

I went to a deeply Catholic school where abortion was considered one of the worst things you could do in your life. The horrors of abortion was a frequent topic of oratory and speeches at my all girl's school and our brother school down the road. The anti-abortion film *The Silent Scream* was shown in class.

Our sex education consisted of reading 1970's pamphlets about girls who had sex before marriage and got pregnant and ruined their lives. And if they had abortions, they also ruined their relationships with God and were usually left infertile. As far as I was concerned, these were just the facts of life.

So I understand intimately the feeling that every circumstance of unplanned pregnancy could become a blessing if people would simply change their perspective.

And I believed this, right up to my early twenties, when I had an unplanned pregnancy scare.

I found out a boy I was seeing had a girlfriend that he'd declined to tell me about, who then found out about me and told everyone in our intersecting peer group how her boyfriend had cheated on her with me.

Then I realised was nearly three weeks late for my period.

I reflected that if I was pregnant, I had three options:

I could continue with the pregnancy and raise a baby which everyone in my peer group would know was conceived through dishonesty. I would need to abandon my university studies, live at home with my disappointed mother and attempt to wrangle a co-parenting or child support arrangement with a person who had lied to me.

OR

I could continue with the pregnancy, carrying the evidence of something I was embarrassed and ashamed of in my own body for nine months while it grew. I could leave my studies before I became visibly pregnant and disappear from public life, telling no one except my family. I could give birth and then give the baby up for adoption, and spend every day for the rest of my life oscillating between resentment and heartbreak and grief.

OR

I could make an appointment at Family Planning, spent half a day at the hospital, grieve in my own private way, tell only those I trusted, and quietly return to normal life.

At that moment, with the flood of relief I felt at realising an abortion would allow this nightmare to go away quietly, I became pro-choice.

I realised how hypocritical I had been to think that a baby could always be a blessing if you just tried hard enough to see it as one. I realised that adoption — while a beautiful thing for some people — wasn't something that many could be expected to do. And I knew that far from being a mistake, abortion offered grace and dignity to people in impossible situations.

And it is with values of grace and dignity that I appeal to you as members of the Select Committee to recommend removing abortion from the Crimes Act.

In the end, I wasn't pregnant. I just had the world's latest period. But after that scare, I could never stomach the idea of forcing people to live by my former pro-life views. And now I sit on the board of ALRANZ, so I guess I compulsively put my money where my mouth is.

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At its heart, the abortion debate in New Zealand is no longer about whether abortions can be allowed to happen. We've had that fight and I'm incredibly thankful to the women who lead the way on this issue. Now, to my mind, the core issue is stigma and best practice.

I don't believe it's best practice for laws to — implicitly or explicitly — take a stance on whether life begins at conception. I think *people* can and should be free to decide that for themselves, but by designating abortion as a crime, the law has decided for us. And in a secular society, that's totally unacceptable.

I also don't believe laws should maintain stigma around an issue which the World Health Organisation calls a **key health intervention for women and families**. But by designating abortion as a crime, the law is feeding the stigma and shame around accessing this intervention.

And I don't believe that a law that works through loopholes based on whether someone has the appropriate level of desperation, can ever be best practice. Nor is it something that's sustainable long-term as more people realise how the law is being practised.

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People who want abortion to remain on the Crimes Act will tell you that taking it out will somehow make more abortions happen. And as someone who used to empathise with that point, I find that deeply ironic considering how rarely pro-life people will take active measures to support things that are scientifically proven to reduce unplanned pregnancies. Like sex education that doesn't come from a 1970's horror pamphlet.

I would urge you to consider that irony and know that recommending the removal of abortion from the Crimes Act isn't an act of you denying pro-life people their beliefs. Instead, it's taking a stand on what role the pro-life ideology and stigma should play in our laws. And in a secular society, that role should be **none**.

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In some ways, regardless of how naive that idealism might be, I actually think all of us would like to live in that ideal world, irrespective of faith. Because wouldn't it be wonderful to live in a world where every pregnancy is wanted, and every child is a blessing?

But to get there, contraception needs to be failsafe and available to everyone.

Every parent needs to feel cloaked in support from their communities and their government.

They need to be able to afford to clothe and feed their child, even if an unexpected expense comes up.

They need to be able to raise their child in a home which never ever makes them sick from black mould.

In a home where relationship power dynamics between partners are safe.

And where, let's get crazy, the world around them views raising a child as the valuable role in society which it is.

But that's not the world we live in right now. And this is where that idealism falls short of people's realities.

And in these moments — these impossible, often grievous moments — this is where abortion can offer grace and dignity. And as members of this Committee, you have the chance to offer them something even more, which is **respect**.

By recommending the removal of abortion from the Crimes Act, you can tell people that the decision is *truly* theirs; without coaching from their medical professionals to navigate loopholes. Without any inference of criminality — in practice or in principle. You can give them the true freedom of choice that they deserve.

If the last abortion debate was about allowing for choice, this Committee has the power to show **respect** for that choice. And I urge you to consider that when making your recommendations.

Thank you for giving me your time today.