

Knowledge and Attitudes of Adults Concerning Induced Abortion in Colombo City, Sri Lanka

A THESIS SUBMITTED BY

M. S. S. SURANGA

(PGIA 11 – 8964)

In partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

ABSTRACT

Abortion is termination of pregnancy, whether spontaneous or induced. Induced abortion is caused intentionally by the administration of drugs or by mechanical means whereas illegal abortion is an induced abortion performed contrary to the laws regulating abortion in that country. Abortion is legally permitted in Sri Lanka, only if it is performed to save the mother's life. Although Sri Lanka has a very restrictive law on abortion, it is estimated that 125,000 to 175,000 induced abortions take place annually. In the year 2014, the contribution of abortion to maternal mortality was 12.5 percent, making it the third most common cause of maternal deaths. Knowledge and attitudes towards induced abortion in the society can influence not only individual decision-making on the outcome of unwanted pregnancies, but also the health sector policy response towards future changes in the law. This study aims to understand the knowledge and attitudes of adults towards induced abortion and abortion law in Sri Lanka. Further, it aims to analyze factors associated with knowledge and attitudes on abortion.

Six Grama Niladhari Divisions (GNDs) and five to eight housing clusters from each GND were selected from Thimbrigasyaya DSD using multi stage stratified random sampling technique. Fifty households were systematically selected from each GND. An interview schedule was administered among 743 residents between 19 to 49 years of age after receiving written informed consent. Twelve key informant interviews were conducted among reproductive health professionals and community-based service providers.

Between 48 to 58 percent of respondents have given correct answers to questions related to pregnancy. A total of 85 percent of respondents were aware that illegal abortion can result in many complications including death. Only 11 percent of the respondents were familiar with the circumstances under which abortion is legal in Sri Lanka. Male respondents with higher level of

formal education, who can read or understand multiple languages, demonstrated a better overall knowledge on abortion.

A majority of the respondents agreed that induced abortion is against their religious beliefs (70 percent) and cultural and moral values (69 percent) irrespective of their religion and ethnicity. Approximately one-tenth of the respondents (11 percent) do not agree with the current legal provisions to perform induced abortion to save the life of the mother. A majority of the respondents, agreed that it was appropriate to legalize abortion for survivors of rape (65 percent), incest (55 percent) and pregnancies with lethal fetal abnormalities (53 percent). Less than 7 percent of respondents have agreed to legalize induced abortion for other reasons such as contraceptive failure and bad economic conditions. Muslims demonstrated more conservative attitudes towards abortion compared to other ethnic (and religious) groups. Never married respondents below 25 years of age, those who have high level of formal education and a high level of access to different sources of information and less number of living children were more likely to accept a liberal law on abortion.

Study concludes that respondents demonstrate a fair to low level of knowledge and conservative attitudes towards induced abortion, which highlights the need for more focused interventions to address these issues. Prevention of unwanted pregnancies and sensitization of the society about the issue of illegal abortion through continuous awareness and advocacy programmes, remain as the key strategies to prevent unsafe abortions and their complications.