women. I have seen the bruises and scratches on these vulnerable pregnant women and heard their stories.

Passing this Abortion Law Reform Bill in its current form, with no safety nets attached allows abortions for any reason right up to the ninth month. The bill is harmful to women and absent of consideration for the difficult domestic situations that unplanned pregnancies can create. Under this bill, a woman has the potential to be the subject of pressure including actions and words defined as family violence for nine months. It simply does not pass the DV Test.

We are now in an era that has seen the devastation of domestic and family violence including, the Westgate bridge case and Australian of the year Rosie Batty's own story of family violence that lead to the death of her own child by his father. It is now, more than ever, imperative that all social legislative debate incorporate a DV Test.

#### A Woman's Right:

I often hear the argument that it is a women's right to 'choose' what happens to her body. I attended the public gathering outside the Queensland Parliament the morning that Rob Pyne MP introduced his Bill. This seemed to be the mantra of many of the protagonists gathered there to support the Bill. I cannot accept this statement when it over rides the rights of another person.

As a woman I have the right to make choices over my body. My choices include whether to engage in sexual activity and whether to use contraceptives. These are legitimate choices I have.

Like many Australians, I am liberal in my philosophy of choice. I believe that I do control my body and I simultaneously believe others have the right to control theirs. However, in

circumstances where conception has occurred and a child has been created and is dwelling within the mother's body then where her rights to control her body interfere with the rights of the child within her body, the mother's right must be suspended for the nine months of gestation. It is an artificial state of being to suggest that the mother has autonomy over her body, when that body is housing the body of another. It is juxtaposed to a liberal view of self-ownership.

Child's right to life

To be clear, I believe in the sanctity and dignity of human life at every stage from conception to natural death. It goes without saying therefore that I believe that the child growing in his or her mother's womb has a right to life.

Recommendations:

- 1. That this current Abortion Law Reform (Women's Right to Choose) Amendment Bill 2016 receive a negative recommendation because women are potentially further exposed to greater Domestic Violence when the safety nets that currently exist in our laws are removed.*

Presented by:

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