

## Is sex-selective abortion worse than sex-selective coitus?

IMPACT ETHICS: Making a Difference in Bioethics, 7 May 2013

<http://impactethics.ca/2013/05/07/is-sex-selective-abortion-worse-than-sex-selective-coitus/>

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That the fetus she is carrying is female is for one or another Canadian woman a sufficient reason to have an abortion.

This fact troubles Canadians, if recent polls are to be trusted. According to Environics, 92% of us oppose sex-selective abortion; Angus Reid says that 66% want laws against the practice. (Barbara Kay reports these percentages in her *National Post* column of 30 March 2013.)

Unfortunately, the figures themselves give us no clue as to which part of the practice is doing the troubling. Is it sex-selection or abortion?

Let's suppose couples can employ a reliable technique to ensure that the zygote is male. Time of day, temperature of the room, number of ejaculations in a twelve-hour period, whatever—let's suppose that some technique reliably results in a male rather than a female if coitus results in pregnancy at all. (Let's not suppose the technique involves a pill or an intra-penile device; artificial methods might introduce an irrelevant consideration.) Now let us conduct a new poll. Would we discover that 92% of Canadians oppose sex-selective coitus? Would any at all think it should be illegal?

I doubt the percentages would stay the same. I suspect that the figure of 92% would fall, and fall dramatically. If I am right, then it's the abortion part that accounts for Canadians' opposition, not the sex-selection part. If it were just the sex-selection, then any way of ensuring a male rather than a female baby would trouble us as much as sex-selective abortion does.

For my part, I would rather that in this new poll the figure of 92% did not fall. That is because the practice of sex selection reveals pinched and narrow attitudes towards having daughters. Abortion itself, on the other hand, is of no interest ethically.

The argument that, ethically speaking, abortion is of no moment begins with the observation that human fetuses, though human beings, are no more richly aware or self-aware than are snails, worms, or salmon, at least for the first couple trimesters. (In their final trimester, they compare poorly with typical adult pigs or dogs.) That they lack a rich awareness of both their environment and themselves implies that they lack interests. Lacking interests, they thereby lack the interests that certain forms of treatment could wrongfully frustrate. Thus, if a snail may be killed (painlessly) for just about any reason a person could have, then so, too, may a human fetus.

If this is right, sex-selective abortion cannot be counted wrongfully discriminatory. Discrimination against girls and women is, of course, wrongful, because it contravenes the principle of equal consideration of interests: that for each of us, what we want and like and aspire

to counts the same as what anyone else does. Human fetuses, though, since they lack interests, cannot be treated unfairly with regard to their interests. For that reason, discriminating against female fetuses cannot be unfair to those fetuses. From an ethical point of view, killing a fetus just because it is not male is not at all like saying “no” to a girl just because she isn’t a boy.

Nonetheless, sex-selective abortion expresses a preference for sons over daughters, and that’s a preference of which we should be happy to disapprove. Indeed, the existence of sex-selective abortion means that some women must have a very strong aversion to having a daughter, given that they want a baby but yet are willing to undergo a surgical procedure—never a trivial matter—so as not to have a baby girl.

Why would someone prefer, strongly prefer, to have a son rather than a daughter? A detailed answer to this question has to be left to the anthropologists or sociologists. Speaking generally, though, perhaps it is based on the belief that daughters often or always live lives less rich and full than sons do. Or, perhaps, it is based on a preference for the sorts of things sons do over those that daughters do. Probably bound up with these beliefs and further preferences are thoughts about the ways in which parents interact with their children, and about the pride they can take in their offspring.

Criticizing false beliefs is a relatively simple matter of compiling and organizing contrary evidence. Those who believe that girls lack traits of character boys possess or have fewer opportunities than boys do to create rich lives can be shown girls as feisty and spirited as any boy and women as accomplished and successful as any men.

To criticise a preference, on the other hand, is to show that it sits poorly with other of one’s preferences or prevents one from realizing important goals. Boys tend more than girls to play competitive power sports (let’s say), and thereby a son is more likely to excel at such sports than a daughter is; and I want to be the father of a child who excels in competitive power sports. And yet (you tell me), girls tend to be more empathetic than boys (let’s say), or to master more easily second and third languages, and thereby to excel at helping or communicating. Since these are also things that matter to me (you continue), my preference for a son is without grounds, for a daughter could just as well fulfil my aspirations as a parent.

That, at any rate, is the outline of a response to a person seeking to be a parent who prefers to have a son. Whatever she wants from a son is just as well available from a daughter—or, at least, that is the type of world we should be working to create.