

BUDDHIST PERCEPTION ON LEGALISING ABORTION IN SRI LANKA

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Abortion though ‘illegal’ under existing laws — strictly speaking it is ‘permissible’ under certain identified circumstances — has emerged as a social problem in Sri Lanka due to the increasing number of ‘illegal’ abortions taking place daily. Sri Lankan Buddhists, like people of other religions, share different views about abortion and are thus divided. The main impetus of the study was to ascertain Buddhist perceptions on abortion by studying their attitude[s] in general towards the issue of abortion. The present government’s decision to accede to the long agitation for liberalisation of abortion laws, also has made it timely to study how receptive the Buddhist community is towards such liberalisation. The principal focus of this research was twofold. Firstly, to identify whether a majority of Buddhists disapprove of abortion ‘under any circumstances’ or not. Secondly, to study whether Buddhists are receptive to the idea of introducing abortion laws into the Sri Lankan legal system. This research was conducted across six electorates in the two districts of Colombo and Kalutara in the Western Province of Sri Lanka in 2015. The targeted sample consisted of 300 respondents were selected using random sampling methodology. 250 respondents consisting of 161 females and 89 males participated in the survey. Data collection was carried out using a questionnaire consisting of both open and close ended questions. It adopted a mixed methodology using both qualitative and quantitative data. Buddhists, while agreeing with the view that the foetus has the right to life, are of the opinion that abortion should be permitted, subject to certain circumstances. Thus, they do not agree with the view that abortion should not be permitted ‘under any circumstances.’ The modern trend among Sri Lankan Buddhists appears to be liberal regarding abortion if performed under certain circumstances. This is reflected in the gap between those ‘in agreement’ and ‘not in agreement’ being only four per cent according to the responses to the questionnaire. The majority of 54 per cent of the respondents held the view that abortion should be legalised in Sri Lanka. Therefore, if the Government introduces legislation to legalise abortion in the future, it should be permitted under exceptional circumstances. However, in such an event a control mechanism must be introduced allowing performance of abortion only to be carried out in licensed clinics. It is also necessary to raise public awareness regarding the means of minimising the need for abortion by encouraging the use of viable contraceptive methods.

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