

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> Aston University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 21 Sociology		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Influencing policy and practice to prevent harassment and reduce harm by anti-abortion activists outside abortion clinics		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2015 – 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr Pam Lowe	Senior Lecturer	2005 - present
Dr Sarah-Jane Page	Senior Lecturer	2012 - present
Dr Graeme Hayes	Reader	2007 - present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2015 - 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>Rising anti-abortion activism outside UK abortion clinics prompted research into the behaviour of activists and their effects on abortion service users. The findings have informed, and increased, public and political debate on clinic activism and have been influential as evidence submissions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• for campaigns and legal consultations that led to Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs) as local 'bufferzones' protecting clinic users from harassment in three English councils;</li> <li>• to local groups and councillors looking to implement bufferzones in other areas;</li> <li>• by professional medical associations and pro-choice grassroots groups, abortion service providers, Councillors and MPs advancing implementation of PSPO- or nationwide-bufferzones in the UK and Ireland; and</li> <li>• that upheld existing bufferzones and prosecutions against legal challenges that confirmed the constitutionality of bufferzone legislation in the highest Australian court.</li> </ul> <p>Our research, along with the local demonstrations of the effectiveness of bufferzones, is feeding into parliamentary attempts to legislate nationally.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>In response to reports from abortion service providers that activities outside clinics were increasingly a problem, ethnographic research was undertaken (2015-2020) into motivations and actions of UK anti-abortion activists. The British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) (a major abortion service provider) granted access to accounts already collected from service users, and these were analysed to provide the first UK report on the effects of anti-abortion activism on service users (<b>R1-R2</b>). The ongoing ethnographic research on anti-abortion activists has extended the investigations from 10 English sites (<b>R2</b>) to 30 sites covering all four UK nations (<b>R2-R4</b>), building on longstanding research into women's reproductive health (<b>R5</b>), including examining policy and political debates (<b>R6</b>). Dr Pam Lowe (Senior Lecturer) has led the research with colleagues Dr Sarah-Jane Page (Senior Lecturer) and Dr Graeme Hayes (Reader).</p> <p>The research has been at the forefront of examining anti-abortion activism, providing unique insights into a social movement previously overlooked in the UK. It revealed the negative effect anti-abortion activities outside clinics have on service users (<b>R1-R2</b>), and the specific religious motivations of the activists (<b>R3-R4</b>). By situating these encounters in broader understandings of gendered harassment, particularly in public places, our analysis theorized why women experience encounters as distressing, even when protest activities seem benign to passers-by (<b>R2</b>). By bringing together understandings from the sociologies of reproductive health and religion, we also explained the motivations of anti-abortion activists and reasoned why the effect they have is so different to the one that they intended.</p>		

Key findings include:

- The *presence* of anti-abortion activists outside clinics – irrespective of their particular conduct – causes significant distress and anxiety to many abortion service users. This presence of pavement activists is threatening since they are unavoidable and their potential behaviour is unpredictable (**R1-R2**).
- Users also feel intimidated by being watched or approached. Intimidation is experienced because the encounters breach the norms of ‘civil inattention’: the social norm of not paying detailed attention to others in public spaces, with women being particularly wary of strangers due to the prevalence of gendered street harassment in society. Activist groups also draw public attention, turning private decisions into a public spectacle (**R1-R2**).
- Anti-abortion activism is undertaken by small groups holding specific Christian religious beliefs, with motherhood and womanhood seen as synonymous. Their understanding is that women would never ‘naturally’ choose abortion, and they happen because of fear or coercion, either directly from partners, family or friends, or indirectly from a wider ‘abortion culture’ (**R2-R3**).
- Anti-abortion activists understand their actions as ‘saving’ women from a decision that is physically, mentally and spiritually harmful, so they see their actions outside abortion clinics, or in wider society as beneficial to women. The contrasting positions, intimidating street harassment or religiously-based saving, mean that the space outside clinics is highly contested (**R3-R4**).

The most original and distinctive implication of the research is that it provides an evidence base for bufferzones around abortion clinics which can be legally justified in the UK to support safety, security and privacy when accessing abortion. The displacement of anti-abortion activism from outside clinics to other spaces is a reasonable response to alleviate distress caused by anti-abortion activities and it does not unnecessarily restrict religious freedom.

### 3. References to the research

- R1** Hayes, G. and Lowe, P. (2015) “A Hard Enough Decision to Make”: Anti-Abortion Activism outside Clinics in the Eyes of Clinic Users: A Report on the comments made by BPAS Service Users. Birmingham: Aston University.  
[https://research.aston.ac.uk/files/45713813/A\\_Hard\\_Enough\\_Decision\\_to\\_Make.pdf](https://research.aston.ac.uk/files/45713813/A_Hard_Enough_Decision_to_Make.pdf)
- R2** Lowe, P. and Hayes, G. (2018) Anti-Abortion Clinic Activism, Civil Inattention, and the Problem of Gendered Harassment *Sociology* 53 (2): 330-346 (Impact Factor 2.817)  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518762075>
- R3** Lowe, P and Page, SJ. (2018) ‘On the wet side of the womb’: The construction of ‘mothers’ in anti-abortion activism in England and Wales *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 26 (2): 165-180 (Impact Factor 1.023) <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506818785191>
- R4** Lowe P and Page, SJ (2019) (2019) Rights-based Claims Made by UK Anti-abortion Activists *Health and Human Rights Journal* 21 (2): 133-144 (Impact Factor 1.407)  
<https://www.hhrjournal.org/2019/12/rights-based-claims-made-by-uk-anti-abortion-activists/>
- R5** Lowe, P. (2016) *Maternal Sacrifice and Reproductive Health: Women, Choice and Responsibility* Basingstoke: Palgrave <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-47293-9>
- R6** Lowe, P. (2019) (Re)imagining the ‘backstreet’: Anti-abortion campaigning against decriminalisation in the UK *Sociological Research Online* 24 (2): 203-218 (Impact Factor 1.181) <https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780418811973>

Output **R1** is a research report produced for BPAS which has been significantly referenced internationally in policy documents, legal judgements and others’ academics outputs. **R2-R4** and **R6** are international peer reviewed journal papers all of which were internally reviewed at 3\* or better. **R6** was nominated for the 2020 Sociological Research Online SAGE Prize for Innovation and/or Excellence. **R5** is a significant and specialist monograph output which has provoked and contributed to the academic debates in this area.

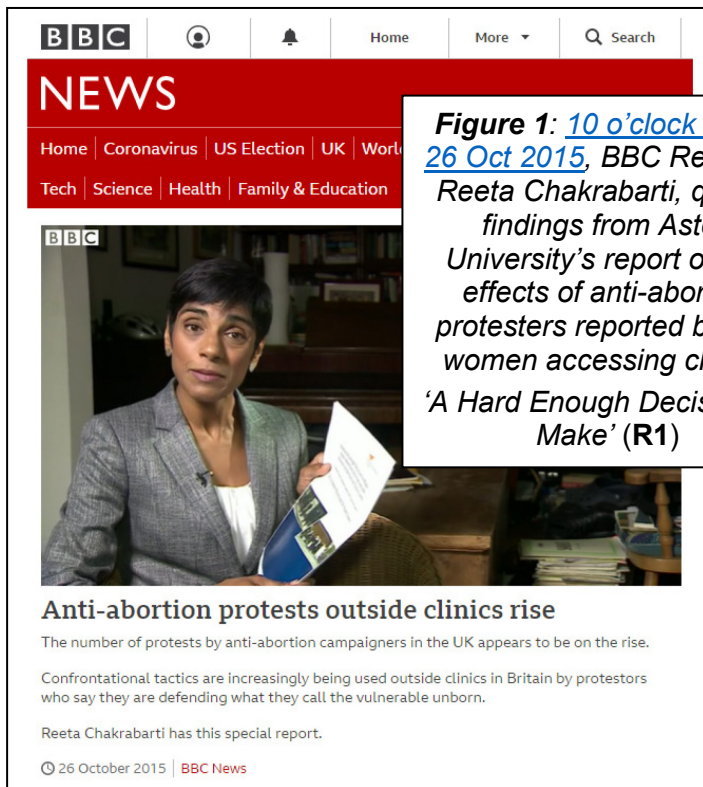
External funding was not received for the research.

**4. Details of the impact**

The findings of this research have informed, increased and influenced public and political debates on the negative effect of anti-abortion activism at clinics. They contributed to the creation of bufferzones around abortion clinics now enabling service users to access legal consultations without harassment, and allowing clinic staff to travel freely to and from their workplaces. The research has been used to form evidence bases for:

- political campaigns and required legal consultations leading to the establishment of Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs) for three English council bufferzones: in Ealing (London), and then in Richmond (London) and Manchester;
- pro-choice grassroots groups, and Councillors, in English regional cities looking to implement further PSPO bufferzones: for example in Birmingham and Nottingham;
- medical professional associations and Members of Parliament and Legislative Assembly advancing legislation for nationwide bufferzones in England, Northern Ireland (NI) and Ireland; and
- successfully defending existing bufferzones in Australia against legal challenges that upheld the constitutionality of bufferzone legislation, and the prosecution of anti-abortion activists who approached clinic service users.

To share the research findings and so inform a public debate based on research, lay articles were written for the **public** and published in a wide range of outlets, with local and national audiences, e.g. [Birmingham Mail](#) (19/10/2017) and [NewStatesman](#) (6/11/2015). Also, Lowe has often been interviewed about her research (R1-R4) by the mass media, e.g. BBC's [Newsnight](#) (10/5/2018), [Sunday Morning Live](#) (10/10/2017) and [Woman's Hour](#) on Radio 4 (7/1/2020) (S1).



A vital step to achieve impact was the dissemination of R1 to abortion service providers, campaigners and politicians. It was covered widely by the media, including BBC News (Fig. 1).

R1-R2 have underpinned the 'Back Off' campaign led by BPAS, which seeks national legislation for bufferzones (S2). BPAS also used R1 in their discussions and evidence submissions with

the Home Office and National Police into how to protect women outside abortion clinics (S2).

Local and national campaigning organisations also used R1 to lobby MPs, including at the public meeting held by advocacy organisation 'Abortion Rights UK' at Westminster. Lowe presented the findings in R1 to

parliamentarians attending that 2016 event, aimed at 'preventing harassment and putting pressure where power lies' (S3).

Lowe contributed to the tactic of using PSPOs as an interim measure to create a bufferzone in Ealing:

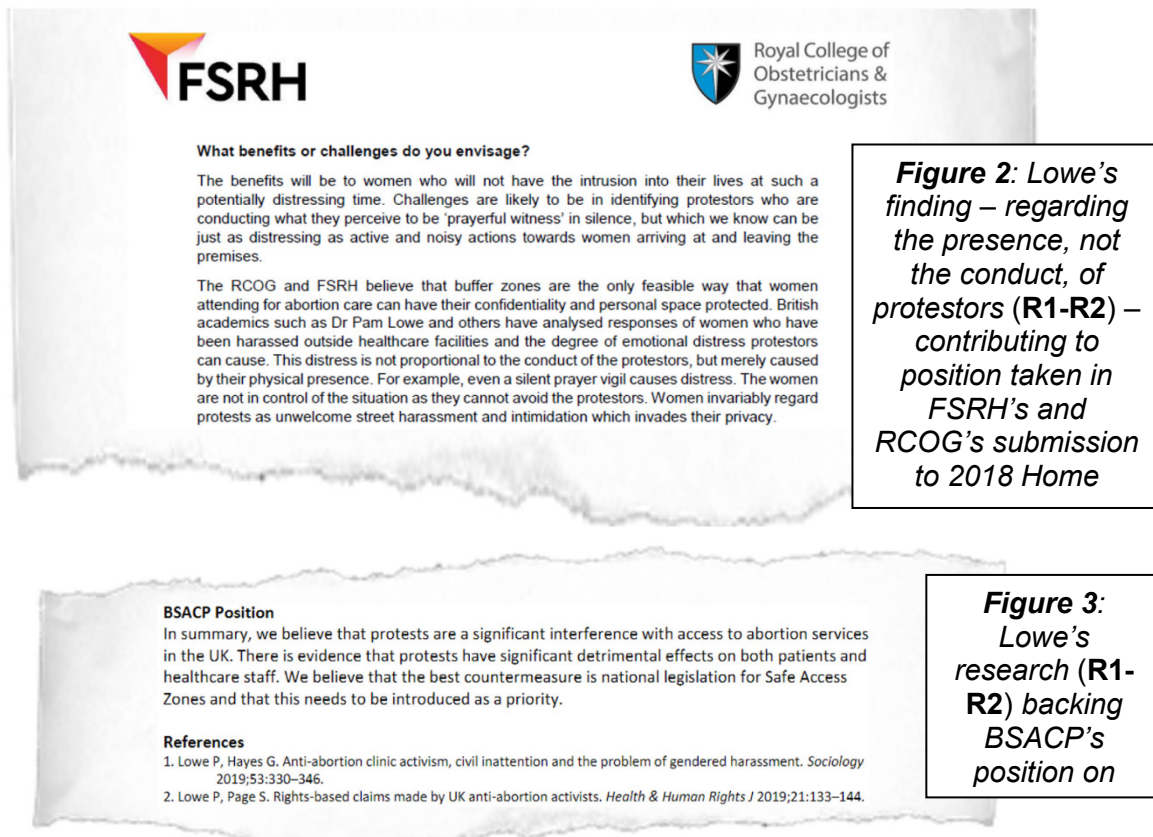
*...a seed of an idea came from Dr Pam Lowe, an academic from Aston University, who was visiting. She knew I was a lawyer and suggested we explore...using a PSPO to protect the area around the clinic (S4)*

Lowé also submitted evidence to the 2018 consultation (**S5**) for the then [implemented Ealing PSPO bufferzone](#), which went on to survive [High Court challenges by anti-abortion activists](#).

The implementation of this first PSPO bufferzone, and Lowé's further research (**R1**) and evidence submissions (**S6**), helped pave the way for more English council PSPOs in [Richmond](#) and [Manchester](#). Lowé has also supported ongoing local campaigns by grassroots pro-choice groups. For example, she gave evidence to a group organising in Nottingham to assist their campaign, and advised a Birmingham Councillor who then brought a successful motion to prevent harassment of users and staff at her local clinic (**S7**).

Lowé's findings have also informed committees and campaigners pushing for national changes:

- the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (**S8a**), regarding clinic protests and bufferzones in England and NI;
- an Irish reproductive rights grassroots group (**S8b**:pp.6-7); and
- three key medical professional associations with their taken bufferzone stances:
  - The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG), and The Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare (FSRH) (**S8c**:part i) (**Fig. 2**).
  - British Society of Abortion Care Providers (BSACP) (**S8c**:part ii) (**Fig. 3**)



The established Ealing and Richmond PSPO buffer zones, and those then proposed for Manchester and Birmingham, were cited as the basis for a national buffer zone in a private member's Bill, which had its [formal introduction \(First Reading\)](#) and [voting \(213 Ayes to 47 Noes\)](#) (24 Jun 2020). This brought the [Demonstrations \(Abortion Clinics\) Bill](#) to the House of Commons (**S9**). Its delayed (11 Sep 2020) parliamentary debate (Second Reading) is being rescheduled.

With the 2018 legalisation of abortion in the Republic of Ireland, the Irish reproductive rights grassroots group used Lowé's research (**R1-R2**) in their government submission (**S10a**:p.4); and later in their new guide showing how journalists can accurately report abortion, bufferzones, and the distress caused by seemingly 'peaceful protests' (**S10b**:p10). Also, the Irish Parliamentary Library's Rapid Evidence Assessment described **R2** as "an important consideration in the debate around safe access zones in Ireland" (**S10c**:p.13).



Lastly, Lowe's work was influential in the Australian High Court after protestors appealed their conviction for breaching an abortion clinic buffer zone. The Attorney General for the State of Victoria used **R1** in a submission that backed its winning legal argument that, "*The appellant also overlooks the fact that non-violent – even 'polite' or 'silent' – communication about abortion that targets women seeking to access abortion services can cause anxiety and distress*" (**S11a**:p.17), and helped to affirm the constitutionality of the present bufferzone legislation: concerning freedom of communication (**S11b**).

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

**S1** Lowe's articles, and media appearances as an abortion clinic protests expert.

**S2** BPAS-related documents in support of their '[Abortion Clinic Protest Review Evidence Pack](#)' submission in response to 2018 Home Office Consultation, citing **R1** on p.7

**S3** Flyer for Abortion Rights' Westminster event, where Lowe spoke to gather support of MPs

**S4** [Article in online Law and Justice magazine](#), *The Justice Gap*, describing development and implementation of UK's first bufferzone

**S5** Ealing PSPO-bufferzone documentation: [Appendix 1 – Consultation Report - free text responses' of Public Spaces Protection Order to address behaviours outside the Marie Stopes Clinic, Mattock Lane \(Mar 2018\)](#), showing Lowe's contribution (p31:148; p221:427) (**R1**).

**S6** Documentation of Richmond and Manchester proposed PSPO-bufferzone consultations:

- Lowe's Richmond submission (incl. **R1**-derived report) and receipt acknowledgement
- Lowe's Manchester submission (incl. **R1**-derived report), receipt acknowledgement and [Public Report](#) citing (pp.22-23) Aston's contribution

**S7** Nottingham Pro-Choice (p.1), and a Birmingham Council (p.2) use of **R1** to end clinic protests and passed [Birmingham City Council motion \(pp.2915-2916\)](#).

**S8** Documentation of contributions towards legislative change in England and N. Ireland:

- a. [Written evidences ordered by Women and Equalities Committee for reporting to the House of Commons for publication](#) (pp.37-38,75,77), including Aston's submissions:
  - [Abortion law in Northern Ireland \(ANI0266, Dec 2018\)](#); and
  - [Sexual harassment of women and girls in public places \(SPP0060, Mar 2018\)](#)
- b. [Abortion Rights Campaign Submission on New Legal Framework for Abortion Services in Northern Ireland](#), citing **R1-R2**.
- c. Lowe's research contributions towards medical associations' bufferzone positions:
  - i. [The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and The Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare submission to the 2018 Home Office review of clinic protests](#)
  - ii. [British Society of Abortion Care Providers Clinic Protests Position Statement, Dec 2020](#)

**S9** [Demonstrations \(Abortion Clinics\) Bill](#) as introduced to House of Commons (24 Jun 2020)

**S10** Lowe's contributions to Republic of Ireland's response to 2018 legalisation of abortion:

- a. [Abortion Rights Campaign's submission to government on the Health \(Regulation of the Termination of Pregnancy\) Bill 2018 on October 3, 2018](#), citing **R1**
- b. [Abortion Rights Campaign's document, How to Report on Abortion: A Guide for Journalists and Citizen Communicators in Ireland June 2019](#), citing **R2**
- c. Oireachtas Library and Research Service 2019, [Spotlight: The impact of anti-abortion protest on women accessing services. A Rapid Evidence Assessment](#), citing **R2**

**S11** Australian judicial documents:

- a. [Submission by Attorney General for the State of Victoria \(May 2018\)](#), citing **R1** on pp.6,17.
- b. [Judgement summary by the High Court of Australia \(Apr 2019\)](#)