

Sex-Selective Abortion

MORE THAN AN ECONOMIC ISSUE

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The first ultrasound image of a fetus was published in the mid 1950s.¹ Though this feat was a technical revolution because it incorporated sonar phenomena into the field of obstetrics, it was the image itself that resonated with individuals in and outside of the medical profession. For physicians, the development of the ultrasound allowed for prenatal detection of fetal abnormalities.¹ For mothers, it provided a powerful visual to conceptualize the otherwise abstract physiological changes they were experiencing. No longer did the fetus' health status depend on the mother's account of her experience; the fetus became a patient in its own respect. Since then, a plethora of ethical questions have emerged, all of which center upon one basic question: should a fetus be considered a person? And if so, does a fetus have rights? So far, no simple answer has emerged. However, in countries where a dominant male preference exists, the lowering costs of ultrasound technology has led to ethical concerns over whether it is permissible to terminate a pregnancy on the basis of gender.

ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

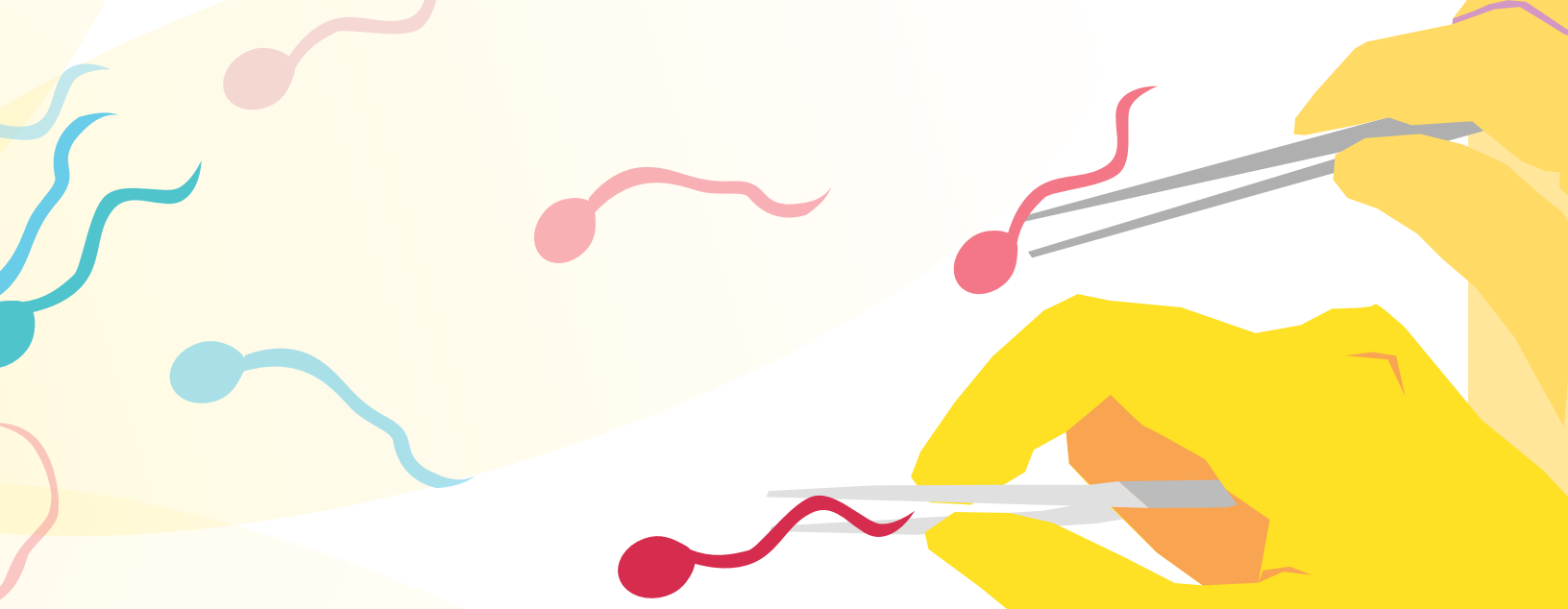
The sex ratio in China hovers at about 121 boys for every 100 girls and in India at about 112 to 100. Several predictions have been made about the economic implications of a skewed sex ratio caused by prenatal screening.² Sex-selective abortion (SSA) advocates often cite Wei and Zhang's study which showed that sex ratio imbalance stimulates entrepreneurial activities, with men driven to increase their wealth in hopes of boosting their viability in the marriage market.³ Other SSA defenders focus more on prosperity and economic gains, specifically on an individualized front. Becker and Posner⁴ famously advocated that selecting against girls will help placate other forms of female discrimination: "As children become adults in cohorts with a high ratio of boys, the advantage of girls and women increases since they are

scarcer. It is claimed that young women in China are already at a premium as potential mates because strong sex-selection has been going on ever since the one child policy was introduced in the early 1980s".⁴ Becker and Posner argue that with fewer women on the marriage market, their worth will increase, which in turn reduces discrimination against them.⁴ However, whether women will truly benefit from this "scarcity" is left unsupported. It is equally unclear whether the principles of *laissez faire* economics will apply to individuals. No study has yet to conclusively support these claims.

In a more critical light, Becker and Posner fail to consider the negative externalities that may arise as a result of this scarcity, such as sex trafficking or prostitution.⁵ The recent emergence of the subdivision "security demographics" is a testament to the growing concerns surrounding abnormal population ratios. Hudson and Boer (2002) suggest that a system of too few women would lead to a higher proportion of unmarried men.⁶ Some studies make correlative claims on the higher crime rates in populations associated with unmarried men.⁶ Others cite the highest proportion of export brides from North Korea to China.² Contrary to the suggestion of Becker and Posner, scarcity of women may further perpetuate discriminatory attitudes towards women, not placate them.

These economic arguments are an incomplete paradigm and perhaps even ask the wrong question. Reducing the debate to nothing more than a calculation of aggregate gain versus loss oversimplifies the issue, ignoring the complex cast of players who inform and are affected by the decision to perform SSA. Such utilitarian discussions may be overlooking the cultural and social frameworks that perpetuate SSA.

Perhaps a more complete debate would include a discussion of the principle of autonomy. The idea that individuals should have the right to self-governance often dictates whether an act is considered ethically permissible. In Hvistendahl's popular book, *Unnatural Selection Choosing Boys Over Girls and the Consequences of a World Full of Men*, she claims that women are acting autonomously because of their ability to choose the gender of their sex, gaining respect and honour in their



respective societies.² Julie Zilberberg goes a step further in saying that such interventions are morally justified because they allow women to exercise their reproductive rights, ensuring survival and preservation of honour, as defined within their societies.⁷

While most agree that autonomy should be considered, it is also important to consider the extent to which these women are autonomous. This is not an easy task, and may complicate Zilberberg⁷ and Hvistendahls² decisive claims about these women's accountability in the act of performing SSA. Among the many intricacies, decision-making is seldom ever an individual choice. Other family members such as sisters, brothers, husbands, and in-laws all may exert explicit and extreme pressures urging mothers to have a sex determination test. Avoiding the threat of divorce upon unsuccessfully bearing a son often serves as a motivation to undergo SSA.

Implicit pressures may be involved as well. There are numerous socioeconomic factors that help to sustain and proliferate the traditional preference for sons. Well-documented societal practices may be as coercive as direct threats; for example, the established dowry system exerts pressures on families to save for a female's marriage. Though the mere existence of cultural and social expectations is not sufficient to deem these external pressures forceful and constraining, lacking any other reasonable alternatives can be considered coercive. For

example, women may freely choose to bear a female under these circumstances, but it is highly unlikely that these pressures qualify as a realistic option; divorce or failure to bear a son may be deemed shameful by family and community members. Just because we have a choice doesn't necessarily mean that choice is viable, as both implicit and explicit expectations may limit the extent of one's autonomy.

In part, we are shaped by what our society expects of us, but the degree to which one can decisively demarcate the boundaries between what is coerced and non-coerced remains unanswered. Since the decision to terminate a pregnancy heavily relies on an external party, whether direct or indirect, mothers cannot be viewed as an isolated decision maker. Rather, she forms part of an interconnected web of individuals, many of whom exert cultural and societal pressures on maternal decision. More recently, China's goal of reducing the sex imbalance has been declared a national priority, aiming for 115 newborn males for every 100 females by 2015.⁸ Though much of their discussion is based on economic prosperity, the story that follows may be more complicated. The question of what it means to be truly autonomous will continue to complicate a debate that so far has concentrated on economic concerns. ■

REVIEWED BY DR. MARK VOROBJEJ

Dr. Mark Vorobjej is a Ph. D. (Toronto) professor at McMaster with research interests centering in logic, ethics, and epistemology. As a contemporary logician, his publications span a large range of issues. Among his many influential works are "Just War Theory and the Invasion of Afghanistan" in *Peace Research* (2009) and "Timeless Reasons" in *Philosophical Studies* (1988).

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