

First Hand Experiences at the Assembly

Background Note on arrangements for Session on 4th March 2017

Objective

The Eighth Amendment raises complex and multi-faceted issues. One dimension is the experience of women who have been affected by the Eighth Amendment.

The Members have indicated that the Assembly should hear directly from women who have been affected by the Eighth Amendment.

Personal testimony like this allows the citizens the opportunity to hear first-hand about some of the effects of the issues they have been discussing at these weekends.

In presenting this testimony and in making the necessary arrangements for it, the Secretariat has been guided by a number of key principles:

- That those who offer to share their stories are treated with sensitivity and compassionately;
- That the stories put before the Assembly reflect a wide 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 the Citizens in their consideration of possible recommendations to the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Interviewees

Range of circumstances

The Assembly will hear testimony across a broad range of circumstances. At the outset, the Chair recognises that not everyone's

lived experience can be captured in an exercise like this; however, the circumstances covered include those who had a crisis pregnancy and those who received a diagnosis of a fatal foetal abnormality or life limiting condition.

Identification of interviewees

The women who have been asked to share their personal stories were identified from those who made submissions to the Assembly, whether directly or through representative groups.

In making the selection Ms Justice Laffoy first selected from women who wrote directly to the Assembly and who indicated they would be willing to share their story with the Assembly. In order to ensure that a broad 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..

Ms Justice Laffoy was assisted in the selection process by the HSE Crisis Pregnancy Counselling Service and academic support from the Crisis Pregnancy Counselling Skills Programme in Maynooth University.

Interviewer

The interviews 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. Dr. Ryan is a therapist and educator/researcher with considerable experience of crisis pregnancy.

Interview Format and Project Delivery

All interviews were pre-recorded for presentation to the Assembly on 4th March. Approaching it in this way means that the women in question will not be presented with a challenging public speaking role. It is noted however, that some of the women participating indicated they would be prepared to address the Assembly in any format.

In all cases those giving testimony have been facilitated to have their partners, a family member or a friend come along with them to support them and/ or be part of the interview process if desired.

A media professional was engaged by the Assembly Secretariat to both project manage the logistical elements and to undertake any editing that was necessary. This work was done by Sinéad Ingoldsby on behalf of the Assembly. Sinéad is a media professional with extensive experience gathering and documenting people's personal stories to be presented to a wider audience. Much of Sinéad's work has involved subjects of a particularly intimate and sensitive nature and she is accustomed to producing this content in a manner that puts the contributor at the centre of the process and facilitates them in the sharing of their experience.

The reasons for editing testimony of this kind are as follows:

- First and foremost, these interviews must be contributor-centered. In some cases, the women have indicated they are anxious to protect their anonymity and therefore the edited version omits any identifying information.
- Aligned to this, there may be moments in an interview of this kind where someone may divulge information, which they do not want to share with a wider audience. They must feel comfortable in the knowledge that any aspect of what they say can be edited out at their request. For these reasons, the unedited versions of the interviews will not be made available to the public.
- Finally, the interviews were edited down to 7-8 minute vignettes, for presentation to the Assembly. This edit is necessary to allow the Citizens to hear from a broad range of circumstances, in the context of a finite amount of time available to the Assembly. Given the intensely personal subject-matter, it was not considered appropriate to require the women to prepare a 5-7 minute contribution for delivery; instead, sensitive questions from a skilled interviewer have allowed women to tell their own stories, while at the same time retaining control over the final edited recording that will be played to the Assembly.

A detailed information note has been given to each interviewee in advance to explain the process in detail and to allow them to be as prepared as possible for the interview. This has formed the basis of an informed consent document, a copy of which is included as Appendix A to this document.

A copy of the final edited version was provided to each interviewee in advance of the Assembly meeting in March. This allowed the Secretariat to ensure that she was satisfied that it was a fair representation of her experience as described in the longer interview.

The testimony has been provided anonymously. The reason for this is that some of the women who have been interviewed sought anonymity. As such, in the interests of consistency each of the six stories will be presented anonymously on the day.

In introducing each of the women, Dr. Ryan will provide some general information about to provide context for their story. It should be noted that when a person's own voice is used, absolute anonymity cannot be guaranteed. There are mechanisms to overcome this (voice distortion etc); however, these have not been used for this project as the negative impacts of using these might outweigh any benefits.

Finally, in relation to anonymity, it is clear that the stories being shared by these women belong to them, and therefore it is not for the Assembly to dictate how they tell that story. This includes engaging with the media afterwards. The Assembly Secretariat has clarified with each of the women that they are free to engage with the media, including to discuss their experience of engaging with the Assembly, following the broadcast of their interviews if they so wish. However, it is a matter for each woman whether she decides to initiate contact with the media.

Interview methodology/approach;

Respondents were invited to reflect on their lived experiences in a respectful and relational process. The emphasis was on the use of open questions in a semi structured format. Attention was paid to respondents phrasing and words which shape the dynamic and pace of the discussion.

Draft areas for discussion and shape for the edit

While these are interviews, the material is sensitive for the interviewees. An empathetic attitude is essential from the interviewer.

The following is a list of the five broad areas for discussion in the interviews. These five broad areas which also informed the edit- these are the essential characteristics of each story that we want to hear.

These are presented in question format and are as follows:

1. Can you tell me, in your own words, the circumstances around your pregnancy?
2. What led you to make the decision you made?
3. What was the process of making that decision? Did you encounter any supports/ difficulties?
4. What were the practical and emotional implications of carrying out your decision?
5. How have you been since that decision?

First Hand Experiences at the Assembly

Informed Consent/ Information Note

Background

The Citizens' Assembly wants to hear directly from women who have been affected by the Eighth Amendment. This will form part of the Agenda for the Assembly meeting on 4th March 2017.

Hearing personal testimony like this is important as it allows the citizens the opportunity to hear first-hand about how the matters they are discussing at these weekends effect women and their families.

The Assembly Secretariat is contacting those who have made a personal submission to the Assembly and is inviting them to share their stories. In order to ensure balance it is proposed that the Assembly will be hearing from across a broad range of circumstances.

Based on the written submission you made to the Assembly, we would like to interview you to hear more about your story.

Please note that you may exit this process at any time. Similarly, the Assembly Secretariat reserves the right not to present your interview to the Assembly.

Details about the Interview

We hope to conduct the interviews over the first two weeks in February at a time and location that is most convenient to you. This can be done at your home or in a neutral location near you- whichever you prefer. Please feel free to bring your partner, a family member or a friend along with you as support.

We are proposing that your interview will be presented as a pre-recorded audio submission.

Your testimony will be anonymous; however it is worth noting that as we will be using your voice, absolute anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

All of the logistical and technical arrangements will be carried out by Sinead Ingoldsby, who will also edit the interview for the Assembly. Sinead has extensive experience working on sensitive projects such as this and is mindful of the need to preserve anonymity and safeguard material.

The interviews will be 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. Mary is a therapist and educator/researcher with considerable experience of crisis pregnancy.

The following is a list of the five broad areas for discussion which will form the basis of your interview. It is these five broad areas which will also inform the edit- these are the essential characteristics of each story that we want to hear.

These are presented in question format and are as follows:

1. Can you tell me, in your own words, the circumstances around your pregnancy?
2. What led you to make the decision you made?
3. What was the process of making that decision? Did you encounter any supports/ difficulties?
4. What were the practical and emotional implications of carrying out your decision?
5. How have you been since that the decision?

How your interview will be presented to the Assembly

Each interview will be edited before it is presented to the Assembly. You will have a chance to hear the final version before that. It is expected that the full interview will be shorted to between 5 and 7 minutes. Editing will also be carried out to help preserve your anonymity.

Your story will be listened to together with a number of other interviews. Mary Ryan will introduce each interview to explain a bit about how the interviews were conducted and the context etc.

The audio will be played to the room. Each interview will be introduced and played separately and the members of the Assembly will be given time after each to reflect on what they have heard.

When all the interviews have been heard, the members of the Assembly will then discuss amongst themselves in private session what they have heard from you and the other interviewees.

As all public sessions of the Assembly are live streamed the audio will also go out on the website. These sessions will then be recorded and put up on the Assembly's YouTube Channel. The session may also be broadcast live on RTE News Now.

It should be noted that excerpts from the session (including therefore some of your interview) may be used by reporters on radio and television when reporting on the session.

I _____ agree to participate freely in sharing my experiences with the members of the Citizens Assembly. I understand that an edited summary of my interview will be made available to the Citizens Assembly at its meeting on 4th March. I understand that while every effort will be made to preserve anonymity it cannot be guaranteed. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the process at any time.

Signed in the presence of each other

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..... (on behalf of the Citizens' Assembly)