

**The Young Women’s Movement Parliamentary Briefing:**

**Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) (Scotland) Bill**

30th April 2024

**BACKGROUND** 

The Young Women’s Movement is Scotland’s national organisation for young women’s leadership and rights. We have existed for 100 years. Our movement is focused on protecting and progressing the rights of young women and girls. Our vision is a fairer Scotland where young women and girls are meaningfully heard, valued and supported to lead collective action and enact transformational change throughout society, systems and structures.

**SUMMARY OF OUR POSITION**

At The Young Women's Movement, we are glad that the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee has unanimously agreed to the general principles of the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill. While the report rightly considered the conflicting human rights arguments relevant to the Bill, it ultimately concluded they are “proportionate” to the legislation’s aims of ensuring women are able to safely access healthcare. We agree, and we urge MSPs from across the Chamber to similarly endorse the principles of the Bill.

**YOUNG WOMEN’S VIEWS**

As noted in our [Status of Young Women in Scotland 2022-23](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6413232bf29ba901ed614415/t/644627b9a4c2fd7092a4df40/1682319303577/SYWS+22-23+Experiences+of+Accessing+Healthcare.pdf) report, young women in particular face substantial obstacles when accessing healthcare in Scotland, particularly contraception, abortion and post-abortion services.[[1]](#footnote-1) In our survey, young women asked for the introduction of buffer zones around hospitals and clinics across Scotland to protect their dignity, preserve their privacy and enhance their reproductive rights.

Young women understood that the Bill is not concerned with whether or not abortion services should be legal and does not propose any changes to abortion law in Scotland. Instead, the Bill is concerned with the legal regulation of protests outside hospitals and clinics that offer abortion services, including the display of graphic signs and posters, following and filming women entering clinics, and distributing leaflets with potentially false or dangerous information.

Young women felt that the Bill rightfully prioritises and protects the rights and dignity of women to access abortion healthcare without fear of intimidation or harassment, and that this is a fair and proportionate way of legally regulating this difficult and highly personal issue.

Most of the young women we engaged with agreed with the penalty for offences related to the Bill, though some expressed concerns that a fine did not go far enough to deter protestors from gathering in large groups. One young woman noted that the use of fines appears to have worked well in Northern Ireland, and that “anything less than a fine would not be severe enough.”

Some of the young women we engaged with noted that protestors could find other ways to intimidate women accessing hospitals and clinics offering abortion services. For example, one young woman noted that audio or visual equipment could be used to continue to intimidate or harass women either within or directly outside the safe access zone, and that the Bill should ensure a ban on the use of technology to digitally harass patients’ and staff entering hospitals and clinics that provide abortion services.

**HUMAN RIGHTS**

At The Young Women’s Movement, we sympathise with those that have expressed concerns about the Bill restricting their human rights, specifically the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and freedom of assembly. Nonetheless, we believe that the Bill does not seek to stop or ban anti-choice protests or activity, and the majority of young women that we engaged with were passionate about that and agreed that the safe access zone should apply to both pro-choice and anti-choice protests. We are convinced that the Bill is an attempt not to restrict freedom of expression, religion or protest, but to safeguard public health and protect the right of women to access abortion and associated reproductive healthcare without obstruction, and that this is proportionate to the aims and objectives of the Bill.

**CONCLUSION**

At The Young Women’s Movement, we believe that attempts to infringe upon women’s right to safely access abortion and associated reproductive healthcare fundamentally attacks women’s equality and devalues women’s place in Scottish society. We therefore urge MSPs to endorse the principles of the Bill and work together towards ensuring that women seeking abortion healthcare across Scotland are legally entitled to access it safely, without being judged, shamed, intimidated and harassed for doing so.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION**

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1. [The Status of Young Women in Scotland 2022-23: Accessing Healthcare](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6413232bf29ba901ed614415/t/644627b9a4c2fd7092a4df40/1682319303577/SYWS+22-23+Experiences+of+Accessing+Healthcare.pdf). The Young Women’s Movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)