

Attitudes towards induced termination of pregnancy among Buddhist and Christian clergy compared to the lay population in the western province of Sri Lanka

Termination of pregnancies (TOP) is common in Sri Lanka despite it being illegal except when the mother's life is in danger. Most TOPs occur within marriage and for social reasons. Attempts to change the law to permit TOP following rape, incest and fetal anomalies have been rejected. Previous data from the Gampaha and Colombo districts among doctors and nurses has identified that religious belief was the most important determinant for disagreeing with TOP.

Methodology of the study included a questionnaire survey. A pre-tested self administered questionnaire with 15 common reasons for abortion was completed by Buddhist and Christian clergy, teachers and executives in all three districts of the Western Province, Sri Lanka.

There were 874 respondents consisting of Buddhist monks (216 – 24%), Christian [mainly Catholic] clergy (131-15%), teachers (303- 35%) and executives (230-26%). The respondents consisted of Buddhists 616 (70%) and Christians 221 [Catholics 181 (21%), other Christian denominations 40 (5%)] while Hindus and Muslims made up 30 (3%) of the respondents. Acceptance of TOP for social reasons was low [interruption to the mother's career (7%) or education (9%), pregnancy after completing family (12%) or insufficient spacing of children (18%)]. Family planning failure and financial problems were acceptable for 20% and 21% respectively. The majority considered TOP acceptable for mental retardation in the baby (56%), pregnancy following incest (57%), or rape (63%), maternal mental (62%) or physical health (75%) and for fetal anomalies incompatible with life (70%). Both groups of clergy were more willing to accept TOP for fetal or maternal reasons but the acceptance rates were significantly lower compared with their respective lay groups. The Christian clergy were more opposed to TOP for social reasons compared to the Buddhist clergy. Multivariate analysis demonstrated that Buddhists and lay people were more willing to consider TOP for social reasons, while lay people were more likely to accept this for maternal health reasons and fetal abnormalities. There is a gradient of attitudes towards TOP with a degree of consensus emerging in favour of termination for maternal health reasons, severe fetal anomalies and for pregnancies resulting from rape and incest. This group of respondents was against abortion for social reasons.