

# SOUTH AFRICA'S

THIS MONTH MARKS 20 YEARS SINCE ABORTION WAS FIRST LEGALISED IN SOUTH AFRICA, MAKING THE ABORTION LAW AMONG THE MOST PROGRESSIVE IN THE WORLD. SO WHY, TWO DECADES ON, ARE 150 000\* SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN A YEAR RISKING DANGEROUS AND ILLEGAL ABORTIONS IN BACKSTREET CLINICS?

BY AOIFE STUART-MADGE

# ABORTION CRISIS

**T**HERE'S A LOT I CAN'T TELL YOU ABOUT BABAWAL. I can't tell you her real name, the township she's from or what she does for a living. But I can tell you that when she was 20, she went to a backstreet clinic in Johannesburg for an illegal abortion – without telling her family and friends.

Babawal knew the moment she felt pregnant that she couldn't have a baby. She was in her second year at varsity – something her strict Christian parents had made sacrifices to make happen. She knew she couldn't break their hearts by derailing her studies. 'Having a baby at that time would have devastated them – not to mention I was nowhere near ready to be a mother to a human being,' says Babawal, now 29.

Similarly, her boyfriend at the time was definitely not ready to be a father. 'I fell in love with a great guy – but as great as he was, he had his own plans and ambitions, and having a baby was not part of those,' she says.

By the time Babawal found out she was pregnant, she was four months along – barely eligible to seek a legal abortion under South African law. Besides, to do so meant confiding in her family doctor and risk being judged – or worse, her parents finding out. 'I was very ashamed,' she says. 'It's difficult to face people you know or people who know your parents, knowing they will frown upon you.'

So she took matters into her own hands and, using the Internet, set about finding a clinic that would perform the abortion secretly without the risk of her family finding out. She didn't have to look far: Johannesburg is awash with billboards and flyers advertising discreet 'quick, pain-free, same-day' abortions. When she picked a clinic, she called the mobile number and was told to bring R800 in cash.

Babawal's boyfriend drove her to the clinic but, once inside, she immediately felt uneasy. 'The whole atmosphere was uncomfortable,' she says. Her boyfriend was asked to pay cash upfront, before Babawal was taken to a small room. 'I was given a pill and left alone to wait for the foetus to loosen and detach before they could use instruments to remove it,' she says. 'After an hour, another woman took me to a dark room at the back of the house. I remember being told to get on a bed and open my legs. Then an instrument was placed in me to remove the foetus. I was terrified. All I could do was close my eyes and wait for it to go away. The pain was the worst part. I have honestly never felt pain like that in my entire life. I didn't even know whether I would be able to walk again. I cried throughout the whole thing, much to the annoyance of the woman who was doing the procedure.'

**'I REMEMBER BEING TOLD TO GET ON A BED AND OPEN MY LEGS. THEN AN INSTRUMENT WAS PLACED IN ME TO REMOVE THE FOETUS. I WAS TERRIFIED'**

**F**ar from the straightforward termination procedure South African women are entitled to by law, Babawal endured a living nightmare – which eventually led to her suffering a nervous breakdown. Nine years later, she's still struggling to come to terms with the horror of that day. You see, the clinic that Babawal went to was operating illegally, and the woman performing

her termination had no medical training and was unqualified to carry out the procedure or prescribe medication. She was a criminal more interested in fast cash than in Babawal's mental or physical wellbeing. The clinic was not a medical facility but a rented house that served as a front for one of a growing number of illegal cash-for-abortion outfits popping up around inner cities.

**A**ccording to global reproductive health group Marie Stopes International, between 52 and 58% of the estimated 260 000 abortions\* that take place in South Africa every year are illegal. These abortions are carried out by criminals masquerading as medical practitioners, with devastating consequences that include complications such as infection, infertility and, in extreme cases, death. These clinics offer no aftercare (Babawal was sent home the same day with a sanitary pad and an aspirin) and sever ties with a patient the second she leaves the clinic. With no land line to contact, it's not unusual for a patient to discover the clinic's mobile-phone number has been switched off or changed after she has attended. 'These fly-by-night providers, who women contact either via text or online, often disappear when it's time to assist further or to provide basic aftercare or deal with clinical complications that may arise,' says Andrea Thompson, advocacy and engagement manager for Marie Stopes South Africa, an organisation that offers safe, legal abortions. 'It is heartbreaking to hear what Babawal went through and that she didn't have the support of a clinical expert to guide her through the process.'

Babawal is one of the 'lucky' ones: her ordeal could have been much worse. According to Thompson, ▶

