

**DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL FACTORS INFLUENCING PUBLIC OPINION ON
PROSTITUTION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE,
SOUTH AFRICA**

S Pudifin*

S Bosch**

SUMMARY

This paper examines countervailing South African public opinion on the subject of prostitution in South Africa, and identifies the factors which might influence these attitudes. It also investigates the complex relationship between public opinion and the law. Whilst engaging in prostitution constitutes a criminal offence under the *Sexual Offences Act 23 of 1957*, it is generally ignored by the police, which results in a quasi-legalised reality on the ground. In recent years there has been growing demand for the decriminalisation of prostitution, and as a result the issue is currently under consideration by the South African Law Reform Commission. The Commission released a Discussion Paper on Adult Prostitution in May 2009, and is expected to make recommendations to parliament for legal reform in this area. An exploratory survey of 512 South Africans revealed interesting correlations between opinion on prostitution and both demographic characteristics (including gender, age, race and education level) and so-called "social" characteristics (including religiosity, belief in the importance of gender equality, the acceptance of rape myths, and a belief that prostitutes have no other options). The survey reveals two key findings in respect of the attitudes of South Africans to prostitution. Firstly, an overwhelming majority of South Africans - from all walks of life - remain strongly morally opposed to prostitution, and would not support legal reforms aimed at decriminalising or legalising prostitution. Secondly, our data confirm that these views are strongly influenced by certain demographic and 'social' variables. In particular, race, gender, religiosity, cohabitation status, and socio-economic status were found to be

* Sarah Pudifin BA (Hons) LLB (University of KwaZulu-Natal); LLM, MPhil (University of Cambridge); Pupil Advocate at the KwaZulu-Natal Bar, Durban; (sarahpudifin@gmail.com).

** Shannon Bosch BA (Hons) LLB (University of KwaZulu-Natal); LLM (University of Cambridge); Attorney of the High Court of South Africa; Senior Lecturer in Law (UKZN School of Law); (Boschs@ukzn.ac.za).

religiosity, cohabitation status, and socio-economic status were found to be statistically significantly related to opinions on prostitution, while other variables - particularly the belief in the importance of gender equality and the level of education - had no statistically significant relationship with tolerance of prostitution. Given that the proposed legal reforms, which will shortly be tabled before parliament, will¹necessitate the consideration of public opinion, it is imperative that studies such as the one presented in this paper be conducted to gauge the likely response which such proposed reforms might face.

KEYWORDS: Prostitution; decriminalisation; public opinion; influence of demographic and social factors