



30 June 2016

The Health, Communities, Disability Services,
Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Committee
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To the Committee,

Inquiry into Abortion Law Reform Bill and laws governing termination of pregnancy in Queensland

The Australian Association of Social Workers is the key professional body representing more than 10,000 social workers throughout Australia. Social work is founded on the principles of social justice, human rights and professional integrity. It aims to enhance the quality of life and support the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in society through practise that is ethically accountable, professionally competent and transparent. The profession's values are embodied in the profession's national and international Codes of Ethics, Practice Standards and the theoretical perspectives that underpin Social Work's professional knowledge and evidence base.

The Queensland Branch of the AASW (herein the AASW) commends the Queensland Government for considering the decriminalisation of abortion in Queensland and continues to welcome the focus on implementing the recommendations from the *Not Now Not Ever* report and the necessary whole-of-government approach to preventing violence against women. Along with better delivering women's fundamental rights to sexual and reproductive health options and equity of access to abortion services, legislative reform in this area would bring Queensland in alignment with other State jurisdictions and the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) for which Australia is a signatory.

Social work is founded on the principles of social justice, human rights and professional integrity. It aims to enhance the quality of life and support the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in society through practice that is ethically accountable, professionally competent and transparent. The AASW Code of Ethics (2010, p13) stipulates that:

'Social work profession: promotes justice and social fairness, by acting to reduce barriers and to expand choice and potential for all persons, with special regard for those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable, oppressed or have exceptional needs.'

The Branch acknowledges that the issue of abortion evokes wide ranging values based views, including within its own membership. Notwithstanding this, and without making a moral judgement on the matter, the Branch contends that the issue is one that cannot be divorced from notions of fundamental human rights and social justice. As such it is not something that should be politicised. It is through this lens that the Branch supports

reform that delivers expanded access for Queensland women to exercise their reproductive rights.

The AASW acknowledges that there are many life circumstances that give rise to women and girls (of reproductive age) seeking to exercise their reproductive rights including sexual assault or rape, health risks to the mother (either physical and/or mental health), socio-economic disadvantage, likelihood of abnormal foetus or risk of health complications and significant disability of the baby (Queensland Health: Maternity and Neonatal Clinical Guidelines: Therapeutic termination of pregnancy, 2013, p10-11).

The AASW is concerned that existing legislation not only denies women appropriate access to their reproductive rights, but it particularly disadvantages women who may already experience disadvantage including but not limited to, women experiencing poverty and/or homelessness, young women, women escaping domestic and family violence, women with a disability, women experiencing sexual assault, women in rural and remote locations and women from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. The AASW has heard testimonies from health professionals within pregnancy support services, of the implications of our current termination laws that include threats to conduct self-terminations. This is clearly an unacceptably precarious position to place an individual in. Robust termination laws can protect vulnerable women in particular, from having to make decisions that can result in significant poor health and emotional outcomes, when faced with an already complex, serious and difficult decision.

What policy objectives should inform the law governing termination of pregnancy in Queensland?

The AASW:

- Encourages legislative and policy change that provides Queensland women expanded access to their reproductive rights and that more broadly demonstrates a commitment to human rights and social justice.
- Considers it critical that any policy objectives must reflect that some women find it more difficult to access safe termination services than others and will require additional support seeking out these services.
- Supports the need for a continued social work voice in this policy reform and particularly in the development of therapeutic support services that should be made available to women considering a termination of pregnancy.
- Recommends that therapeutic support services are provided by a social worker who is an accredited member of the Australian Association of Social Workers and who has the demonstrated experience, skills and knowledge appropriate to supporting women to access services.

What legal principles should inform the law governing termination of pregnancy?

The AASW supports legal principles that:

- Are inclusive of principles of social justice, human rights and respect for diversity. This includes provision for termination related health services that are equally accessible to all women in Queensland.
- That the legal principles for the current reform necessarily reflect the psychosocial needs of the Queensland community.

Recommendations

1. The AASW recommends that any legislative reform is progressed from a human rights and social justice lens.
2. The AASW recommends that sections 224, 225 and 226 of the Criminal Code be repealed to decriminalise the act of a woman seeking out termination of pregnancy.

3. The AASW supports the inclusions of evidence based reproductive health information within 'healthy relationships education program' to young people in school.
4. The AASW supports increased funding to specialist sexual assault services and counselling for vulnerable young women, as outlined in the Zig Zag Young Women's Centre Inc. submission.

The Branch appreciates the opportunity to feed in to this critical area of reform and welcomes future opportunities to assist the Government through the provision of input into the development of social policies and program development across the social welfare and community service sectors.

Yours Sincerely,

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