



What is a selective abortion?

Selective abortions, which are a small fraction of all abortions, occur in those cases where a particular fetus is perceived as having undesirable characteristics. Selective abortion is also done when there are too many fetuses 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 fetus does not suit the parents in some other way
- the fetus is defective
- the pregnancy is intended to produce a child with specific genetic properties, and this fetus doesn't have them

Sex-selective abortion

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

In the mid-1970s, amniocentesis, which reveals the sex of a baby in utero, became available in developing countries. Originally meant to test for fetal abnormalities, by the 1980s it was known as the "sex test" in India and other places where parents put a premium on sons. When amnio was replaced by the cheaper and less invasive ultrasound, it meant that most couples who wanted a baby boy could know ahead of time if they were going to have one and, if they were not, do something about it.

While the natural sex ratio at birth is 105 boys born for every 100 girls, in India the figure has risen to 112 boys and in China 121. The Chinese city of Lianyungang recorded an astonishing 163 boys per 100 girls in 2007.

At present, this is of particular concern in India, where it is partly responsible for the 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 fetuses is said to be aborted."

Similar issues are causing 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

India is one of the countries with the biggest problems regarding sex-selective abortions and female infanticide.

India's average is 940 girls for every 1,000 men, and that gap itself has widened since 2001.

The Indian state of Haryana has the most unbalanced sex ratio in the country, with 877 women for every 1,000 men.

Haryana's situation is the result of illegal sex-selective abortions and female infanticide.

Sex-selective abortion (usually referred to as 'female feticide') is illegal under Indian law, but the law is not strictly enforced and the practice is widespread.

Female fetuses are often killed for financial reasons.

- **Earning power:** Men are usually the main income-earners, either because they are more employable or earn higher wages for the same work, or because they are able to do more agricultural work in subsistence economies. Since male babies have a greater income potential, they are less likely to be killed.
- **Potential pensions:** In many societies, parents depend on their children to look after them in old age. But in many of these cultures a girl leaves her parental family and joins her husband's family when she marries. The result is that parents with sons gain extra resources for their old age, when their sons marry, while parents with daughters lose their 'potential pensions' when they marry and move away. This gives parents a strong reason to prefer male children. Some parents (particularly poor ones) who can't afford to support a large family, will kill female babies. Girls are considered a drain on family resources during their childhood without bringing economic benefits later on.
- **Dowry:** Some girl babies are killed so that the family doesn't have to pay a dowry when they get married. In Indian society it is tradition for the parents of the bride to give a dowry to the groom and his family. The dowry consists of large amounts

of money and valuable goods. For families with several daughters this can be a serious financial burden.

In 2007, Gul Afroz Jan, who teaches law at Kashmir University, first raised the alarm that female feticide was rampant in the Muslim-majority valley. She had done a study for which she interviewed 100 pregnant women and 10 of them told her that they had gone for sex selective abortions.

"In a patriarchal male-dominated society like ours, preference for a male child is in our psyche," she said. "A son perpetuates our family name and line while a girl is thought to be a burden, to be married with a huge dowry."

Ms Jan says now the growing middle-class families are also adopting the two-child norm and as they go for smaller families, female feticide is often used to limit the size of the family. "And technological advancement [sex determination tests] has ensured that thousands of girls are denied their right to be born," she says.

Several Indian newspapers show the same sort of view towards female feticide.

"At an awareness camp for school children conducted by an NGO in an infanticide-prone area the children were asked who they preferred for a sibling - boy or girl. 99 per cent of them favored boys; girls, they said, cost more to their parents. A 14-year-old schoolboy ran away from home when his parents refused to kill the twin girls born to them rather late in their life - he did not want to shoulder the responsibility of marrying them off later in life!"

-The Hindu, May 12, 2001

"What is better, having an unwanted daughter or none at all?" shoots off Pratap Dayi, who had aborted a female fetus five times over.

"As it is, I have no place in my house, and my daughter would most certainly have been worse off. There would have been ghee and milk for my brother-in-law's sons and not even a roti for her - plus the land would have been theirs, too."

-The Tribune of India, 6 May 2001

Dr Saleem-ur Rehman, director of health services for Kashmir Valley, is working to stop this practice. On Dr Rehman's order, 100 ultrasound clinics have been sealed in the valley. Action has been taken against centers in Srinagar, Budgam, Baramulla, Ganderbal, Kulgam and Kupwara. Many more have been sent notices and are in the process of being raided and sealed.

Any clinic which is not registered, or one that has not submitted the mandatory Form F (which has to be filled for each pregnant mother that visits the clinic), or a clinic that submits incomplete forms has been shut down.

"Some of them are big names, but they are doing very bad work. We know they are definitely doing sex determination tests. I will not allow medical technology to be part of this menace," he says.

Dr Rehman says his job is made difficult by the fact that he can never have definite proof.

"The person who gets the sex selection done - like the pregnant mother, her husband or her mother-in-law - will never reveal anything. Nor will the person who does it, because he's getting paid for it and he knows it's illegal. So we can only have circumstantial evidence."

And of that, he says, he has plenty. In medical circles, he says, word gets around, and doctors who do sex selection tests or reveal the gender of fetus to parents develop a reputation.

But technology is only the supply side of this business. Activists say until the demand side - the overwhelming desire for the male child - is tackled, the problem cannot be wished away.

Governmental policies have also increased female feticide as an unpredicted side-effect. For example, when the Chinese Government introduced a One Child Policy in 1979 there was a surge in female feticide and female infanticide. Families needed to have a son because of their higher earning potential, so a girl baby was an economic disaster for them, and there was a strong motive to ensure that girl babies did not survive.

Female infanticide has existed in China for a long time, and although the One Child Policy has added to the problem, it didn't cause it.

Despite the egalitarian nature of Chinese society, many parents believe that having a son is a vital element of providing for their old age. Therefore in extreme cases, a baby is killed if it is not of the preferred sex, because of the pressure not to have more than one child.

The Chinese Government have acknowledged the problem and introduced laws to deal with it, including the Maternal Health Care Law. This forbids the use of technological advances, such as ultra-sound machines, to establish the sex of fetus, so as not to pre-determine the fate of female infants or encourage selective abortion.

Already, the relative shortage of women in countries like China and Taiwan has helped create new markets in women.

They include arranged wedding agencies that set up marriages between South Korean men and foreigners, often women from poorer nearby countries like Vietnam, that now account for 11% of all marriages in South Korea.

There is also a booming trade in trafficking of women for prostitution out of Vietnam and a growing practice of child marriage in China, where wealthier families secure wives for their sons early by effectively buying young girls for their sons.

Fertility treatment

A different sort of selective abortion occurs when the pregnancy involves several fetuses, and unless one or more are aborted all the fetuses will be endangered - therefore some of the unborn must be removed for the good of the others. This case is usually a result of fertility treatment.

IVF and selective abortion

IVF (in vitro fertilization) is a medical procedure used to help some infertile couples. A woman's ovaries are stimulated to produce multiple eggs which are fertilized with her partner's sperm. This produces several fertilized embryos, some of which are placed in her womb, and the others are frozen for possible later use.

Two ethical problems then arise:

- because several embryos are implanted to increase the chance of a successful pregnancy, multiple births can occur. Some couples chose selective reduction instead - the destruction of some of the embryos early in the pregnancy - either because they don't want so many children, or in order to improve the survival chances of the other embryos.
- if the stored embryos are eventually removed from storage and disposed of, this could be regarded as abortion. Some legislation under discussion in the USA (e.g. the Texas 'Prenatal Protection Act') would make such disposal an unlawful killing except under restricted circumstances.

Note that the case of the stored embryos poses a very different ethical case to other forms of abortion in that the embryo to be terminated is in a test tube and not in the mother's body.

This removes all the arguments about a woman's rights over her own body from any discussion of abortion, since her own body is no longer involved, and not aborting the fetus does not impose an unwanted pregnancy upon the mother.

Defective or unsuitable embryos

Doctors are becoming more able to screen embryos for genetic abnormalities. In some cases the pregnancy may be terminated if a serious genetic defect is found.

Similarly doctors are able to screen artificially fertilized embryos in order to make sure that only healthy ones are implanted in the womb.

Both these examples raise abortion issues, but for many people the early stage of development at which the embryo is destroyed makes these issues seem less significant, probably because they don't regard the embryo as having acquired the status of a moral person at that stage.

However, such abortions are subject to criticism as undermining our attitude to people with disability.

For example, one organization has argued:

...to destroy a child because he or she is not perfect is especially unjust and elitist...are we not really sending a message to the disabled: you are inferior, you should never have been born?

And another argues:

...abortion of the handicapped is ...an offence to the disabled, sending them the message that they are inferior and of less value than the able bodied.

If doctors were able to screen an embryo for trivial factors such as hair color, or intelligence, and parents were able to abort an embryo because they only wanted a child of above-average intelligence, most people would regard this as morally unacceptable, and as a misuse of technology.