

Protests at abortion clinics - harassment or free speech?

A woman stands on the street arguing fiercely with a group of anti-abortion protesters. She questions a man about whether he is filming women entering a clinic. She rebukes the protestors passionately about making women feel guilty and about judging people without knowing their circumstances. She is just a passer-by, but the fact that she is obviously in the late stages of pregnancy herself seems to add force to her support for other women's right to choose differently. Against the wall there is a huge, graphic poster of an aborted foetus - a tiny, partly-formed arm, raised and blood-covered.

In another part of London, a middle aged woman with curly grey hair asked a young protestor "Why are you here outside my doctor's surgery?" She tells a TV news reporter that she fought for a woman's right to choose to end a pregnancy and does not want to see protests at her 'wonderful' GP surgery.

These are two examples from YouTube videos in which people question the right of anti-abortion protestors to demonstrate outside clinics and surgeries.

The British Pregnancy Advisory Service has experienced an increase in the number of anti-abortion protests outside abortion clinics, with some activists standing directly outside and blocking entrances, hindering access to advice, counselling and medical treatment.



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As protests have become more frequent, there have been calls for 'buffer zones' around clinics which would keep the protestors at a distance. The hope is that this would prevent the area around medical centres becoming 'a battle zone' of protest and counter-protest in which staff as well as patients are intimidated.

Such zones have been tried in other countries. In Canada, for instance, the state of British Columbia has buffer zones of different sizes around doctors' surgeries, hospitals, clinics and medical workers' homes. Other states have limited the numbers who can protest or pray outside clinics. Toronto has instituted a 3 metre 'floating' buffer zone meaning protestors cannot come close to patients and staff.

People who object to the protests suggest that they make already vulnerable women feel uncomfortable and that they attempt to make women feel wrong or guilty. They say the cameras used by the protestors particularly worry the women, who fear being filmed and then publicly 'shamed'. At an already very emotional time, the protest feels intrusive and threatening to them. They argue that women who attend an abortion clinic have not taken

the decision lightly and should not have a difficult choice challenged in a way that is psychologically and sometimes physically intimidating.

One woman told Channel 4 news how she felt harassed on her way into a clinic by the sight of plastic foetuses and graphic pictures of the process. "They weren't aggressive or loud, but it was emotional blackmail," she said.

The protestors, on the other hand, generally feel that their cause outweighs any discomfort that they impose on the women or the general public.

In the cases on YouTube the protestors were from a group called Abort67 whose aim, according to their website, is "to make abortion unthinkable and to see the law give full protection to the unborn. The most effective way to change public policy is to first change public opinion."

Abort67 is part of a wider group CBRUK. Its parent group - The Center for Bio-Ethical Reform - was formed in the United States in 1990. Protests and even violence against abortion providers are much more prevalent in the US and the debate there is much fiercer.

This group sees a foetus, from conception, as a viable human being, they feel they are justified in acting to prevent abortion. To those who put the hardest cases to them - such as "What about rape or incest?" - their answer is "Why should the unborn



Carlos Javier Sanchez/AP/Press Association Images

Women have not taken the decision lightly and should not have a difficult choice challenged in a way that is psychologically and sometimes physically intimidating

child be punished because of his/her father's crime?" They see the rights of the foetus as the highest priority and therefore have little time for the counter-argument of a woman's right to choose. Instead they argue that they have the right to put their point of view and that a buffer zone would interfere with that.

Abortion is a legal right in this country, and so is free speech! When two rights collide, how do you decide the greater priority?

The organisation 40 Days for Life holds prayer vigils outside abortion clinics. They deny that these cause harassment and distress. A spokesman said: "We've been organising prayer vigils since 2010 - legal and peaceful vigils - we've seen hundreds of women in London choose life because of pavement counselling, and this has helped people in need." His group, and other anti-abortion groups, dislike the use of graphic images by Abort67 but strongly defend their "legal right to public protest". They see the demand for buffer zones as restricting the right to free speech. For example, the campaign group Right to Life says, "Regardless of what we think of the prudence or wisdom of individual protests or protestors, all people of good will should zealously guard our freedoms to act and speak in the public square."

Abort67 has the slogan Push Back, echoing its desire to turn back all pro-abortion laws. "We want to see a generation that is bold and fearless to stand up under the pressure to go with the flow."

The British Pregnancy Advisory Service, within a coalition of 19 organisations, including the Royal College of Midwives, Marie Stopes International and the End Violence Against Women Coalition, has launched the Back Off campaign, saying: "We believe limiting the ability to interfere with women as they try to access a lawful medical service in confidence does not represent an undue restriction on our existing freedoms. These people have every right to campaign for greater restrictions on women's reproductive choices and there are plenty of opportunities and locations in which to do so. However the space immediately outside a clinic should not be one of them."

Abortion is a legal right in this country, and so is free speech. Does ensuring free and unhindered access to clinics deny people the right to peaceful protest? When two rights collide how do you decide which has the greater priority?

Sources: Various

In September 2018 the government decided against establishing buffer zones around abortion clinics across the UK. The Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, said that although a review had collected evidence of protestors displaying graphic images, following people and standing in their way, and even of assaults, this was not what normally happened. Most protests were more passive and the existing law was adequate. To impose buffer zones would be out of proportion.

Individual local councils are finding ways to act. Ealing Council in West London has set up a buffer zone using a Public Space Protection Order and others are considering following this example.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- Do you agree that abortion should be legal?
- Do you agree with the idea of free speech?
- Who do you sympathise with? Can you see the opposite point of view?
- Are there ever inappropriate places to protest?
- How would you deal with this situation?