



The Case Against Sex Selection

Dr David King, Director of Human Genetics Alert (www.hgalert.org)

Sex selection is the exercise of sexism at the most profound level – choosing who gets born, and which types of people are acceptable. In traditional patriarchal societies, such as India, the preference for boys has led to there being fewer than 800 girls per 1000 boys in some parts of the country. In Western countries, although there is not a strong preference for either sex, the choices that are made are still based on rigid, sexist gender roles. Where parents are ‘desperate for a girl’, will they be hoping for a loud tomboy who grows up to be an engineer? Society must continue to fight sexist stereotypes, not allow them to dictate who gets born.

The very act of selecting our children creates a major ethical problem, and can only be justified when the aim is to avoid serious genetic impairments. By choosing the characteristics of our children, we turn reproduction into just another consumer experience. In the process, the relationship between parents and children becomes one between designer and designed object. Although parents always have hopes for their children, parents who have chosen their child’s sex will have expectations of their performance. It is fine to be choosy about washing machines, but not about babies. Turning children into designed objects undermines human dignity and, ultimately, the basis of human rights. This will have disastrous consequences for our society.

If social sex selection by sperm sorting is permitted, it will be impossible to prevent the use of preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) for that purpose. And once PGD for parental-preference sex selection is permitted, it will be impossible to argue against its use for a whole variety of other unacceptable purposes, such as selection for appearance, intelligence etc. If we allow sex selection by any means, the door to ‘designer babies’ will not have been opened a crack – it will have been thrown wide open.

It is sometimes suggested that so-called ‘family balancing’ – in which families with three or more children of one sex choose a child of the opposite sex – is a less objectionable use of sex selection. An American company is now trying to market sex selection tests for this purpose. However, this is still consumerism, and the motivation for such choices is still likely to be sexist. Moreover, the distinction between family balancing and other forms of sex selection is arbitrary and legally unsustainable. Parents who only want two children will successfully claim in the courts that they are being discriminated against if they are denied access to family balancing. Parents who only want one child will claim the same thing, saying that since they only want a single child, it is even more important for it to have the ‘right’ sex.

Advocates of 'reproductive liberty' often claim that reproduction is a purely private matter, and that individuals have a right to reproduce in whatever way they wish. However, the situation in India shows that individual liberty cannot be absolute and social impacts matter. In any case, the basic argument is flawed: a right of non-interference in natural reproduction is very different to a consumerist 'right' to select and design our children according to our whims.

Strong individual rights may protect against eugenic interference by the state, preventing governments from pursuing policies of selective breeding based on notions of desirable and undesirable genotypes. However, if individual rights are extended into consumer rights to buy whatever we want in the marketplace, we face the greater threat of a free-market eugenics, driven by the profit motive and by consumer desires for the perfect baby. Rather than non-interference, what is needed now is more state regulation to restrain the eugenic trend, including a ban on sex selection.