

The liberal dilemma on sex-selective abortion

The revelation of extensive sex-selective abortion in Britain has again pitched cultural relativism against the idea of gender equality, argues James Mumford.

The controversy over sex-selection abortions, which hit the front pages again this month, pits two deep egalitarian impulses – a commitment to gender equality on the one hand, a commitment to cultural diversity on the other – against each other. It can leave politically correct people looking as if they might internally combust.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has decided it is not in the public interest to prosecute doctors offering abortions on the grounds of gender alone. Evidence this is happening was first publicised in 2012 when Daily Telegraph reporters accompanied pregnant women to different abortion clinics around Britain. After the women had explicitly stated they were unhappy their foetuses were female, the doctors proceeded to falsify the paperwork. Said one: ‘I’ll put too young for pregnancy, yeah?’

The CPS’s decision not to punish this practice has provoked outrage. From pro-lifers, predictably. But also from people, otherwise pro-choice, who’ve spent their lives campaigning for gender equality. So, Conservative MP Sarah Wollaston has said that selective abortion of baby girls ‘harms all women by reinforcing misogynist attitudes.’ While Shadow Attorney General Emily Thornberry told the Director of Public Prosecutions that any progress in dealing with violence against women and against girls ‘will be completely undermined if the [CPS] is seen to wash its hands of alleged abortion on grounds of sex selection.’

Problem is, there is also evidence that in some of these circumstances sex-selection abortions are an expression of deeply held cultural preferences, not just individual choices. Some of the pregnant women in the Telegraph sting were from ethnic minorities, while the former medical director of the UK’s largest abortion provider, British Pregnancy Advisory Service (bpas), has alleged that not only is abortion of female fetuses widespread in the UK, but that the phenomenon is also ‘more common among some ethnic communities’. And then, in January 2014, The Independent’s analysis of the 2011 National Census revealed the ‘widespread discrepancy’ in the sex ratio of

children in some immigrant families, a fact which 'can only be explained' by sex-selective abortion.

We know that in the developing world the increasing availability of ultrasound technology has led to the abortion of millions of female fetuses. Indian economist Amartya Sen was the first to draw this to the attention of the West. In 1990 he arrived at an estimate of 100 million missing women, a number revised to 163 million by French demographer Christophe Guilmoto in 2005.¹ In her powerful book, *Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys over Girls, And the Consequences of a World Full of Men*, Mara Hvistendahl tells the story of the fateful pairing of 'old traditions and new technologies' across Asia. In India, she shows, there are now 112 boys born for every 100 girls; in China, 121.

The existence of this practice in the UK, however, has come as news to us. If, as critics say, the whole episode has thrown a beam of light across the reality of abortion on demand, it has also raised the question of exactly whose demand we are talking about. The individual's or the group's? The couple's or the culture's?

And so respect for the particular mores of minority groups comes up against a foundational concern about the place of women in the world. An appreciation of diversity, our making peace with pluralism, and a belief that culture 'goes all the way down' – those convictions might lead us to reason that here is a distinct cultural practice which, though we might personally disagree with it, we are nevertheless obliged to tolerate (particularly if abortion is legal otherwise). Or we might think that certain rights simply trump others, and women's rights are among those.

The horns of a dilemma indeed. What are we to make of it? How should we respond? Over the course of the debate there have been so many old rogue philosophies surfacing it is difficult to know where to start. For example, who dares to call out the unashamed Utilitarianism of bpas's Ann Furedi when they admit the assumption that aborting girls is okay if the detrimental consequences of having those girls outweigh the benefits? (As G.K. Chesterton countered, when there aren't enough hats to go around the problem isn't solved by lopping off some heads.) Here, though, as we try to understand what's at stake, it is worth bearing in mind historical context.

There is in fact a direct precedent for this most emotive of issues. In the nineteenth century there was another practice involving female sacrifice which appalled white Westerners. That practice also on the face of it seemed voluntary, something women were not physically forced to do. It too was rooted in an ancient religion and its transcendent ideals, in a culture far older than that with which it came into conflict. It too was legitimated by people's

forward-looking concerns about what kind of lives the ‘candidates’ in question would live if spared. And – to make the quandary even more acute – that practice emanated from an indigenous rather than immigrant culture, i.e. one the British encountered away from home.

Sati was the Hindu practice whereby a widow would absolve herself of her sins, and show her utmost devotion to her dead husband, by throwing herself on his funeral pyre. So when the British banned it from Bengal in 1829, was that an unforgivable imposition, an exercise of immense cultural power? Or was it the best thing the British ever did in India? A victory for gender equality? A cause for celebration? That it was the latter is suggested by the fact that the campaign against Sati was not just carried forward by the usual suspects in England – Wilberforce et al. In Bengal itself Raja Rammohan Roy led the charge, thus demonstrating that perhaps certain moral principles may prove more foundational than the deepest of cultures.

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