Understanding current public perception & attitudes towards abortion in Sri Lanka
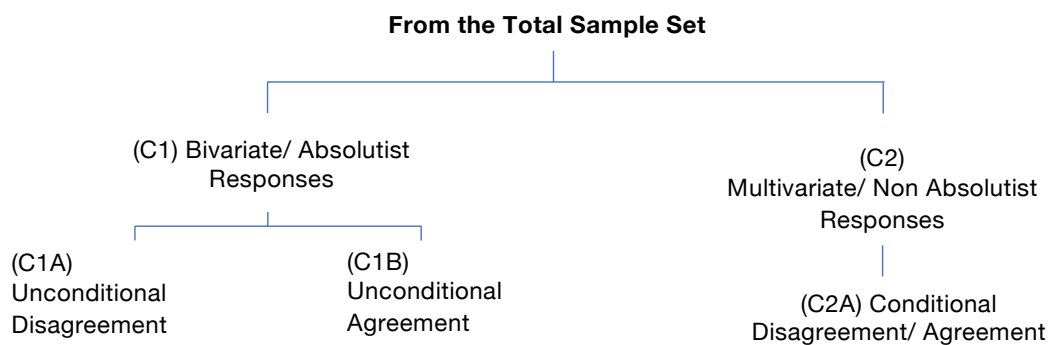
Survey approach proposal

1. Establishing the constraints and scope of research

Attitudinal surveys, particularly surveys on attitudinal shifts on the topic of abortion that we have observed internationally, either rely on, or heavily benefit from secondary data derived through censuses. In Sri Lanka however, we have been unable to observe reliable and scalable datapoints regarding culturally sensitive issues such as abortion, sexuality, contraception etc from the national statistics provider, The Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka.

This leaves us with the task of conceptualising, designing, developing and carrying out a sample survey to gather primary data in order to deliver on the criteria that FPA seeks to fulfil.

In order to paint a clearer picture of prevailing attitudes on abortion, and by extension, hypothesised attitudinal changes induced by increased accessibility to information, I present the following graphical breakdown to conceptualise how one might develop a research methodology which distils the answers to FPAs specific questions from the general societal discourse on women's bodily autonomy in Sri Lanka.

From the Total Sample Set

(C1) Bivariate/ Absolutist Responses

(C2) Multivariate/ Non Absolutist Responses

(C1A) Unconditional Disagreement

(C1B) Unconditional Agreement

(C2A) Conditional Disagreement/ Agreement

While C2A section carries the bulk of FPA's questions, it is important to stress that the most potent hindrances to cultural negotiation on abortion are passed on to the general population from institutions, religious or cultural, which insist on absolutist positions on abortion (C1A).

It is also worth considering the notion that the high incidence of induced abortion in rural areas (generally associated with low socioeconomic status and education) reveals the persistence of the utility value of the option of an abortion over the cultural/religious value of carrying to term, which by extension validates the cautionary hypothesis that a high incidence of practice within a given sample may not necessarily statistically reflect a more favourable attitude towards that practice, and vice versa.

Abortion is a gendered issue, wherein one must acknowledge the complexity that the gender group to which the practice is exclusive, also happens to be a group that is culturally and politically less empowered than its gender counterpart to drive/change the attitudinal discourse regarding the practice. It is also worth noting that despite increased access to information, the recent developments in sectarian frictions in Sri Lanka has added, or compounded a racialised facet to reproduction and family planning, the extent, persistence and seasonality of these developments have been hitherto unresearched.

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The above are just a few examples as to why a baseline research of an issue as intersectional as abortion requires a bespoke and fine tuned research methodology, rather than a strictly formulaic implementation of an off the shelf quantitative methodology. We propose, to obtain the most yield from the resources offered to us, a three pronged research methodology which will produce a comprehensive result which acknowledges and accounts for the variegations and the diversity of the Sri Lankan society without compromising on validity or economy of sampling.

1. We base the research on a conceptual framework which hypothesises an ideal set of Theories of Change regarding attitudes and perception of abortion

   a) We do this primarily due to the lack of a pre-existing baseline
   b) Developing a best case scenario TOC enables us to define an upper threshold of conditional favourability towards abortion, with the lowermost threshold being the unconditional rejection of abortion.
   c) We conceptualise shifts in attitudes and perceptions across multiple socioeconomic and demographic variables as floating points in between the said thresholds, which aids better analysis and easier visualisation.
   d) This enables us to focus on the deltas that deviate substantially from either threshold in given sample subsets, which can then lead to closer qualitative scrutiny.

2. We gauge public opinion at its most impactful where it intersects with cultural authorities, public bodies and organisations, in other words we account in our research, points of dissemination and exposure for perceptions and attitudes.

   a) We find merit in the idea of exploring agents of attitudinal conservatism or change, particularly given that we are unable to expand our survey to a very large dataset within the given budgetary constraints. we try and assess the focal points and centres of attitudinal transformation/learning as they pertain to each demographic/community.

3. Acknowledging that FPA requires data with communicative ballast, we attempt to flesh out the quantitative findings gathered in sections 1 and 2 with narrative based reporting on select candidates in a way which best reflects the diversity of the actors affected.

2. Determining Sample Size, Sample Pools and weighting responses

The research is made complex by the fact that it attempts to survey attitudes and perceptions within a culturally heterogenous context, wherein culture(encompassing ethnicity, religion and education) is also a direct and core determinant of attitudinal tilt. Surveys on abortion from the USA, Zambia and South Africa, [1] for example, show a strong correlation between religiosity and stance on Abortion, wherein the groups who are most in support of abortion happens to be the least religious). We hypothesise thus that culture, therefore becomes central to the attitudinal discourse on abortion in Sri Lanka.

Relying on the 2012 census data, we understand that outside of Colombo, Sri Lanka's cultural diversity is best reflected by the populations in Ampara and Badulla Districts. Sampling from these districts provides a contrasting deviation of income and education levels across the total sample, divided across Urban, Rural and Estate sectors as well.
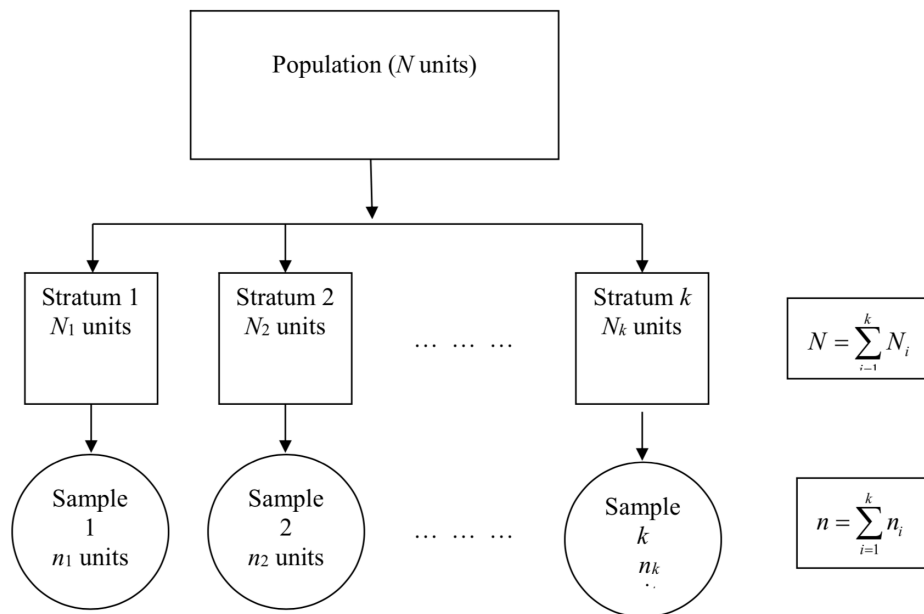
In quantifying the incidence of attitudinal change within the sample subsets, we find it useful to weigh the attitudes and perceptions against the economic status, access to education and access to information of the respondents wherein more permissible attitudes towards abortion from lesser socio-economically privileged communities would be weighed to balance the attitudinal skew between Urban and Rural communities.

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A cross sectional approach : Sample Size and Strata

Determining sample size, at this particular stage needs to be approached with some caution, rather than calculating a general sample size, one needs to determine stratifications of the general population across various socioeconomic and cultural lines, and then derive a sample set for each stratification whose aggregate will produce the final desirable sample size*.

As for a general preliminary picture, let us posit that we rely on a proportionally stratified sample, of which the strata will be determined and finalised upon undertaking the survey

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                    ┌─────────────────────────┐
                    │   Population (N units)   │
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$$N = \sum_{i=1}^{k} N_i$$

$$n = \sum_{i=1}^{k} n_i$$

Stratum 1 N_1 units — Stratum 2 N_2 units — … … … — Stratum k N_k units

Sample 1 n_1 units — Sample 2 n_2 units — … … … — Sample k n_k

Wher :

N : Population Size

k : Number of Strata

N$_i$: Number of Sampling Units in the ith strata

n$_i$: Number of Sampling Units in the ith stratum where **n** is the total sample size*

The sample size does not depend on the size of the population unless the population is < 5,000, and only depends significantly on the size of the population for populations < 1,000.   The crucial factor in our sample, in, is that it is representative.

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