

## **It's not the abortion part of sex-selection that should concern us**

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That the fetus you are carrying is female is certainly a terrible reason to have an abortion—but, good or bad, your reason is none of the government's business. It's simply not the place of our federal Parliament to voice an opinion on the merit of this or that reason behind a woman's choice to have an abortion.

To make this point is not, of course, to applaud the refusal by the House affairs committee to allow MP Mark Warawa to bring M408 to the House of Commons. M408 would have had Parliament "condemn discrimination against females occurring through sex-selection pregnancy termination." As Andrew Coyne has written in the *Citizen*, denying MPs the privilege to introduce motions and to speak in the House corrupts Parliament ("How mob rule muzzled Mark Warawa, and all other Canadian MPs," 30 March). Less party discipline and more respect for the rules and traditions of parliament would serve Canadians well.

If Warawa wants to raise the matter of sex-selective abortion in the House of Commons, let him do so. It's easy enough for MPs to vote against his motion and to explain why they did so.

It's not for Parliament to voice an opinion on women's reasons for having abortions, for human fetuses are neither in fact persons nor recognized as such in Canadian law. They are not persons for they have no interests; they lack the self-consciousness necessary for having interests, at least until late in the third trimester, and even then their level of self-consciousness compares unfavourably to that of adult rabbits and ducks. (If adult rabbits and ducks may be killed to serve the interests of persons, so may late-term human fetuses.)

Since they lack interests, human fetuses cannot be wronged. They cannot, therefore, be wronged by being discriminated against, not on grounds of sex, not on any grounds. Warawa's motion, then, makes no sense. No fetus is wrongfully discriminated against when it is aborted on account of its being female, so sex-selective pregnancy termination involves no wrongful discrimination for parliament to condemn.

Now this is not to say that the fact that some women in Canada chose to abort fetuses because of their sex is no proper concern of civil society or even of the Canadian government. It may very well be a proper matter of concern for you and me, and perhaps our government eventually has some role to play. But no one, no doctor, no ultra-sound technician, no politician should seek to place any barrier between any pregnant woman and an abortion. If a woman asks the sex of her fetus and a professional knows, that professional is duty-bound to answer,

whatever he or she fears the woman will do with that knowledge. A fetus cannot be wronged, but a patient or client denied information surely has been.

That a woman would have an abortion just because the fetus is female likely speaks to one or another social condition we should all be striving to change. The first is the belief that a daughter is less likely to fulfil one as a parent than a son is. This belief, in turn, might rest on such beliefs as that boys and men engage in more interesting pursuits than girls and women do, that they usually accomplish more of significance in life or gain more status, or that they relate to their parents in more satisfying ways.

The second is the desire to serve the tastes and aspirations of one's husband or family by doing their will. A woman might abort a fetus because it is female not in the belief that raising a daughter would be unfulfilling, but because of her husband's belief that it would.

What should concern us about sex-selective abortion, then, is not the abortion part, but either the beliefs and tastes behind the preference for a boy or the subservience of women to their husbands and families.

What to do? In the first case, I can think of nothing better than simply celebrating girls and women as people living rich and accomplished lives. We parents must make it known to others that we enjoy our daughters no less than we do our sons. Of course, all this requires that we work to remove whatever arrangements continue to prevent girls and women from living as they will.

In the second case, again the best approach is to lead by example. A society marked by companionate and supportive family relations will extend that mark into the consciousness of all its members. Equality within the family will recommend itself to others through its own merits, so long as it is there to be seen.

Why are these projects only for civil society, though, and not also the government? After all, our government has taken a leading role in trying to reform behaviour in connection with smoking and diet and bullying, to name just three.

Well, it's not clear that each example is of a proper concern of government. Laws and policies that restrict smoking in the interest of the health, comfort, or property of those who live, work, or play with smokers have their place, but laws or policies that target smokers for their own good don't. Whatever role the government takes in addressing the reality of sex-selective abortions, it must not be at the expense of civil liberties or a woman's freedom to choose.

My point is that there's nothing in sex-selective abortion to bother us but the attitudes towards raising a daughter that that practice expresses. But those attitudes are the private business of individual people. That puts them beyond the proper reach of government. It doesn't put them beyond the reach of you and me, though.