
SEX SELECTIVE ABORTION AS A SOLUTION OF SON'S PREFERENCE

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Abstract: This article addresses the phenomenon of sex-selective abortion, which is a social issue that is becoming a major concern for Albanian society. Sex-selective abortion occurs mostly in China, India, Pakistan and the Caucasus as well, which have strong son preference. In terms of definition, sex-selective abortion consists in the elimination of the female sex baby's birth through prenatal sex selection, as the preference for male children. Abortion of female fetus is most common in areas where cultural norms value male children over female children. This has directly resulted in a severe imbalance in the sex ratio at birth (SRB), which constitutes the most significant contributor to the phenomenon referred to as 'missing girls', 'female deficit' or 'shortage of girls'. Numerous challenging demographic, sociological, ethical and public policy questions have arisen from the use of sex-selective abortion. It is an issue that is related to abortion rights, severe gender discrimination and maternal healthcare. This paper aims to provide a concise review of sex-selective abortion worldwide, and to compare it with the Albanian context.

Data were obtained from the existing international literature to this approach. This thesis is based on several books and studies focused on the sex-selective abortion considering also Albanian researches. Social policy and theoretical view is the focus to this field of study.

Sex selective abortion of female fetus is most common in areas where cultural norms value male children over female children. It can affect the human sex ratio - the relative number of males to females.

To summarize, the reasons for sex selective abortion are due to: in some societies the family continuity depends on son; girls cannot hold property in some societies so a male child is essential for a family to retain its wealth; girls are seen as transitory members of a family - they marry and leave home; the family may have to produce a dowry when a girl child marries (this could be regarded as a back door way of a woman getting to inherit some of the family wealth); boys bring in a dowry when they marry, adding to the family wealth; a wife's status (and thus her economic security) is not consolidated until she produces a son; the trend to small families means that parents don't want to have several girl children before having a son. It is recommended that the international debate on sex-selective abortion ought to be regarded as an important area of related interest in Asia, China etc., as well as an area of related interest even in Albania. At this point of view, considering the cases in Western and many other countries and therefore it is valuable even for Albania, sex-selective abortion should be addressed with ethical and social policy issues.

Keywords: SSA, preference for son, culture, religion.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to UN statistics, there are 117 million girls missing around the world. Where have they gone? Many of them are left on the sides of roads, drowned, maimed and thrown in trash bins. But even more of them have been aborted. The reason? They were girls, not boys...

Sex-selective abortion is a well-known issue that is related to abortion rights, severe gender discrimination and maternal healthcare. This issue occurs mostly in Asia, including India and China as well, which have the highest level of excess female child mortality, declining fertility rates and strong son preference.⁵¹ To gain more understanding regarding this phenomenon, this thesis will explore the issue first by explaining the situation in a global context, and then going further with the analysis of the policy implementation, related factors that underlie the slow progress in reducing sex-selective abortion in the countries much affected.

Most abortions are caused because the pregnancy is unplanned and having a child causes a crisis for the woman. Sex-selective abortion⁵² is the practice of terminating a pregnancy based upon the predicted sex of the baby. The selective abortion of female fetus is most common in areas where cultural norms value male children over female children, especially in parts of People's Republic of China, India, Pakistan and the Caucasus. Sex selective abortion can affect the human sex ratio- the relative number of males to females. The preference for male children is part of the general inequality of women in some cultures. This is largely economic and due to a several reasons. Therapeutic abortions result from a medical problem where allowing the pregnancy to continue to birth would endanger the woman's health.

⁵¹ Sugandha Nagpal, (Feb.2013). Sex-Selective Abortion in India: Exploring Institutional Dynamics and Responses. McGill Sociological Review, Volume 3:18-35. York University, Toronto.

⁵² <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/sex+Selective+abortion>

Selective abortions, which are a small fraction of all abortions, occur in those cases where a particular foetus is perceived as having undesirable characteristics. Selective abortion is also done when there are too many foetuses in a pregnancy. These include cases where:

- the unborn child is a girl, and the parents, for cultural or other reasons, want a boy
- the foetus is defective
- the foetus does not suit the parents in some other way
- the pregnancy is intended to produce a child with specific genetic properties, and this foetus doesn't have them.

Despite comprehensive official prohibitions, sex-selective abortion has been widely practiced in China over the past two or three decades. This has directly resulted in a severe imbalance in the sex ratio at birth (SRB), which constitutes the most significant contributor to the phenomenon referred to as 'missing girls', 'female deficit' or 'shortage of girls'. Numerous challenging demographic, sociological, ethical and public policy questions have arisen from the use of sex-selective abortion [i]. Sex-selective abortion is not specific to Asia. Christophe Guilmoto and Geraldine Duthé explain why European countries in the Western Balkans and Southern Caucasus are affected too. Although the problem was described for the first time more than ten years ago, it is only now that the authorities in these countries and in Europe are starting to show concern [ii]. This is especially the case in the Southern Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) where it has sometimes exceeded to 115 boys per 100 girls (a normal sex ratio is 105), and to a lesser extent in the Western Balkans, around Albania, where it floats around 110 [2]. The persistence of traditional patriarchal values is central to the son preference observed in these regions, but the fertility decline and the development of modern health care services under the new political and economic regimes have raised demand for prenatal sex selection. The sex ratio at birth is usually expressed as the number of boys born alive per 100 girls born alive [2].

Table 1. International figures about the sex ratio at birth (number of male births per one female birth).⁵³

Years	Africa	Australia	America	Europe	Asia	World	China
1995-2000	1.03	1.05	1.05	1.06	1.09	1.07	1.18
2000-2005	1.03	1.05	1.05	1.06	1.10	1.07	1.21
2005-2010	1.03	1.05	1.05	1.06	1.09	1.07	1.20

A distorted SRB is not a new problem in China. According to the available historical data, China's SRB has been persistently much higher than normal [1]. It used to be widely held and is still assumed by many Chinese that son preference is a serious problem mainly in countryside where people are less educated, not in cities where living standard and education level are much better.

Modern medicine allows parents to learn the sex of a baby before it is born, and in some cultures this can lead to a foetus being aborted if it is female.

In the 2000s this has been of particular concern in India, where it is partly responsible for a low and declining population ratio of women to men - there were 972 females against 1,000 males in 1901 and 933 females against 1,000 males in 2001. The Hindu newspaper reported in 2002 that "in Delhi, one in seven female foetuses is said to be aborted." Similar issues have caused concern in South Korea and China.

The preference for male children is part of the general inequality of women in some cultures. This is largely economic and due to reasons like these:

family continuity depends on sons girls cannot hold property in some societies so a male child is essential for a family to retain its wealth girls are transitory members of a family - they marry and leave home even while girls remain in the family they generally earn less than boys the family may have to produce a dowry when a girl child marries (this could be regarded as a back door way of a woman getting to inherit some of the family wealth) boys bring in a dowry when they marry, adding to the family wealth a wife's status (and thus her economic security) is not consolidated until she produces a son the trend to small families means that parents don't want to have several girl children before having a son.

2. METHODOLOGY

This article is oriented at examining the impact of sex-selection phenomenon in the Eastern countries. Significantly, this paper develops the issue in the context of literature review. To this regard, it corresponds to the

⁵³ Anna Higgins, J.D. (April, 2016). Sex-Selection Abortion: The Real War on Women. Published at Charlotte Lozier Institute.

sex selection impact in terms of both factors and results to it. The research question is related to the overall context of sex selection and son preference in our country and to compare it with with the Eastern countries.

According to the selecting academic articles for this paper, care was taken to choose peer reviewed journal articles that relay theoretical constructions and/or utilize or engage in primary research conducted across various countries. Taken together, the articles reviewed and analyzed for the purpose of this paper espouse a critical feminist ideology and reflect interdisciplinary perspectives.

Meanwhile, this paper is unable to depict a multidimensional/integrated approach; it attempts to describe the phenomenon of sex-selection by centralizing on the problem and its impact. This examination is not comprehensive, as it cannot possibly examine the implications of context specific socio-cultural variables i.e. in diverse regions as there are no official data in Albania to this issue. Significantly, the paper's involvement is the analysis of social relations and its alignment with the theoretical framework. The paper acknowledges the importance of an integrated approach that encompasses an investigation of social and institutional systems, as they mutually reinforce each other and inform expressions of son preference.

In terms of organization of the article, at its onset the paper draws on diverse frameworks to conceptualize the practice of sex-selective abortion. The first section of the paper details the widespread of the problem in different countries. The second section includes theoretical point of views, debates from different sociologist towards East countries attitudes to West countries about this subject. And at the end of the paper there are the findings and conclusions.

However, the abovementioned analysis prescribes the model of particular expressions in patriarchal cultural norms and son preference in several countries including Albania. Importantly, it exercises an insular focus that does consider the contemporary characteristics of the issue. Thus, this article attempts to explain, beyond the dominant academic discourse, son preference.

In terms of clarifying some terms utilized throughout the paper, it is important to note that both terms sex-selective abortion and sex-selection are used interchangeably and refer to the selective abortion of female fetuses. Overall, the current paper aims to present the social aspects of the problem, the role of the governments and non-governments' institutions in informing the society for better understanding the problem and to decrease all its impact toward the community.

3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SEX SELECTION - SON PREFERENCE

Prenatal sex-selection against females (PNSSaF) has lead to more than 100 millions missing girls, mainly in Asia. Well documented in India [2] and China, more recent research in Vietnam [1] and the Caucasus reveals that PNSSaF is geographically more widespread than previously thought [iii]. In recent years, research on the sex ratio at birth (SRB) has provided accumulated evidence of PNSSaF among Asian Diasporas in Western Countries: in the UK [iv]; in the USA and Canada [v] and, since 2010, in other European countries (Greece, and possibly Norway, Italy). PNSSaF appears to add, or to some extent substitute other forms of gender discrimination, including girl neglect, abandonment and infanticide [4]. Prenatal sex-selection against female (PNSSaF) is seen as a mean to increase the chance of having a son, especially when controlling for family size.

In traditional patriarchal societies such as India and China, a son is viewed as paramount to fulfill exclusively male family roles, including patrilineal inheritance practices and providing economic support and care (through his wife) to parents in old age – whereas a daughter is viewed as an economic burden for her parents [vi]. Bearing a son is the primary role of the young wife and a way to raise her status in her husband's family household [vii]. Women often resort to PNSS to escape abuse and multiple pregnancies, and to avoid having unwanted girls who are then at risk of being neglected [viii]. This strategy to improve their well-being and potentially that of their (wanted) children is, however, seen as a route to perpetuating female discrimination and the devaluation of girls [7].

To summarize, the reasons for sex selective abortion are due to: in some societies the family continuity depends on son; girls cannot hold property in some societies so a male child is essential for a family to retain its wealth; girls are seen as transitory members of a family - they marry and leave home; the family may have to produce a dowry when a girl child marries (this could be regarded as a back door way of a woman getting to inherit some of the family wealth); boys bring in a dowry when they marry, adding to the family wealth; a wife's status (and thus her economic security) is not consolidated until she produces a son; the trend to small families means that parents don't want to have several girl children before having a son. These factors underline the complexity of the ethical implications of PNSS as well and the political challenges [ix].

4. LITERATURE REVIEW - THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Many studies have examined sex-selection on a dual theoretical framework, which are social learning and self-determination theory. Social learning theory emphasizes two different methods of learning: learning through the

consequences of response and learning through modeling [x]. This theory asserts that "social learning accomplished through observation and modeling of behavior" [10]. This component self-motivation to change behavior is a key difference between social learning theory and other behavioral theories.

It is important to note, however, that social learning theory shows only the outside of ideologies and not on the inside. Many values and behavioral regulations are neither spontaneous nor pleasant. Nonetheless, the acquisition of such behaviors are necessary to the socialization and integration of the individual to his community" [xi]. According to self-determination theory, this occurs through the "process of internalization": Progressively, individuals learn to enact behaviors with contingencies more and more distal, and eventually removed. They then understand the importance of doing the behavior to get the desired result. Finally, this identification with the results is integrated into the structure of the self. At that moment, social values are accepted as personal values [11].

Self-determination theory divides motivations into categories along a continuum ranging from extrinsic motivations to intrinsic [xii]. Extrinsic motivation "refers to doing an activity solely to obtain rewards or to avoid punishments" [xiii]. Based on this, possible extrinsic motivations for sex-selective abortion could involve a sense of obligation toward one's family or spouse to produce a male heir or a fear of punishment for producing a female child. Example motivations that would fall under this category include: "*My husband wants to have a son, I will be treated badly in my family if I do not have a son, It is expected in my culture to have a son...*"

Just as social learning theory has been applied across cultures, self-determination theory has proven valid in diverse social settings. Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymon, and Kaplan's [xiv] study of motivation's effect on academic performance among Eastern children stressed the theory's applicability across cultures. All the studies involving self-determination theory examine the type of motivation on individual experiences when conforming to an expected behavior in his or her social circle. Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that one could apply self-determination theory to measure motivation for any behavior that is approved of by a culture- regardless of how that behavior is viewed by the outside world. Sex-selective abortion would be an example of such a behavior. While it is not carried out in all societies, the practice is commonly accepted in large portions of the world.

In many studies, ethnicity has been shown to be a contributing factor in how influenced one is by social learning. Houts and Kassab found that there is a relationship between social learning and fear of crime. As indicated in several previously-mentioned studies, culture and ethnicity play an important role in both social learning and the influence of motivation on behaviors [11]. As such, populations whose traditions and norms differ significantly from those of previously-studied groups leave room for future studies with potentially divergent results.

Additionally, religion has been identified as a factor in studies involving social learning. Lottes and Kuriloff's examined multiple demographic variables in relation to socially-learned sex-role ideologies. Of those variables, religion was identified as one of the most salient [6].

Finally, this research integrates social learning theory and self-determination theory as a mean to explore both how individuals adopt the practice of sex-selective abortion and why they choose to engage in the behavior.

However, little is known about individuals' motivation for performing acts that the larger society might consider unpleasant or objectionable- such as sex-selective abortion. More research is needed to determine the relationship between motivation and engagement in taboo behaviors.

To conclude this theoretical analysis of the sex-selective abortion, this paper essentially attempts to explore possible reasons for the pervasiveness of sex-selective abortion in the international perspective. The majority of the literature have shown that in the case of sex-selection there are complex reasons (*as quoted:* [xv]) reasons that allow the accused delegate responsibility complex system as a whole, in other words if the cause is according to the public values, becomes compelling and could be accepted, otherwise not. The abovementioned practices explain this in correlation with cultural issues that show women's inferior position in the respective societies.

5. SOCIOLOGICAL DEBATE

Certain cultural minorities have a cultural preference for sons. [6] Based on this preference, they may desire sex-selective abortion. SSA involves the identification of the fetus's sex during the pregnancy using prenatal diagnosis, followed by abortion of the fetus if it proves to be of the undesired sex. If SSA is to be applied, the sex of the fetus has first to be determined. SSA is thus closely related to the rise of prenatal diagnosis (PND) in genetics, amniocentesis or ultrasound. In general, prenatal diagnosis and selective abortion are driven by the desire to prevent illness. As some illnesses are sex-linked, the debate in medical ethics concerns what genetic diseases or congenital anomalies are so serious that they justify PND and sex selective abortion. The prenatal diagnostic techniques that are required for sex determination of the fetus are

also available in other European countries and the abortion legislation in most European countries is such that it makes SSA possible.⁵⁴

For example, we are able to name countries where abortion is only permitted if there is risk to the mother's life or health, or if the woman is in a critical situation which cannot be resolved in any other way. Because the law does not define what constitutes a critical situation, ultimately it is the woman who decides, thus making SSA legally possible. In most European countries women have, as in the Netherlands, a legal right to decide on the termination of pregnancy, or the abortion laws in these countries recognize rather broad grounds for permitting abortion, including socio-medical reasons, like the UK (except Northern Ireland) [4]. As the Netherlands is, compared with other European countries, rather reluctant in offering PND to pregnant women, it follows that SSA is legally possible in most European countries [xvi].

To this regard, if a woman does not want a child because she is unemployed and will have to take care of the child entirely by herself, then these are critical situations experienced as such by the individual [xvii]. The situation is different, in the case of a Muslim woman who does not want any more girls. In that case 'it is not a matter of an individual desire, but of a culturally imposed demand: desire for males', and, according to Saharso, we should not sympathize. The non-representative data on cultural minorities suggest that certain cultural minorities do have a cultural preference for sons, and that women are condemned if they have not (yet) produced a boy. But it is unclear whether they are prepared to accept SSA [4].

In countries where SSA is a widespread phenomenon, such as India and China, it is the expression of a cultural view in which women are of less value than men [4]. According to this argument, it is assumed that western women are fully autonomous in their decision-making, while women from non-western cultures, as victims of their culture, are not.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The problem of sex-selective abortion is rooted in something much deeper than the practice itself. It is rooted in the failure of our nation to recognize that sex-selective abortion tears at the very fabric of liberty by denying equal protection under the law to a segment of the population [4]. Sex-selective abortion is practiced, although probably only on a very small scale, by immigrant minorities in the European countries.⁵⁵ Whether SSA is practiced in other European countries, and on what scale, we do not know, as it is not registered. We do know, however, that in other western countries with minorities from countries where SSA is prevalent, some of these immigrants desire SSA [4].

When a western woman says she is too poor to have a child, her decision to abort has clearly been made under constrained conditions⁵⁶ but, by contrast, when a non-western woman says the importance attached to boys in her culture means that she cannot afford to have a girl child, her decision to abort is more commonly regarded as subservience to 'a culturally imposed demand. There seems to be a presumption here that people can act autonomously when they are bowing to economic necessity, but not when bowing to cultural expectations; and one of the central points of Saharso's argument is that this feeds, in worrying ways, into a hierarchy of western versus non-western culture. This edges far too close to saying we will not believe a woman is 'choosing' if what she chooses is at odds with majority beliefs.

The practice of SSA in India showed some of the intricacies of culture, modernity and gender inequality. SSA is possible, first, because of the existence of modern PND techniques, and practiced not by the poorest, most backward part of the population, but by the urban middle class. Second, the dowry system plays an important role in the motives of Indian women to choose a SSA. Yet dowries have become so expensive because an increasingly market-dominated modern economy led to the commercialization of the dowry system [6]. If we take into consideration the wider context in which Indian women choose a SSA, their motives appear clearly cultural. SSA is morally wrong, yet individuals that choose SSA are not necessarily morally inferior to those who do not (have to) make that choice.

If discrimination against a girl or boy on the basis of sex after he or she is born is prohibited, why then do we refuse to enact laws that protect those same children from lethal sex-discrimination prior to birth? We have thus far done a disservice to women and society as a whole by refusing to educate our citizenry on the importance of equality under the law in every instance of sex discrimination – including prenatal sex discrimination.

⁵⁴ Saharso, S.; Philips, A. & Mookherjee, M. (2005) "Ethnicities 5, 2 'Sex-Selective Abortion' 271-281"

⁵⁵ Sugandha Nagpal, (Feb.2013). Sex-Selective Abortion in India: Exploring Institutional Dynamics and Responses. McGill Sociological Review, Volume 3:18-35. York University, Toronto.

⁵⁶ Sawitri Saharso, (June 2005). "Sex-selective abortion". *Gender, culture and Dutch public policy. Ethnicities*. Free University, Amsterdam. p. 248-266

In general, different academics support the official Chinese as well as international mainstream position—that sex-selective abortion has negative impact on society and should be banned by legislation and that the existing comprehensive prohibition should be rigorously implemented to reverse, or at least slow down.

We can turn the tide of prenatal discrimination by first acknowledging the obvious, that prenatal sex-discrimination in all its forms is unethical and unacceptable. We must accept that sex-selective abortions occur globally, even in the United States, and acknowledge the serious consequences that result from gender imbalances and the refusal to condemn sex-selective abortion. Sex-selective abortion perpetuates sex discrimination in general and specifically, in many countries, the attitude that male children are preferable and somehow superior to female children. Reversal of sex discrimination in the United States begins with implementing sex-selective abortion bans, considering regulations of pre-implantation sex selection, and instituting national abortion reporting requirements. Allowing these facts to inform our public policy and taking the steps necessary to eliminate sex-selective abortion will put the United States squarely on the frontlines in fighting the actual “war on women.” Such a stance will create a platform from which the U.S. can affirm the unique value of each individual, and can publicly condemn unjust discrimination against either sex.

From the findings it is obviously shown that in our country this phenomenon is due to cultural factors and due to the absence of the appropriate social policies at this regard. Much further researches on the ethical and social policy implications of sex-selective abortion in Albania—in the context of its impact towards family and society, needs to be done. It is recommended that the international debate on sex-selective abortion ought to be regarded as an important area of related interest in Asia, China etc., as well as an area of related interest even in Albania. Regarding sex-selective abortion in Albania there is only one report done by UNFPA 2012 for the “Sex unbalanced at birth in Albania”. This study contributed to extent the knowledge and describes the situation of SSA in Albania. At this context, first this issue urged to be followed with many other studies, and in that way the recommendations for governments and non-governments Albanian institution can be addressed with ethical and social policy issues that are the cases in Western and many other countries.

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