

Remarks by the Chairperson, Ms. Justice Mary Laffoy,

At the introduction of the Session on First Hand Testimony at the Assembly

This morning we concluded that part of our work programme that involves expert presentations. To date, our work has focussed on providing you, the Members, with the detail required to be able to make informed recommendations to the Oireachtas on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution. We have consistently tried to put this material before you in an objective and neutral manner.

At this juncture, we should take a moment to remind ourselves of the actual words of the Eighth Amendment as enacted which we have been tasked to consider;

The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right.

The words I have quoted have affected people, both born and unborn, in Ireland in many ways, directly and indirectly. To gather many voices, views and opinions on the topic, the Assembly asked for submissions from individuals, representative groups, citizen organisations and members of the public on the topic. We received over 13,000 submissions and the remainder of this weekend will be entirely dedicated to information, testimony and opinions brought to us via this submissions process.

When you are considering the many voices and opinions you will read, hear and engage with over the remainder of the weekend it is very important that you place them in the context of the entire work programme that we have put to you to date. They also provide you with an opportunity to review and reassess what you have heard in other sessions.

This is a Citizens' Assembly and, as the citizens you have consistently asked to hear from the voices of women whose lives have been directly impacted by the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution. This is important because these are very particular experiences that most of you will not have experienced yourselves. Personal testimony affords us the opportunity to hear first-hand about some of the effects of the medical, legal and ethical theory we have heard since we held our first meeting.

In presenting this testimony and in making the necessary arrangements for it, the Secretariat and I have been guided by several key principles:

- That those who offer to share their stories are treated with sensitivity and compassion;
- That the stories put before the Assembly reflect a range of perspectives and experiences;
- That the stories do not imply any judgement on the decisions made by other women in similar circumstances.
- That the testimony offered is informative and will aid you the Citizens in your consideration of possible recommendations to the Houses of the Oireachtas.

These are our guiding principles but from outset we must acknowledge that it has not been possible to capture everyone's lived experience. However, the circumstances covered today include those who had a crisis pregnancy and those who received a diagnosis of a fatal foetal abnormality or life limiting condition.

Also, while every effort was made in terms of bringing to you a spectrum of voices it would be impossible to capture a comprehensive range of case studies. Rather this is an **attempt** to highlight the many and overlapping complexities involved in women's personal experiences with the Eighth Amendment.

Given that the women involved were making submissions to the Assembly whose job it is to consider the Eighth Amendment, it is unsurprising that they expressed their own views about the Eighth Amendment during the interviews. This is part of telling their story. It would have been very inappropriate for us to silence these women by censoring those views. However, it does mean that all of you – as the

members of this Assembly – will have to think very sensitively and carefully about what the women say. I am sure that you – like I was – will be struck by these women’s bravery and honesty and will respect the integrity of each personal experience that is shared with you. But you may find that you draw different conclusions from each experience, compared to those drawn by the woman herself. This is a necessary part of this deliberative process. One of the core values of this process is that we respect the perspectives of those with whom we may disagree. This also means that we can disagree with those whom we respect. This value becomes even more important today, tomorrow and during our last weekend.

It is important that at this stage that we discuss in some detail how we are bringing this personal testimony to you.

The women who will share their story with you today were identified from the submissions to the Assembly, either directly or through a representative group.

In making this selection I first looked at women who wrote directly to the Assembly and who indicated they would be willing to share their story with the Assembly. To ensure that a range of circumstances was presented a representative group was in one case contacted to assist with the identification of women who might be willing to tell their personal stories.

I was assisted in the selection process by the Secretariat, the HSE Crisis Pregnancy Programme and with academic support from the Crisis Pregnancy Counselling Skills Programme in Maynooth University. There is detailed documentation about the process on the website and I would encourage people to visit these pages as I believe it a valuable record of both the complexity of this process and of the good faith that it was undertaken in.

The interviews were recorded in February and testimony has been provided anonymously. The reason for this is that some of the women who have been interviewed sought anonymity. These are women who are telling their stories not as public figures but as individuals and private citizens and we must respect their wishes. Therefore, in interests of

consistency each of the six stories will be presented anonymously on the day.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to place the voices we will hear in the context of the submissions we have received. Over 200 individual personal stories were received by the Assembly and many more were received via advocacy groups. The Secretariat has collated these submissions, mindful of all requests for anonymity, in one document and Sharon is going to demonstrate how these can be accessed. This is a very important document. These are real life experiences and I would ask you the members and anyone who is following this Assembly to access this material.

(SHARON DEMONSTRATION)

Thank you, Sharon.

The interviews with these women were carried out by Dr Mary Ryan, Head of the Department of Adult and Community Education and Co-Director of the Counselling and Adult Guidance Programme, Maynooth University. Sinead Ingolsby was engaged by the Secretariat to undertake the logistical elements of the recordings. Dr. Ryan will provide you with some further detail on the interview process before we begin. After that we will begin and we a voice of a woman will be heard for seven minutes. This will be followed by a moment for member reflection where the Assembly will go into private session for three minutes. Live stream televising will be paused.

Finally, I must thank all the women whose voices we will hear today. In bringing their voices into this room, into this Assembly. We are engaging with real live and real lived experiences. These are women bringing their

stories to us at our request, to help us understand the Eighth Amendment. I truly am grateful to them.

I would now like to call on Dr. Mary Ryan to first give us some further background to the stories and then introduce each one.