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