

Good afternoon everyone and thank you for making the time to be with us here today. For those of you who are not familiar with Women's Forum Australia, we are an independent think tank striving to create pro-woman cultural change through research, education, mentoring and advocacy.

We are here today to discuss the implications of the *Abortion Law Reform (Miscellaneous Acts Amendment) Bill 2016*, introduced into the Legislative Council by Green's MLC Mehreen Faruqi in August last year. We also hope to open up a broader, important conversation around the issue of abortion and its impact on members of our community, especially women.

Currently in NSW, abortion is legal where a woman's doctor reasonably believes on economic, social or medical grounds that it is necessary to protect her life, physical or mental health. As one of the most common medical procedures in Australia, with 1 in 3 women having an abortion, and more than 25,000 being performed in NSW each year, it is also readily accessible.

Ms Faruqi's Bill seeks to remove abortion from the *Crimes Act*, require doctors with a conscientious objection to refer for abortions, and instate 150m exclusion zones around clinics performing abortions.

Ms Faruqi claims that her Bill merely brings the law into line with current practice and public perception of what the law already is and should be. In reality however, her Bill is out of step with community attitudes and is a radical departure from the current law with profound implications for women and our community.

By simply removing abortion from the Crimes Act, the Bill removes all prohibitions against unlawful abortions without proposing any regulation to fill the gaps or address the issues this creates. It allows abortions to be carried out by anyone, at any stage of pregnancy, for any reason, including for discriminatory reasons such as sex and disability selection. It creates a situation of uncertainty and removes important protections afforded to women, children, medical professionals and citizens under the current law, of which Claire will discuss further in a moment.

A couple of months ago in Queensland, politicians refused to support Independent MP Rob Pyne's two ill-conceived abortion law reform bills because they, like the Faruqi Bill, contained so many flaws. These included the uncertainty around unforeseen and unintended consequences, the extreme nature of legalising abortion for any reason at any stage of pregnancy, and the dangers the bills posed to women. Both bills fell well short of acceptable law making and after much consideration and two lengthy reports, they failed to pass the Parliament.

In addition to the significant deficiencies and dangers inherent in Ms Faruqi's Bill, it is also disappointing that in a bill seeking to reform abortion laws, the very real needs and sufferings of women who have had and who seek abortions, are being overlooked or ignored.

Critically, the Bill does not make any attempt to understand and address the societal issues, which might make women view abortion as their only choice, nor does it include any safeguards to ensure that women are giving fully informed consent.

Women who abort often cite reasons such as fear of intimate partner violence, coercion from their partner or others, study or career pressures, and a lack of financial and emotional support. Instead of simply providing women with the so-called "choice" of abortion on demand, we need to do far more as a society to address the underlying causes and provide them with positive alternatives that are not going to expose them to further harm.

This includes progressing real alternatives for women facing unplanned pregnancies, and addressing issues of domestic violence, access and affordability of child care, flexible workplace and study arrangements and access to pregnancy and counselling support. Any bill that seeks to reform abortion law should address these issues as a matter of priority.

Given the pressures and lack of support that often drive women to seek an abortion, as well as the physical and psychological risks inherent in abortion, informed consent provisions are also palpably absent from a bill that seeks to reform abortion laws. The recent NRL scandals where the women involved were not only coerced by their partners but deeply regretted their abortions, is but one example of the need for more safeguards in this area.

As you can see, there is much room for improvement in terms of addressing the real needs of women when it comes to abortion, but Ms Faruqi's Bill does not address these. Instead, it removes some of the only crucial protections women have and puts them at risk of further harm.