

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Abortion Law in Ireland, HC 1584 (private session)

Thursday 24 January 2019 Antrim

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Listen to the session

Members present: Mrs Maria Miller(Chair); Tonia Antoniazzi; Sarah Champion, Angela Crawley; Vicky Ford; Jess Phillips.

Questions 1–42

Witnesses

Witness A; Witness B; and Witness C.

Examination of witnesses

Witness A; Witness B; and Witness C.

Q1 **Chair:** Thank you so much for coming in. We are really grateful for you giving your time today. This is the Women and Equalities Select Committee and we are doing an inquiry on access to abortion in Northern Ireland. What we are trying to do in these sessions is to hear people's voices and to give people the opportunity to talk about their experiences. We are incredibly grateful for you coming in today and doing that.

This is not being broadcast. It is what we call a private session. So, although there are some people who will take an anonymised note of what is said, please feel free to speak freely. Hopefully, as we will ask our questions, you will realise that it is not quite as intimidating as it might look right now. We are all Members of Parliament and we all have huge interest in this area. The way we do this is each of us has some particular questions to ask, but it is quite free-flowing, and so please feel free just to answer the questions you want to and not the others.

The two gents over there are in charge of making sure the microphones work and things like that and the two ladies here to my left are from the Committee and they help us with the paperwork and also Alex at the back helps with paperwork. Otherwise, the rest of us are MPs.

Brilliant. Any questions before we start? We will probably go on until about 3.05 pm or something like that.

Jess is going to start. Jess, do you want to say where you represent?

Jess Phillips: I am Jess Philips and I represent Birmingham Yardley and so the east of Birmingham. I hail from Northern Ireland. My father is from Northern Ireland. It is a pleasure to be back here, although a bit rainy. I am going to start just by simply asking if each of you want to say how you feel that the current law on abortion in Northern Ireland has impacted on you and your family to start with.

Witness A: In my situation, I went through a scan where my child had an abnormality. They detected an abnormality, which was life-threatening, and they did not give any chance of survival. They did suggest an abortion maybe would be an option for me due to the abnormalities. Obviously, I was very against that, but with the support of doctors, I did strongly believe that this was right, even though I was and always believed that this was needed a lot for women like myself in my situation as I felt there was not the support for these situations. Mothers in this situation are very vulnerable, so emotions run very high and fear, so it is very important that women get support in these situations. I thought in my situation that abortion is not pushed on but it can be shown as an easy option, as it could resolve the situation, you know.

Q2 **Jess Phillips:** When you say "an easy option", did they suggest that you have an abortion here in Northern Ireland?

Witness A: Well, they did not say where it would be, but the words were put across that abortion would be an option for you, but obviously—

Q3 **Jess Phillips:** Did you feel pressured to have an abortion?

Witness A: Well, to be honest, given my views, I would never consider it. I would be very against it but to be honest, there was pressure because the doctors gave more of what could happen. They gave me a list of maybe 10 different things that could happen to my baby, all the different consequences that comes along with going ahead with the pregnancy, and there was not, to be honest, many positive vibes that I got a chance to hear. It was more all the risks, and my consultant more or less apologised and said, "We're sorry. We are just doing our job. We have to give you all the negatives here". And there was plenty of them on the list, to be honest. None of them did come to occur in my pregnancy. That is what they thought and towards the end none of it came about. Thank God I did keep to my guns, I stuck to it, and now I have a beautiful, happy daughter that is thriving and went against all the doctors' expectations. And to this they said to me, "We're so glad that she pushed through, although we are here to help as much as we can", and I totally respected the doctors' opinions and they're allowed to have them, but they don't have a 100% answer for everything and we always should be given the opportunity and chance there and I would strongly say more support and less of giving the all possibilities of what could have happened because they did have a big impact, as I say. But it was their duty. They had to do that as their job to make the parents and the mother aware of it.

Q4 **Jess Phillips:** Do you think that they should not give all the options?

Witness A: To be honest, well, I do expect them to. They do give the options, but I am against it being done in the manner that they did because that moment is a crucial moment for the mother. We are very vulnerable and we are trying to handle this the best way we can. They gave me all the medical options and all the negatives that could happen and, in their opinion, what was going to happen. It was only through good family support and my own morals and I had to make my own judgments and think what was best and what positives there could be, but it did end up a good situation in the end, really.

Q5 **Jess Phillips:** I am very pleased to hear that. Sorry, just to say the original question again, it was: how do you feel that the law on abortion in Northern Ireland has affected you and your family?

Witness B: I believe the law in Northern Ireland saved my life. The first pregnancy was textbook. It was a perfect pregnancy. Nothing went wrong with it and all went according to plan.

My second pregnancy was somewhat different. At 16 weeks my waters broke prematurely and I went to hospital. I was taken in. I was assessed and I was monitored just to see how I was doing. I was advised to stay in hospital for ongoing monitoring because they wanted to keep looking after me and the pregnancy. I should say that when I went into hospital I was told that there were three things that could happen, three ways that this could go. Firstly, my body might just go into labour. That can happen, but it did not. The second thing that might happen is that over

the course of time we may lose a heartbeat because all the waters had gone from the membranes. They had gone but they kept being replenished. That is what the body does. It keeps replenishing, but each time that I would stand up it would drain—but so long as the heartbeat remained there and I steered clear of infection my term would continue. Okay. They did warn me that there could be perhaps other things, which it could survive, and so I stayed in hospital, holding on to that hope, that that little heartbeat which had already started long before, but I could feel it. I could feel the kicks of the child at 16 weeks and I was able to tell it was always getting stronger and stronger over the next four weeks that I was in hospital.

Unfortunately, after four weeks there, infection set in. My situation was very similar to that of Savita Halappanavar in Galway with one difference, and the difference is that my doctors treated me correctly. They assessed and continually monitored my obs. They kept a good eye on me. Because of the ruptured membranes there, unfortunately the infection set in and that meant things could get very complex. Immediately, they put me on antibiotics. Over the weekend, that was when the infection came. I was put on three courses of antibiotics to try and help me turn. I should say it was the Saturday night when the infection first showed. Come Sunday, with all those antibiotics, I felt fine. On Sunday evening, the nurse said to me, "Look, your obs are back to normal again. This is good. I think the antibiotics have helped you".

And on the Monday morning, the doctors came around initially and things were looking fine, but then an hour later the doctor returned and said, "Look, there's some markers in your blood which we're worried about. It may be that your blood needs compensating". Now, until that point, I felt fine. I was back to normal. I had no complaints. Suddenly, after she told me that, my heart rate shot up in the next 24 hours. It was 130 when it was normally 70. Have you ever gone for your final exams and someone tells you to calm down? You cannot calm down. The doctor said to me, "Look, we are scared that there's an infection lurking in your body". I said, "Look, I'm fine. There is nothing wrong with me. I am just completely frustrated and scared after the news that you have just given me. My body is fine. There's nothing telling me that I'm sick". They said differently and over the course of that Monday they told me that they had to bring me in for early labour. My child was only just shy of 21 weeks at that stage. We knew that early labour she probably would not survive.

How could I give them permission to do that when there was nothing wrong with us? I could still feel her kicks and they were really strong at that stage. She was a fighter. For a whole day, the doctors gave me many opportunities to try and bring down my heartrate but it would not come down. In the evening the nurse was getting very nervous but three doctors had come to see me. They had all spoken to the head consultant and they all came and told me the same message. They said, "Look, we understand that you do not feel sick in any way, but we are telling you that the markers in your blood are busy and in your pregnant state it's going to be very difficult. Your body is overcompensating". Now, I do not

know the doctors but I had to believe them. My body is telling me I am fine. So what do you do? Believe my body or these medics? [inaudible]. It was not until I realised that actually they are held to account by the law. They cannot tell me to get rid of my child without being at risk. I could have sued them for that. That was the main thing that enabled me to take their advice. So then they were monitoring me for septic shock overnight and the next day I had to give permission to deliver my baby, which she did not survive.

The next six weeks I blamed myself because I still struggled. I struggled. I thought I had just given permission for my child to die. It was not until I finally realised that the results of the test that I actually had the same bacteria as I understand, the same thing (as Mrs Halappanavar). The doctor rang again after I came out of hospital and gave me another course of antibiotics to make sure I was okay. I was looked after. If I had not realised that the law was holding the doctor to account, I would not have listened to them because the maternal instinct is strong. And I am not someone who does not know the dangers. I lived in [Country] for two years. One of my best friends in [Country] died during childbirth. I understand the risks of childbirth. But I was scared and your body tells you that you are fine, your child is kicking inside. It takes one very important framework for me to listen to the advice that I have been given because that is why I say that it protected me. Now I read the reports of the case in Galway - read that there was inadequate monitoring. There was failure to adhere to clinical guidelines there, as well as not offering all the options for her care, but my doctors did act correctly for me, and in doing so, saved me.

Witness C: I feel like I should give you a hug.

Jess Phillips: You can do that by all means.

Witness C: I am pregnant right now as well. In my case, it was a completely different experience that might surprise me because the media paints a very interesting picture. Before I became pregnant, I did not look into that or think about because I did not need to, and I had a very interesting life. I was studying first for a [Subject] degree and then I went on to do a Masters. I was focusing my master's in counselling on the [Subject]—I could go on—but I visited a lot of countries with [Organisation], I think in total visited over 20 countries within a couple of years, so I felt like I had an exciting life. I was studying for my Masters. I was travelling to different countries. I do not know if you find this interesting, but I love music, so I was able to use music as a tool for peacebuilding, and this brought me to great experiences. [Event]

So I was having a very good life. And then I had this boyfriend who was [Nationality] and very sexy and I fell so in love with him and I was thinking life was great. [Personal history including experiences of abuse]

And then suddenly, out of nowhere, I got pregnant and [Personal history including experiences of abuse]. I did not want everybody in the world to

know that I was pregnant yet because I was not sure if I was going to make it to 12 weeks.

I was under a lot of stress but I needed to know what to do, so I went onto [social media site] and I said a bit of my story on [social media site] and asked, "Does anybody know what to do in this situation?" And I was shocked at the reaction I got because I had instantly 104 comments in a very short space of time. All of them said, "Just get an abortion, easy", and then, "[Identifiable information]". And I replied, not in a disrespectful way. At this point, I had never, ever heard of the debate between pro-life and choice. I had nothing to do with that because my mind was in other places. And so I said, "I don't want to end the life of my child. Does anyone have any other advice?" And I was banned off [social media site] after receiving a tirade of abuse from women because, according to them, abortion is not killing and I am bad for saying that, even though I was the pregnant one they were telling to kill her own child. And I was so devastated when I had this experience. I did not know who to turn to and [Personal history].

And weeks went by and was living like this and I was thinking, "How am I going to do this?" And my family, even though they were not necessarily pro-abortion, said things like, "You are a slut. You are unmarried. You are having the baby. This is a shame on the name". My friends just said, "Sure, just get an abortion. You can't complain if you're not going to just get an abortion". And my boyfriend blocked me, so that was the last actually I heard of him. And everybody was just like, "You're the only one making this difficult because you could just have an abortion". And for me, that was shocking because, before I would consider abortion, it is my instinct to research everything in great depth to make sure that if I am going to make a life—changing decision like this, I am going to do it the right way, an informed decision and research.

[Activity]The baby was actually developed. They had a heartbeat. I did not know that earlier than nine weeks they had a heartbeat because I knew nothing and I was shockingly undereducated until I got pregnant myself. Whenever I researched it, I realised just how early the heartbeat starts. I researched in great depth and I realised that I had a little child inside me who was depending on their mummy to look after them, and even though this is a challenging time they need me to be strong and they need me to be the best I can be.

And I did not give up, despite a lot of people telling me to. I was in a homeless shelter and I was desperately discriminated against for being homeless because people have such a brand. If you are homeless, you must be on drugs. You must be hopeless or be suicidal. You must be mentally unstable. In the shelter they did spot checks and went through my stuff all the time. They checked my body for self-harm. They tested my blood for evidence of substance abuse. I was constantly treated like a criminal. The homeless shelter did not allow visitors and so I was isolated and there was very little space in the homeless shelter, so I was very far

away from everybody I knew. And it is a horrible situation to be put into. All I really needed was someone just to help a little.

And I came across to London because I started to research. I was like, "Why is everybody so pro-abortion? Is there nobody that exists that actually wants me to have my baby? And I love them? I don't want to lose my baby who by nature I love already". And so I contacted an American charity and I told them and just had a rant because I was just—I said to them, "I don't know what to do. I don't think anybody like you exists in my country". And it turned out that Stanton Healthcare had only just come into existence and it was a beautiful girl called [Name]. Unfortunately she passed away just over a year ago. She was very softly spoken and very kind. You could not rattle her in any way. I had a lot to learn from her. She helped me get accommodation and she drove me to job interviews. The only job I could get because nobody wanted to hire a pregnant woman was at a pig storehouse. It stunk and I did it because I knew it was temporary. It would not be forever and I knew, despite all of these limitations, I got my house from that job.

I had my baby [Identifiable information]. She is called [Name] And I felt that the law kind of, in a way, was my excuse at times because people were like, "Just have an abortion", and I was like, "No, it's against the law", so in your face, you know, so it was my only thing that I had because everybody just wanted an easy escape. Nobody thought that someone could be resilient. Everyone assumed that I was going to be weak and everyone assumed I was going to fail.

Q6 Jess Phillips: If the law was different and abortion was available here as it is where I live in Birmingham, you would still have made exactly the same choices that you made?

Witness C: I am not sure. A lot of people put a lot of pressure on me. I was even told things like, "You can't complain about your suffering because you chose to have the baby". It is the attitude that comes with the change in the law that is the biggest problem, I feel.

Q7 Jess Phillips: Do you think there is a marked difference in attitude in Birmingham than there is in Northern Ireland?

Witness C: I have seen that, yes. I have really felt it because I have friends from all over the world. Where abortion is legal, they see it as almost as easy as birth control. They do not give any value to the life that is actually depending on the mother.

Q8 Sarah Champion: Thank you. I just want to say that I am finding you incredible and so articulate and I am learning so much. Thank you for being so honest with us. I am Sarah. I am an MP from Rotherham, which is in South Yorkshire.

I wanted to start from the opposite end and start back with you, Witness C. Just a really quick answer from all of you. Do you think that the law on abortion is well understood in this country, both for women and from the point of view of medical practitioners?

Witness C: There needs to be a great deal of understanding built amongst the community because I have had a lot of deep conversations with people since my experience and it shocked me how little people know. I cannot hold it against them because before it actually impacted my own life, I did not know anything much about it, either.

Q9 **Sarah Champion:** What about the medical professionals?

Witness C: Most of the medical professionals I have met just want healthcare that supports women. [Personal history] Do you know what I mean?

Q10 **Sarah Champion:** Thank you. Witness B, you said that the abortion law effectively saved your life. Again, the same question: do you think that women and also medical professionals understand the law around abortion?

Witness B: My doctors understood it. I thought they understood it clearly and they explained to me why they needed to do what they had to do. I think there is a fear in people in actually thinking it through and thinking through what it means to you. I had never thought it through. I thought it was for those people who had complications, but anyone can have complications. As I said, I had none in my first pregnancy, lots in my second, and none of us knows what awaits us. I think it is important for people to realise that.

My experience made me realise that there are more people who wish to keep their babies than who wish to lose them, and those people need to know that doctors have their best interests at heart and their babies also protected by the law and it is not that their mobile phone might be more protected than the baby. I think that is really important for the majority. But there is a myth that many people seem to believe because it has been put about by the media that this is a dangerous place to be pregnant. I do not agree with that. Should the law change, I would feel like the carpet was ripped out from under my feet. I would feel disempowered by that and stripped of rights.

Q11 **Sarah Champion:** That was very interesting. Thank you for that. Witness A, what are your thoughts?

Witness A: I do agree with yourself, Witness B. In my situation, it was the doctors obviously in their opinion that because my baby would not survive maybe the full-term pregnancy and, if she did survive, it would be maybe for a few hours after birth due to the abnormality. So, in their point of view, the suggestion, "There's an option if you want to go for an abortion", they obviously mentioned that. But thanks to the pro-life laws here—

The doctors said that they would help me throughout the whole pregnancy and towards the end, when there was a whole change about the outcome. They could not even believe that the scans were from the same baby. When they saw my 20-week scan, they literally turned to the nurses and said, "Sorry, can you bring the correct scan because this is

not the same child?" The abnormality, [condition], that would mean that my child would be born unable to breathe and would maybe survive an hour or two at the most, they had suggested, and there was a very slim chance of my daughter living. She would have to undergo many operations and she would never be able to live, for the small amount of life that she might have had, any normal life. She would never be able to—

Q12 **Sarah Champion:** In your opinion, if the law was not pro-life, then they might have acted a lot quicker to force your hand to have an abortion?

Witness A: Yes, definitely.

Q13 **Vicky Ford:** Witness A, how old is your daughter now?

Witness A: She is [Under 16] now.

Q14 **Vicky Ford:** So, to a certain extent, that experience that you had was before they tightened up the rules that they have now on making it much more difficult to get an abortion if you have a child that is unlikely to survive. We have heard recent evidence that it is much more difficult. I think you are all just wonderful for the stories you are telling us and the way you are able to tell us so clearly of your experiences of the law and being a mum.

There were three areas where it has been sometimes suggested that maybe the law should be more flexible and they are the issues with rape, with incest and when a baby is unlikely to survive birth. Do you feel that those are special circumstances that should be singled out by the law and would be more in favour of the mother maybe than the child?

Witness C: It is very hard to generalise either one of those situations, rape, incest and what was the third one?

Q15 **Vicky Ford:** They call it fatal foetal abnormality. The baby is unlikely to survive.

Witness C: I think it is very difficult to assume that that is what women want or need. I will go through each one for example.

Rape, for example, according to the statistics from the UK, accounts for 0.03% of the abortions, so I am very glad and happy to say that it is not the main reason people abort—98% or 97% are for social reasons.

In the case of rape in this country, which I unfortunately experienced myself in [date], as soon as I reported—obviously it can have an impact on your body, and I could not sit or stand or walk properly without a lot of pain because I was attacked by somebody—the police took me to a place called [name]. [Name of place] is a charity, I believe, or an organisation that works with the police, but you do not have to go to the police to get their care. They offer medical care for anyone who has been the victim of assault or attack. They instantly gave me the morning-after pill and instantly gave me the things I needed to continue life. That included counselling as well.

But even though they gave me the morning-after pill, I had a scare because my period did not come. Apparently this can happen sometimes with morning-after pills because they have an impact on the body. And I was a couple of weeks late and in that period of time I was thinking, "What am I going to do if I am pregnant to this person who did this to me?" I felt like both of us were victims of this horrible—I did not really feel like he was human with the way he acted with me, but for sure I did not necessarily jump to the conclusion that I should abort. I think I understand why some people do, but I think that is why, from my own experience, it is different for everyone. And I have met someone who has had a baby from rape and she agreed with me that they were both the victim and they just needed to be supported and she does not look at her baby and think about the father very often now. The baby's growing up.

It is just very hard to generalise that situation. In that situation, I found myself suicidal and I did make an attempt and I ended up in hospital. It was like a horror movie to me. I was chased by this man and he succeeded, unfortunately, and in this country the law states that if a woman is suicidal she can have an abortion, so in these situations where it is a threat to the woman's life, this is whenever it is allowed.

- Q16 **Chair:** Sorry, just before you move on, Witness C, do you think it is important that this provision of law that if a woman takes the decision after being raped that she does not want to have the child, that she is able to take that decision?

Witness C: I think each individual is unique and each situation is unique. I have been part of a number of support groups after my experience and some women are more deeply impacted than other women because of the differences in their circumstances as well.

- Q17 **Chair:** It is important that, yes, that individuality is recognised in law?

Witness C: I think that there is a lot of fear whenever you have just been raped and you do not know what to do or what to think or how to feel. To be rushed into a decision like an abortion because it is painful and it seems like a way out I do not think is necessarily—

- Q18 **Vicky Ford:** Are you saying people are rushed into it?

Witness C: Because people instantly try to problem solve.

- Q19 **Vicky Ford:** Witness B, what is your view? There are three circumstances where people are suggesting that the law may be almost not giving women enough choice, partly rape and incest where you could see that there is severe mental impact of that child when it is obviously not the woman's choice that she has become pregnant, and the third one is where the child is unlikely to survive birth. We have heard from Witness A how doctors got it wrong in her circumstances, but we have also heard from women who have had a really difficult time and have been forced to go through with the pregnancy, which has left them with a lot of mental scarring, when they knew the baby was not going to survive. How do you feel about it?

Witness B: I would say in my situation the one thing that I held on to was hope because, without hope, it is even worse. I think we all have to have something to cling to to get us through difficult times. Rape and incest are awful situations—awful—but encouraging a woman to have an abortion is just adding to that.

I know that during the six weeks following my loss of my daughter, I blamed myself. I was tormented. I blamed myself because I felt that I had let her down. I felt that all the options had not been truly explored and that time was too tight. We were panicking and there could have been other options. And I know the torment that that was.

All I can say is that from my own mental health now, I am really glad that we did explore the other options that we did, and I cannot put myself in the place of someone else who may feel hurried into making a decision without having real time and all the information first. [inaudible]. Two wrongs do not make a right and you have to go on living. No one wants to live with regrets. That is all I would say. I think they need support and care and that is obvious—there needs to be better support and care.

Q20 **Vicky Ford:** Do you want to add anything else, Witness A?

Witness A: I think you have spoken very well. Obviously it is terrible for any woman to be left in these situations and obviously, like I previously mentioned, they are extremely vulnerable at this stage and there are so many emotions going around. If they know themselves and the person that done this and thinking that, you know, this is going to be their child, it takes a lot of time for a person to emotionally be stable and able to make such a decision. They need the proper professional and family and moral help—every help they possibly can have—so that, you know, in future they are not going to have to live with regrets for the rest of their lives. I have come across so many people where, through similar situations or just through having an abortion, there are so many regrets. I believe people suffer from the mental illnesses now—your depression, your anxiety—through shame that is brought upon by these things where ultimately they maybe might have taken the second option. There is always adoption and there are different things in place that are there for them that can maybe ease things where, in the long run, they are not going to look back with regrets. Like my friend says here, you need a lot of support.

Q21 **Vicky Ford:** Witness C, if the mother felt so depressed by this that they were suicidal, they could still at that stage—do you think that is a reasonable test?

Witness C: I think that if someone's life is in danger, when someone is suicidal, they are not in a logical place. Like we are talking right now and we are coming from a place of reason and rationale. When someone is suicidal, they are not thinking normally. Their life has to be protected.

Q22 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** It is very interesting to listen to all of the different stories and you are all in a different place. I want to talk about support

because you have talked about the support that you have had and have not had from the medical professional and the unregulated support that was available through Mumsnet and things like that, which obviously did not have the same standpoint as you, Witness C. But do you think there is adequate support for women seeking a lawful abortion from medical professionals? Is there that support should you have an issue or there be a problem?

Witness C: Can I offer my own opinion? The support is not in the right area. I do not think that support through abortion is necessarily the best answer. I feel like most women who choose an abortion today feel like they have no choice but to go for abortion because they feel financially under pressure or they think their career could be over or their partner told them to abort or their family do not agree with the pregnancy. There are so many different factors that push women into this place where they feel there is no choice. And when they want to pick themselves up, I know from first hand that it is very difficult to do that. Because I am a single mum with a baby, I have been refused jobs. I have been refused housing support. I have been refused many houses just in the last two months because I am pregnant and I have a baby.

Q23 **Chair:** Refused housing support by whom?

Witness C: Estate agents and landladies and landlords. They want a particular type of person for their house.

Q24 **Chair:** Private landlords?

Witness C: Yes. I am on a waiting list for a house but I do not know how long that will last for.

Q25 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** When you first had contact, did you have more options offered to you by your medical professionals or by your GP?

Witness C: I think my experience of—I had my first baby at [Hospital] and on this baby I have only just started at [Hospital]. The staff have been so fantastic to me throughout everything. Every challenge in the pregnancy, they were so compassionate and ready to support me, any time of day or night. I had a heart attack when I was 31 weeks pregnant with my first baby. I am sure it was all the stress that I was under, but they were absolutely supportive throughout the whole thing. I was there every week until I gave birth after that. Yes, they were fantastic. I could not fault them.

Q26 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** But if they had not provided that support, you might not have wanted to go through with the pregnancy?

Witness C: I have no idea.

Q27 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Do you have anything to add, Witness B? Do you think people are supported if they looking for a legal abortion?

Witness B: I wasn't.

Q28 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** No, I know you were not, but do you think those

services are there and the support is there should you need or want to have it?

Witness B: I honestly do not know.

Q29 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** That is fine. When you were talking, you said you were 16 weeks and you were in hospital, you did mention that they had given you the option then or they had spoken about it.

Witness B: I would have jumped down their throats if they had given me that option. I will be honest. There was one doctor and I felt that he was tiptoeing around it, [inaudible] and he upset me hugely that he did not value my child's health..

Q30 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Witness A, do you have anything to add on that?

Witness A: Just that when I look back to my situation, I am so grateful when I see my daughter and she beats all the odds and everything the professionals have said. I hope in some way—I do not know how—I can just try and be an inspiration and support for other mothers who are in the same situation. Like I said, the doctors supported me greatly throughout my whole pregnancy and it is important to help the mother in these situations. Having listened to everything the professionals at that stage had told me—in my case, they all said no survival—if I had not had the proper support and family support and moral support, and everything that I needed at that time, and had the law been different, you could very easily just go through with the abortion of a child with severe abnormalities, to be honest. There would be a lot of cases where I believe—I hope there would not be—vulnerable women who maybe do not have the support could go for this option. Like I said, mothers are very vulnerable at this stage.

If I had been one of them, my daughter would not be here today and she is the most beautiful daughter and she is thriving and all. When we go back and forth to the consultant for a check-up, they continuously always say that they still to this day cannot believe how, after everything they had predicted and thought, she is just thriving. And she is doing amazingly well and like they said she would never be able to have an active life. She wins all the medals on sports day. That is something I bring up with them and laugh because they said she would not be able to walk for herself and would not be able to breathe, and she managed to live.

For me, I am so grateful and I just hope that the law continues the way it is here in Northern Ireland because, like I said, women are very vulnerable and having this option, if it was different, for some women it would be easy to think about it. So, like I said, the pro-life laws could save my baby's life and it gave me a beautiful daughter, another child into this world. I hope that in some way it can be an inspiration for other mothers always to never give up hope. Like my doctors said to me, this is not something that we sometime more or less be—but science only goes so far and obviously there is more than that beyond that.

Q31 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** I am not going to ask another question on this, but what support have you had from pro-life groups and who have they been?

Witness A: They have been very good and there was some close contact. I don't really know these groups and it is a few years back now since my daughter's birth, but I had very good support from family background and friends. I think at the time I did not really look around the groups much because I did not really know many.

Q32 **Sarah Champion:** Did you feel there was good support there for you, though, at the time?

Witness A: Yes, I did—I just wanted to help with my story, just as I felt very strongly, you know, just to try and inspire just a bit of hope for other mothers. And I really strongly wanted to be here, and I am so glad that I got the opportunity today to be here, just to show that this can contribute so much to helping that the law can see that, even though the child has severe abnormalities, we cannot just give up hope. We have to strongly try and hold in place that hopefully the law does not change.

Q33 **Sarah Champion:** Witness A, I do not know if you said and, if you did, I am really sorry I missed it. Has your daughter got any physical or mental problems?

Witness A: No, she has just been discharged now from the regular check-ups that she has been having every year and every couple of years she had to get CT scans to check. But what they said is, if I had never taken the 20-week scan, towards the end of the pregnancy when they continued on the scans, this would never have been detected. None of this would have. So, to be honest, I think even the question of the 20-week scan comes in play. I know it is there as an option to see whether there is something wrong with the baby. I just strongly question whether it is a good thing or not because, if I had said, "I am not going to have the 20-week scan", I would never have gone through this and the doctors would never have detected this. So there is another question there.

Q34 **Angela Crawley:** Thank you for sharing your experiences with the Committee and sharing such personal testimony.

We are aware that there is the United Nations work with international law and the UN Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which you might know of as CEDAW. The law in Northern Ireland, they argue, breaches women's human rights and the CEDAW Committee has called for the law in Northern Ireland to be changed both for individual women and for medical professionals so that we decriminalise in relation to abortion. I am just wondering how you each feel about that.

Chair: Give us just literally a quick point of view.

Witness C: It depends on the context. Whenever a woman's life is in danger, let her have the choice. I can completely understand it. But right now I am 18 weeks and I can feel my baby moving again and it is

exciting. I have a natural instinct inside of me to love that child and it breaks my heart to imagine that there are babies out there that are aborted even from this point or even after. It just really breaks my heart.

I feel like, in relation to women's rights, they should maybe do more to stop discrimination in employment or stop discrimination in housing. I actually have the money there to pay these private landlords. I was not lacking in anything. But they just said no.

Q35 **Angela Crawley:** In terms of the human right making that decision, do you think that right or wrong?

Witness C: I do not think that it is right to abort a human baby. That is my personal opinion.

Q36 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Witness B?

Witness B: If I am being honest, it baffled me. I looked at it and I couldn't—first, it came from very biased sources. It really discouraged me that a report put out by a committee within the United Nations has not been able to gather a balanced viewpoint. I was really shocked and discouraged me. It talked a lot about impoverished areas [inaudible]. So, first of all, I did not find it to be a very authoritative report to begin with.

In terms of criminalisation, were it not for the fact that doctors can be held to account, and that there could be consequences if they did something wrong, I would not have listened to them. I would not be sitting here in this room. I would have died. There must be consequences, but I am not the person to say what those consequences are. But I also think in each case and every situation is different. Not necessarily—I do not know if it is just pregnant woman that are being prosecuted but I do not believe that some people in Northern Ireland have been prosecuted.

Q37 **Chair:** There have been people prosecuted, yes, and imprisoned.

Witness B: Have there? I also understand those are not just the women but those who have abetted. I would say that were there not consequences for my doctors, I would not be here.

Q38 **Chair:** How about you, Witness A?

Witness A: I would not agree with more abortion in any circumstance or any situation; for example, like you mentioned the situation of a woman, if her life is in jeopardy, obviously it is very difficult in the most extreme worst case. I do know what it is like as a mother and I can't speak for others, but I would give my life for my child because there is always the chance, like in my situation. It is not always 100% certain what can be and what cannot be because there is always hope, and you have to always know that there is something beyond science, so I think as long as there is the support, there is always hope and anything is possible. I think any of us now would look at our children and know that we would we will give our lives for our children.

Q39 **Chair:** Brilliant. Can I just ask one very final question? This is a yes or a no. Do you think the law has got the balance right at the moment because in the extreme cases women would have access to an abortion? Would you agree with that?

Witness C: [Personal history].

Q40 **Chair:** The law there has the safeguards in place?

Witness C: They had to. There was no other option in that situation and she wanted her baby.

Q41 **Chair:** Witness B and Witness A, you would agree with that? Do you think the balance is right at the moment because there are safeguards there so that, in extreme cases, women would have access to an abortion if their life was at risk?

Witness B: I believe, yes, that the safeguards are there. I also believe that because of the balance of protecting both of us, that this framework is very important.

Q42 **Chair:** Witness A, what do you think?

Witness A: I think that, at the moment, it is protecting the woman and the baby. In my situation, if it had not been in place, even though I would never go for abortion, but looking at maybe teenagers these days and just girls, they are more vulnerable and maybe do not have the support. Having been in this situation, if that law on babies with severe abnormalities had been different for our children, I believe there would be abortions. Yes, maybe they would go ahead and, like in my case, some babies could develop something in pregnancy but can be born fine, like my daughter. The law does provide for the baby and the mother.

Chair: Thank you all so much for coming in and sharing some very personal stories. I am really grateful to you for doing that. Not everybody can do that and you are pretty special people for coming in and doing that today. Thank you. It was incredibly helpful for us to hear that first hand and we are very grateful. We will treat everything you have said to us in the way that it was given in terms of not talking about this in a way that can be attributed to you, but I hope you would value the fact that we can use your evidence to draw on as we write our report. Thank you so much.