

Defend women's equality –

Defend the 24 week time limit for abortions

Introduction

At Committee Stage of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill sometime this spring, anti-choice MPs will attempt to restrict women's abortion rights by seeking a reduction in the legal time limit for abortion from 24 weeks to 20 or even 12 weeks.

_____ believes access to safe, legal abortion is an essential prerequisite of women's equality. Along with the Government, MPs across the political parties, women's and human rights groups, sexual health organisations, the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists, and the Royal College of Nurses _____ is firmly opposed to any reduction in the current time limit. **We urge you to:**

- **speak up for women's equality and human rights at Second Reading and throughout the Bill's passage and**
- **oppose any measures to reduce the time limit which would have appalling consequences for the small number of women who need later abortion - each facing very difficult and individual circumstances.**

Five reasons to defend the 24 week time limit.

1. It is central to women's equality

The legalisation of abortion – along with the introduction of the pill - has transformed women's lives — increasing control over when, and if, to have children and so boosting women's employment and education prospects, incomes and opportunities. Barriers to reproductive rights are barriers to full social, economic and political equality. Any restrictions on existing abortion rights would have the inevitable consequence of restricting women's choice and control over their own lives and diminishing their life chances. Women who need later abortions deserve the same choice and access as women who seek a termination in the earlier stages of pregnancy.

2. Any restrictions on the time limit risk violating fundamental human rights

Equitable access to safe abortion is a fundamental human right recognised by international human rights treaties. The denial or restriction of a pregnant woman's right to make an independent decision regarding abortion violates or poses a threat to a wide range of human rights: to health, privacy, freedom from inhuman and degrading treatment, liberty and security of the person, the right to decide the number and spacing of children and even to women's right to life itself.

3. A more restrictive time limit would penalise the most disadvantaged and vulnerable women

Women seeking later abortion are among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable women, often facing exceptional and distressing circumstances. Only 1.6 per cent of abortions are carried out after 20 weeks. They are needed for compelling reasons — most commonly because of late diagnosis (peri-menopausal women or women using contraception); women 'in denial' because of trauma at conception (rape or abuse); serious NHS delays; or due to catastrophic changes in their life circumstances (serious issues with an existing child or domestic violence).

4. Reductions in the time limit will NOT prevent or reduce demand for later abortion

Criminalising vulnerable and disadvantaged women would not reduce the need for later abortion but would place some in a desperate position – forcing them to travel abroad, find unsafe back-street services or endure a pregnancy to term against their will. The major national medical and nursing bodies understand this and have been very clear in their support for the protection of such women under the law. A more honest and effective strategy for limiting the need for and reducing the incidence of late abortion would focus on empowering girls and women with effective sex and relationships education, improving access to free abortion services and removing barriers to early abortion (such as the requirement for two doctors' signatures).

5. There have been no significant developments in foetal viability or sentience.

The current debate on abortion has been dominated by a misleading narrative that there have been dramatic scientific breakthroughs in foetal viability and sentience in recent years. There have been developments in foetal medicine, but none that requires a reappraisal of the status of the foetus, and none that would make anyone more qualified to make a choice about a pregnancy than the woman concerned. As the Commons' Science and Technology Committee's recent Inquiry into the scientific aspects of abortion concluded:

“ while survival rates at 24 weeks (the current upper limit for abortion) and over have improved since 1990, survival rates (viability) have not done so below that gestational point. The Committee concludes that there is no scientific basis - on the grounds on viability - to reduce the upper time limit.”

On the issue of foetal pain, the Committee said “the evidence suggests that while foetuses have physiological reactions to stimuli, this does not indicate that pain is consciously felt, especially not below 24 weeks”. Similarly the Committee noted that: “while new 4D imaging techniques are a useful tool in diagnosis of foetal abnormality, there is no evidence they provide any scientific insights on the question of foetal sentience or viability.” (Twelfth Report of 2006-2007)

Abortion Facts

- 83 per cent of the British public support a woman's right to choose (NOP, October 2007)
- Abortion is still not available on request — women can only access abortion with the agreement of two doctors and under specific criteria.
- A quarter of women having abortions in England and Wales have to pay for them - there are no public funds available specifically to help poorer women in these

Conclusion

Trade unionists and pro-choice MPs have a proud history of defending and promoting a woman's right to reproductive choice and control. A vote to defend the existing time limit is a vote for women's health, equality, dignity and autonomy. Please join us in defending women and their families against the forthcoming attacks.

For further information and briefing or to arrange a meeting please contact: