



## **PERSPECTIVES OF SRI LANKAN BUDDHIST PRACTITIONERS ACCESSING SAFE ABORTION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE PREVAILING SAFE ABORTION-RELATED LAWS IN SRI LANKA**

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This study examined the perspectives of the Sri Lankan *Theravada* Buddhist on accessing safe abortion, in Sri Lanka. In the context of Sri Lanka, cultural, religious, and legal factors significantly influence Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). Due to the strictness of the safe-abortion related laws in Sri Lanka, many people use unsafe methods. Therefore, liberalizing the safe abortion-related laws is a timely need. This study aimed to understand how *Theravada* Buddhist practices in the country influence shaping societal attitudes toward safe abortion access. This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews. Also, a purposive sample of *Theravada* Buddhist practitioners participated in the interviews. Thematic analysis was used as the analytical strategy to analyze the data collected. There are various studies done regarding safe abortion access and determinants that hinder access to safe abortions. However, there are few studies that are specifically talking about the perspective of religions in accessing safe abortion. Most of the studies carry the perspectives of Christianity, Catholicism, and Islamic religions. However not many studies are conducted specifically regarding the *Theravada* Buddhist perspectives that are commonly practiced in Sri Lanka on abortion access. Therefore, with the intention of bridging this gap, this study was conducted specifically on how Sri Lankan *Theravada* Buddhist perspective impacts on accessing safe abortion. The main objective of this study was to understand the perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs of the Sri Lankan *Theravada* Buddhist practitioners regarding access to safe abortion and their impact on the implications for women's reproductive rights and health. Research findings emphasized the fact that, while most of the Sri Lankan *Theravada* Buddhist practitioners and scholars continue to emphasize the importance of preserving human life, there is a growing discussion related to how certain beliefs can be re-interpreted to reduce suffering, and bodily autonomy, especially in the context of women's reproductive health.

**Keywords:** Sri Lanka, Theravada Buddhism, abortions, safe abortions, liberalization

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Access to safe abortion remains a critical issue in Sri Lanka, influenced by different cultural and religious perspectives and legal factors. Buddhist perspectives play a significant role in shaping societal attitudes and beliefs of Sri Lanka, because the Sri Lankan culture and beliefs are shaped mostly by *Theravada* Buddhist teachings, which also influence social attitudes and perspectives of people towards safe abortion access. When considering social attitudes, most people's 'decision for not accepting legally induced abortion in Sri Lanka is mainly based on religious beliefs and moral values' (Suranga et al, 2017, p.101). However, the interpretations of these teachings can vary widely among Sri Lankan *Theravada* Buddhists leading to diverse perspectives on the morality and acceptability of abortion.

There are various studies done regarding safe abortion access and determinants that act as barriers to access safe abortions. However, there are few studies that are specifically discuss the perspective of religions in accessing safe abortion. Most of the studies regarding religion and abortions are focused on Christianity, Catholicism and Islamic Religions. There are very few studies regarding the Buddhist perspectives and specifically regarding the Sri Lankan *Theravada* Buddhist perspectives. Therefore, with the intention of bridging this gap, this study shall try to identify the connection between perspectives and attitudes of Sri Lankan *Theravada* Buddhist practitioners and social realities in addressing the challenges faced by women in accessing safe abortion services.

The main objective of the study is to investigate the perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs of Sri Lankan *Theravada* Buddhist practitioners regarding access to safe abortion, with a focus on understanding how these social attitudes and beliefs can impact the implications for women's reproductive rights and health.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach to get a broad understanding on how Buddhist practices and teaching impact attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives of people regarding access to safe abortions. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of Buddhist practitioners, activists, and professionals working in the Sexual and Reproductive



Health and Rights (SRHR) sector. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, identify patterns, and understand themes. Informed consent was received from all participants, and they were explained about the purpose of the research, and their right to withdraw at any time. Privacy and confidentiality were secured.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the most important themes to emerge from the interviews with Sri Lankan *Theravada* Buddhist practitioners was the strong emphasis on the importance of a human life. Based on the Buddhist studies, “The Buddha has taught that out of all forms of life, human life is the most advanced. A human birth is very rare compared to all the other life forms on earth. To be born as a human being, one should have cultivated a lot of merit in past lives. Compared to other life forms, the human being is a very sophisticated and complex entity” (Daily Mirror, 2016). According to most of the participants, an induced abortion prevents human birth. Also, the participants referred to the first precept of Buddhism, which prohibits the taking of life, including that of a fetus, and people believe that breaking this precept will bring negative consequences because of *Karmic law* and the belief of negative effects on the spirituality. Sri Lankan Sinhala-Buddhist Culture is shaped with Theravada Buddhist teachings and beliefs. These deep-rooted beliefs in the sanctity of life are central to traditional Buddhist teachings and this lead to a moral opposition to abortion within Sri Lanka, making it a sinful or an immoral act. These ideologies make providing access to safe abortion inappropriate and socially unacceptable.

On the contrary, some of the young Buddhists from urban contexts find some of these teachings challenging to contemporary life. They believe that some of the beliefs of people, shaped by Buddhist perspectives, should adapt to current realities, such as economic struggles, health risks, and social pressures that women face; for example, situations such as under-aged rape cases. Many of these young Buddhist practitioners see the current legal framework as being outdated by the means of both modern medical realities and the social challenges that women face today. They see, allowing safe and legal abortion in cases where it is necessary to protect the woman’s health or well-being is not a rejection of Buddhist values but a deeper application of the Buddhist teachings such as compassion and reducing harm.

Through these research findings, it was evident that even though many Buddhist practitioners and scholars continue to emphasize the importance of preserving human life, there is a growing discussion related to how certain beliefs can be reinterpreted to reduce suffering, and bodily autonomy, especially in the context of women’s reproductive health and rights.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the most important recommendations is that more attention should be given on creating dialogues to bring a precise understanding of Buddhist principles to align with contemporary social realities. It is important to facilitate open forums or discussion among religious scholars, leaders, legal and medical practitioners, and especially, the local communities. This discussion should focus on Buddhist teachings such as compassion and ending suffering especially in challenging situations such as unintended pregnancies, pregnancies by rape or incest, under-age pregnancies, and socio-economic situations, that may lead people to seek unsafe abortion services. Culturally sensitive awareness campaigns could be organized, specially through local clinics and health centres to raise awareness on safe abortion practices, public health and legal regulations, traditional and religious ideologies and perspectives, contraceptives and consequences of unsafe abortions which will help in reducing the incidence of unintended pregnancies and enhancing the bodily autonomy and overall well-being of women.

Another important recommendation is to consider reforming Sri Lanka's abortion laws allowing exceptions such as rape, or incest, and not only on the instances where the life of the mother is at a risk. These reforms should be defined as not rejecting the Buddhist values but incorporating Buddhist values such as compassion and reducing the suffering for women seeking abortion services and improving their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

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