



South Africans against abortion

In spite of the legalisation of abortion twelve years ago, most South Africans are of the view that this practice is 'wrong', concludes BONGIWE MNCWANGO and STEPHEN RULE. They have analysed a set of questions on this topic for the fourth consecutive year (2003–2006) included in the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS).

THE CHOICE ON TERMINATION OF PREGNANCY ACT (Act no. 72 of 1996) was seen by government as a means of curtailing backstreet illegal operations. It replaced a far more restrictive law and thereby opened the way for abortion on demand. As a consequence 526 123 abortions took place during the period 1997 to 2005.

The opposing 'pro-life' advocacy lobby has support among groups such as 'Doctors for Life', the 'Christian Lawyers Association', 'Christians for Truth' and 'Africa Christian Action', which has kept the issue in the public mind.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

SASAS included questions to test public attitudes towards abortion under two different sets of circumstances, both examples

of what are termed ‘soft’ or ‘hard’¹ reasons respectively:

- in the event that the family has a low income and cannot afford any more children;
- if there is a known chance that the baby would be born with a serious defect.

STRONG OPPOSITION

Consistently over the four years, nine out of ten South African adults were of the view that abortion is ‘wrong’ if the reasons are that a family has a low income and cannot afford any more children. A similar sentiment is evident among three-quarters of South Africans, even if there is a strong chance of the baby being born with a defect.

To determine factors influencing attitudes towards abortion, the four 2003–2006 survey data sets were merged, yielding 2 214 cases.

EDUCATION LEVEL

Several key determinants of attitudes towards abortion emerged, namely level of education, frequency of church attendance, and race. Educational level is the strongest predictor of attitude under both circumstances. Pro-choice sentiments become more prevalent as levels of education increase. So, South Africans with the highest levels of education are least likely to think that abortion is ‘wrong’.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

In contrast, frequent attendance at church meetings or services correlates positively with the view that abortion is ‘wrong’. Conversely, those who attend services infrequently or never are the most likely to think that abortion is ‘not wrong’.

RACE

Although race is not the strongest predictor of attitudes towards abortion, black South Africans are far less likely than Indians, coloured or white people to approve of abortion if there is a strong chance that the baby would be born with a defect. But attitudes hardly differ between races in respect of the ‘soft’ reason of a family having a low income and not being able to afford any more children.

CONCLUSION

The analysis also showed that attitudes also vary – but to a lesser extent – between people of differing marital status, geographical

Table 1: Trends in attitudes towards abortion: 2003–2006

Reason	2003 (N=4980)		2004 (N=5583)		2005 (N=5734)		2006 (N=5843)	
	% wrong	% not wrong	% wrong	% not wrong	% wrong	% not wrong	% wrong	% not wrong
If the family has low income and cannot afford any more children	90	10	89	11	91	9	91	9
If there is a strong chance of a serious defect in the baby	78	22	76	24	73	27	74	26

Table 2: Approval of abortion, by level of education

Reason	No schooling	Primary	Gr8–11/ equivalent	Matric/ equivalent	Tertiary	Total
If there is a strong chance of a serious defect in the baby	14	20	24	33	44	26
If the family has low income and cannot afford any more children	4	7	9	12	16	9

Table 3: Approval of abortion, by frequency of church attendance

Reason	Once a week or more	Less than 4 times a month	A few times a year	Infrequently or never	Total
If there is a strong chance of a serious defect in the baby	24	27	31	30	26
If the family has low income and cannot afford any more children	8	10	10	12	9

Table 4: Approval of abortion by race

Reason	Black	Coloured	Indian	White	Total
If there is a strong chance of a serious defect in the baby	21	30	34	44	26
If the family has low income and cannot afford any more children	9	8	9	11	9

location and gender. Pro-choice attitudes under both circumstances are less likely among people living in rural areas, married or widowed people, and among men.

In a nutshell, the study revealed two major findings:

- The extent of support for abortion tends to depend on the circumstance surrounding pregnancy, with abortion for hard reasons getting stronger support.
- Education consistently emerged as the strongest predictor of abortion attitudes under different circumstances; that is, people with high educational attainment exhibited greater support for abortion. ●

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¹Hard reasons include but are not limited to pregnancy as a result of rape or incest, the woman’s health being under threat, or the possibility of the baby being born with a defect. Soft reasons include the mother being materially deprived or unmarried or not wanting to have any more children.