Written submission from Mrs Pauline Gately (ANI0274)

Executive summary

1 The extension of legalised abortion to Northern Ireland is opposed on the grounds that:
   a) The right to life of the unborn child should be acknowledged and defended: the unborn child should not be subject to age discrimination.
   b) It is contrary to the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child.
   c) Under the false banner of emancipation it actually exploits and abuses women and can cause great, if largely silent, suffering.
   d) Legalising abortion has adverse consequences for pregnancy care.

Introduction

2 This submission is prepared in a personal capacity, founded on 30 years’ experience in engaging with ‘life’ issues. This includes working to open a Life House to help women who might be otherwise driven to abort because homeless and also following and engaging with the debate on a range of relevant issues both politically and academically.

3 Defence of abortion is largely predicated on a denial of the nature of the unborn child and on the premise that legalised abortion is necessary prerequisite for female emancipation. To an extent that is reflected in the stated scope of this Inquiry which prioritises the implications for women over others affected. It also focuses on the experience of women in Northern Ireland (NI) under their current legislative regime without seeking to learn from the experience of women where abortion is more widely legalised. This submission primarily invites the Committee to consider the implications for women in NI should abortion law be ‘liberalised’ there by looking, for illustration, at experience in the rest of the UK.

4 It also comments briefly on the implications for the UK of its international commitments and on the role of this Committee.

The ultimate exploitation of women

5 The early feminists saw abortion for what it is. As Alice Paul put it:
The ultimate exploitation of women\ii.

6 Now women and girls are invited to believe they can be sexually active outside the context of a loving, committed relationship in which children would be welcomed and nurtured and still avoid pregnancy. Then when they discover otherwise they are offered abortion as a quick fix: language is manipulated and the scientific truth about the nature of the developing child suppressed to deny the reality of the true nature of abortion. At the same time the lived experience of women who would rather not abort but are pressured by partners, families, friends or simply circumstance is often that, under the banner of ‘choice’ they are offered no help to explore alternatives\ii. Then they are left to bear alone the burden of the ‘choice’ they never really had. (It is the prolife organisations that understand this and provide the necessary support and counselling.)

7 This is not emancipation. It causes untold suffering. Yet, in a misguided attempt to spare the feelings of those who have already aborted, the denial and misinformation continues and the suffering passes on to subsequent generations.

8 True female emancipation can only be achieved when

- women are no longer sexually exploited,
- both men and women are encouraged to restrict sexual activity to a committed relationship in which any child conceived will be welcomed and nurtured by both parents and
- women are fully respected, supported and valued in their unique procreative role but
- that role is not over-played to deny women the chance to fulfil their potential in other areas of life.

9 No doubt many will see this as unrealistic. I suggest this is only because we live in a culture which makes it seem so. Just as the early feminists challenged the prevailing culture so should we. The process of true emancipation of women, far from being supported by the legalisation of abortion, has been obstructed by it and that must change. To extend the scope of abortion in NI is simply to extend this exploitation and the denial of the true needs and rights of women.

The impact on healthcare
10 The desensitisation of relevant healthcare practitioners to abortion has had a detrimental impact on the care of women with problem pregnancies.

International obligations

11 The Inquiry introduction mentions the role of the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the relevant Convention. The Convention nowhere mentions abortion. I question, therefore, how the CEDAW Committee can assert that the UK has failed in its obligations in this regard. I note, in particular, this comment from Ruth Halperin-Kaddari:

“Denial of abortion and criminalization of abortion amounts to discrimination against women because it is a denial of a service that only women need.”

12 That does not follow. To deny this ‘service’ is not to discriminate against women but rather to discriminate against an activity which kills another human being.

13 Further, if the Convention were to be interpreted as requiring the decriminalisation of abortion it would be in direct conflict with the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child which states:

“Whereas the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth.”

The Role of the Women and Equalities Commission

14 The stated role of the Committee includes holding the relevant Government bodies to account on age equality. I trust you will do so.

15 I also ask you to note the disability discrimination currently inherent in abortion legislation elsewhere in the UK and invite you to consider this under your ongoing remit.

Conclusion

16 I ask the Committee to consider this matter in the light of the objective scientific reality of abortion and the detrimental effect on both women and the
unborn of its legalisation. Then I invite you use your role to foster a culture in which women can be truly emancipated and equality is observed before, as well as after, birth.

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ii From a letter to the Catholic Herald dated 28th October 2016 from 38 women: “All of us were having abortions for a wide variety of reasons: domestic violence, abandonment, lack of rights to stay in the UK, no recourse to public funds, pressure from family, lack of money, joblessness and homelessness. None of us sought abortion as our choice, but we sought abortion as the only choice we had. Many of us upon entering Marie Stopes or BPAS centres were not asked about our reasons for wanting to abort. Some were, but none of us were offered any help or support to continue our pregnancies by these centres.”

See also various Care Quality Commission reports on abortion clinics (e.g. Marie Stopes, Maidstone Page 27, left column)

iii See, for example, Melinda Tankard Reist: Defiant Birth and Catholic Medical Quarterly, Valuing the Right to Conscientious Objection: A Patient’s Perspective

iv UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, UK violates women’s rights in Northern Ireland by unduly restricting access to abortion – UN experts

v United Nations, Declaration of the Rights of the Child

vi UK Parliament, Role - Women and Equalities Commission

vii See Section 11 (d) Abortion Act 1967 as amended which makes ‘serious’ handicap (such as cleft palate) a ground for abortion and with no time limit. Re cleft palate see, for example, the Telegraph, 7th December 2003: We warned them, they mocked us, now we’ve been proved right