

Should gender selection be allowed for parents wanting a baby boy or girl?

- Gender selection is widely practised around the world.
- Gender selection is something many parents want: to decide the sex of their children.
- Gender selection is easy to do but raises huge moral / ethical issues.
- Gender selection can take place by encouraging in vitro fertilisation (IVF) only by sperm carrying the x or y chromosome.
- Gender selection can take place immediately after IVF when embryos are tested before implantation.
- Gender selection can take place when the developing foetus is tested, either genetically or by looking at ultrasound images, with abortion of a foetus if the "wrong sex".
- Gender selection can take place after birth when one or both parents kills their own baby.

While most people would be horrified at the thought of murdering a newborn baby just because it is the wrong gender, this has been happening in India and China, possibly elsewhere. Gender selection has become common (by one method or another) because many parents have decided that if they are only going to have one child, it should be a boy. In India, China and other nations, baby girls are also valued far less than baby boys in some communities.

The Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing research teams have found that in some parts of China there are 120 boys to only 100 girls because of Gender Selection - natural births produce a ratio of 105 to 100. Another study of women migrating to Beijing found they were arriving with 159 boys to only 100 girls. Gender Selection in China has already produced a very profound national imbalance with many tens of millions of young men now growing up without women to marry.

In India there is a similar problem with Gender Selection, and this has been the case for many years. A study in 1985 of women having amniocentesis (sampling of cells in the fluid surrounding a developing foetus in the womb) in Mumbai (Bombay) found that 90% were carried out to determine the gender of the child, and that 96% testing positive for a girl resulted in abortion. Although now illegal to abort in India on the basis of Gender Selection alone, ultrasound is commonly used to make the diagnosis before the 20th week of pregnancy and abortion is a common result.

In the UK recently two parents who had seen a daughter die requested gender selection to guarantee that their next child be a girl, but were refused - against British law. They said that

they had many sons and desperately needed a daughter. Indeed they claimed that they had a human right to a baby girl and that gender selection should be allowed - as an exception for them.

The trouble is that society as a whole is not capable of handling gender selection without terrible results. Cultures vary. A report in October 2000 found that 75% of newly wed couples want their first child to be a girl - and if many families have only one child. what then? Even if they all have two children, statistically there will be far too many women in Japanese society, assuming gender selection becomes common practice.

And why stop at gender selection? Why not start selecting future babies on the basis of predicted intelligence, athletic ability, musical talent, height or personality tendencies? The human genome project, coupled with Genetic engineeringg research is giving us huge powers to predict the future of human beings. We don't yet know which genes are good at predicting intelligence, but there is no doubt that we will. What then?

You can be sure that there will be huge pressures, if gender selection becomes normalised, to continue with selection for a host of other characteristics.

Do you really want to live in that kind of world? A world where gender selection routinely condemns to destruction healthy foetuses just because they don't fit the personal preferences of selfish parents?

Gender selection is a dangerous avenue to go down.

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