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Safe access to abortions: buffer zones

Liz McGachey, NEC and national women's forum member speaks about accessing abortions in the UK safely and the legislation around abortion buffer zones.

Trigger warning: this article contains references to abortion and sexual violence.

Access to abortions has not always been easy. Anti-abortion protesters outside clinics make it unsafe for many - not just for those requiring this service. These protesters' actions range from handing out leaflets to following women, which can be intimidating for patients and staff. They might also carry signs and use loudspeakers to call these women murderers.

Abortions are often carried out in clinics where other health services are provided to women, including counselling for survivors of sexual assault or cervical smear tests. These patients will often be in a vulnerable state before facing this intimidation.

Safe access zones, or 'buffer zones', have been law in England and Wales since May 2023, and in Northern Ireland (NI) since September 2023. These zones make it illegal to influence, obstruct or harass those accessing or providing abortion care. They apply within 150 metres (or 100 to 250 metres in NI) of a clinic, hospital or any premises providing services. This allows women to access vital services with safety, dignity and privacy.

Consultation on these zones in Scotland closed in August 2022 and the Scottish government is committed to taking action to pass this important law to give all women safe access to healthcare. The STUC Women's Committee which I sit on, on behalf of PCS, has been involved in the consultation alongside health organisations, MSPs and campaign groups. This is very much a trade union issue and safe access to healthcare, of any kind, is a fundamental human right.