

As the Tribunal of Enquiry has progressed here in Tralee, a wave of emotion has been gaining momentum throughout the country. Compassion and outrage have been felt by most women. Compassion for Joanne Hayes and outrage at the tone of this Tribunal.

We have come together today to express our sympathy and concern for Joanne Hayes in her personal ordeal.

She has suffered and continues to suffer at the hands of this all male Tribunal. She is paying a high price and we ask what is it she is paying for? Joanne Hayes is a victim, not a criminal. She stands accused of no crime. She is not on trial.

This Tribunal was set up to investigate how certain charges were made against Joanne Hayes and her family in Tralee Garda Station and why these charges were subsequently dropped.

In the pursuance of what is believed to be the truth, we ask, how far is it permissible to go in degrading and distressing a witness? For we must remember Joanne Hayes is a witness. She is not on trial.

We wonder at the relevance of some of the questions being asked and the significance of the information being so painfully extracted on the intimate details of Joanne Hayes's personal life. It has been asked, do we need to know all the sordid details? But we should also ask, do all the details need to be made to seem sordid? Certain questions and statements seem intended to make innocent events appear sinister. Certain observations and conclusions appear to impose a selective view of morality, of women and of how we should or should not behave.

We feel deeply for Joanne Hayes. It is a feeling coming from our hearts. We have seen her body and soul dissected and scrutinized before us. As women we feel that in a way, we are all up there on display. We are reduced, as so often happens, to bits of bodies - breasts, wombs, vaginas, periniums, and we ask again, is it all necessary? And we remind ourselves Joanne Hayes is not on trial.

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What type of society do we live in that can allow this and similar tragedies to occur? We see ourselves as a caring and Christian Nation. We present ourselves to the world as a haven of moral superiority. Our laws and our constitution may paint a picture of society which many would like to see, but how far do they reflect the real life situations of people in this country?

During the Amendment Referendum we pledged ourselves to care for pregnant women - whether in or out of marriage. Tolerance, compassion, caring, support. We heard these words so often. But so often they seem hollow to women who see themselves in desperate situations which drive them to desperate remedies. What forces girls and women to feel so ashamed and frightened, to conceal their pregnancies, to give birth alone and isolated in mental and physical anguish.

This is not the first time it has happened. We think of the unknown mother who abandoned her baby soon after birth on the Castleisland roadside. We remember Ann Lovett - her tragic death and that of her baby in a grotto in Granard this time last year. We remember Eileen Flynn - losing her job and her livelihood for bearing the child of the man she loved.

And now we think of Joanne Ha yes, ashamed and frightened, giving birth alone in a field behind her home.

The women and countless others are paying a high price - and what, we ask are they paying for?

We ask how does it happen, and is it all necessary? And again we remind ourselves, Joanne Hayes is not on trial.

Tralee Women's Group.