

Barbara Kay on sex-selective abortion: The 'war on women' that dares not speak its name

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Since the dawn of the modern pro-choice movement, liberal activists have done their best to equate abortion-on-demand with women's rights. Make access to abortion easier, the theory goes, and you automatically empower women.

But then ultrasound technology, combined with a preference for male children in patriarchal cultures, produced the specter of gendercide — the systematic practice of using sex-selective abortion to kill off female fetuses. Is no-holds-barred abortion still such a great thing for women if it serves to systematically cull their ranks?

The problem is acute in South Asia, where girls and women are — to Canadian eyes — often shockingly de-valued.

It is technically illegal to perform sex-selective abortion in India — but the ban is widely flouted. And it is India's educated and affluent — seeking smaller families, but culturally motivated to ensure that one or more of their children is male — who have the money and connections to bypass the law. (The poor also do sex selection, but the old fashioned way: According to some ghastly reports, newborn girls are left to die on the floor or in a wastebasket.)

Before the practice of sex-selective abortion became a reality in Canada, one could not apply the words "hate crime" to abortion. In general, when a woman aborts a fetus, there's nothing personal in it. It isn't the fetus she hates — or its race or sex. What she seeks to avoid is the burden of responsibility the fetus represents for her future.

But in the case of sex-selective abortion, one can call it hate — at least, within the broad usage of the term that now predominates in human-rights circles. In such cases, the woman does want a baby — just not a female baby.

According to a 2012 study published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal, Indian-born women who reside in Canada and already have two children "were significantly more likely than Canadian-born women to have a male infant." Specifically, the male to female sex ratio for third children born to mothers in this statistical grouping was found to be 1.36 (with a 95% confidence-interval of between 1.27 and 1.46), a substantial deviation from the expected baseline of 1.05.

Where are all those female fetuses going? Take a guess. There are many private clinics in big cities such as Toronto that cater specifically to "family balancing" desires.

Sex-selective abortion is feminist pro-choicers' Achilles heel. For it is clearly an aberration of abortion's original purpose — just as it would be an aberration if technology could identify sexuality in the womb, and homophobic parents were choosing to abort gay and lesbian babies.

Yet feminists decades ago made absolute freedom of choice the litmus test for support of women's rights. Thus, regulation for any reason whatsoever is seen as anathema to the movement.

Add to that their anguish over appearing racist by admitting gendercide is culturally motivated, and they uneasily but stubbornly cling to the sanctity of "choice." This is an increasingly untenable stance, tainted both by intellectual laziness and moral cowardice.

Legislation targeting sex-selective abortion is ineffective in the West, because it's difficult to enforce (as in the Netherlands, where the practice is illegal but still widespread). That is why I favour Conservative MP Mark Warawa's petition for the Commons to approve his motion — M408 — to "condemn discrimination against female pregnancy termination."

This is an intelligent compromise. Women still would have freedom of choice, but the view of enlightened people that sex-selective abortion is a retrograde practice, alien to Canadian values and based in contempt for women, would be given official expression in our legislature.

Official condemnation by our government would help to erode the acceptance of this practice, in the same way that official condemnation of smoking through forced packaging information and public-service campaigns halved smoking rates. We would not be making sex-selective abortion illegal, but we would let people know that they are doing something destructive and shameful.

Partisanship should not stand in the way of the motion. Yet both NDP leader Thomas Mulcair and Liberal leader Bob Rae have voiced their disapproval of Mr. Warawa's motion.

Mr. Rae claims there is a consensus among Canadians that abortion is a private matter. Not so: A 2011 Environics poll found that 92% of respondents opposed sex-selective abortion. And a January 2012 Angus Reid poll found about two-thirds of respondents (about half of them women) favoured laws prohibiting the practice.

Mr. Mulcair claims to find sex-selective abortion repugnant, but apparently fears that the motion is a stalking horse for legislation that will end in back alleys and coat hangers. It won't: Stephen Harper has made it abundantly clear that he will not be legislating an abortion law. But fine. Let Mr. Mulcair propose his own all-party motion of condemnation, however he wants to word it — to which Mr. Warawa will happily sign on.

Silence is indifference. Gendercide is a hateful practice. Let that much at least be said.

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