



**“Sex Selection: The Impact of Reproductive Technology and its
Consequences”**

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I. Introduction

Although sex selection is a problem widely prevalent in many countries throughout the world, mainly existing in places like India, China, and Korea, the seriousness of the issue is not taken into consideration by many people. So, this paper is to provoke future conversation about the urgency of the topic. One of the major ways that sex selection and subsequent abortion have gained leverage is through the help of technology. Technology has adversely affected the sex ratio and has had other consequences in favor of sex selection. At the same time, however, technology, specifically reproductive technology, has also proved to be a helpful in the way that it has allowed us to detect genetic abnormalities in fetuses. Thus, to analyze these situations, two major theoretical frameworks will be used: feminist and ethical. The feminist theory will help investigate how sex-selection is a major way to discriminate against females, stealing their most basic right to even live. Additionally, the theory of ethics will be used to look into how the advancement of technology is being misused and to examine whether this misuse of technology for sex-determination and sex-selection is ethical.

I will examine the case of a woman involved in a rape case in Delhi to think through the issues of devaluation and degradation of women as a consequence of sex selection. This case study is about a young woman, Jyoti Singh, who was brutally raped and murdered by five men on a bus and thrown off later. This specific case will help depict the dehumanization that women face as they are literally objectified to the point from which they cannot escape. Additionally, the

comments that some people made about this situation gives further insight into the different perspectives regarding the issue of inferiority of women compared to men.

This research paper attempts to answer the following research question: how does reproductive technology prove to be a disadvantage for women in terms of sex selection? Furthermore, why are the consequences such as abnormal sex ratios and devaluation of women of sex selection so important? How have these consequences impacted the status of women in recent years and what is at stake for the future? One of the most crucial problems associated with sex-selective abortion is the abnormal growth in sex ratio, which has directly or indirectly worsened with the rise of technology. I propose that even though reproductive technology may be useful to a certain extent in detecting major genetic abnormalities, it has had a great influence on worsening the issue of son-preference and sex-selective abortion through various mediums including offering a cheap and easily accessible way of sex-determination as well as by allowing greater advancement in scientific research to, then, further provide more efficient ways to sex-select.

II. Cultural Preference for Sons

The process of sex-selection is mostly prevalent in Asian countries due to a variety of reasons, but mainly the cultural and social preference for sons. As conveyed by Madan and Breuning, “Prenatal sex selection was seen as a solution to a number of problems: it would fulfill the desire of families for a son, result in happier marriages, and make the life of women easier” (Madan and Breuning 426). In India, like many other countries, where culture plays a major role in daily life, marriage was one of the major factors as the authors mention that sex selection would “result in happier marriages”. Another way that people try to justify this behavior is that

“it would stop female infanticide” (Madan and Breuning 426). However, here it is critical to analyze whether using technology to perform female feticide is ethical and a truly better alternative to female infanticide. This is where the theories of ethics and feminism converge in analyzing this crucial problem. This strongly relates to Oomman and Ganatra’s argument as they convey the cultural aspect of sex selection as well: “the world is value-laden and full of preferences. To be able to select on the grounds of such preferences encourage society to perpetuate its culturally constructed devaluation of particular human characteristics, in this case female sex” (188). Here, the authors convey that the possible reason for sex selection is the specificity of cultural preferences that people have. However, this preference for sex selection and abortion as a way to discriminate against women is said to be a “devaluation of particular human characteristics”. The authors very accurately use “devaluation” to describe this situation since sex selection not only reduces the number of women in the world, but also their value as compared to men. It devaluates the unborn female fetus who is deprived of the right to live and devaluates the woman carrying the child whose right to make decisions about her own body is taken away. Thus, these preferences that these authors describe are portrayed in a negative manner since they are blamed to participate in the indirect discrimination of women through sex selection. Both these scholarly articles convey similar ideas as all the authors blame the cultural preference for sons and the inferior status of women in Indian society as one of the major reasons leading to sex selection.

Similarly, author Roberta Steinbacher and her colleagues concur with Madan and Breuning as they write, “Katzev, Warner, and Acock (1994) found that women believed that marital stability and satisfaction were direct functions of having a son and that having sons would decrease the chance of separation or divorce from their spouses” (Steinbacher et al. 230). Here,

again, the correlation between a male child and marital happiness is highlighted, thus suggesting that girl children would result in unhappy marriages. Going hand-in-hand with the fact that many people believe having sons to result in better marriage life, is the idea of inferiority of women and lack of power they hold in Indian society. Ganatra and Oomman mention in their article, “sometimes the pressure is more overt and against the wishes of the woman; she is often advised by family and a medical professional to postpone the decision to have an early abortion until sex determination can confirm that she is not carrying a male child” (185). In this quotation, the authors convey that sex selection is not always the decision of the woman. Rather, in most cases, it is the result of pressure through her family or doctor. This shows that despite opposition from the woman herself, she might be forced to give up on her fetus just due to its sex. Again, the problem of ethics comes into question since medical professionals who are trained to follow the law and support mothers are instead partaking in the illegal process of sex determination and even supporting abortion following it.

III. Lack of Government Regulation

Despite many efforts by the Indian government to cause a decrease in sex-selective behavior, there is, instead, an increase in adverse consequences of sex selection, thereby placing a blame on the government to not only cause these consequences but also promote son preference in India. However, the government has established various rules outlawing prenatal sex determination in any form: “According to [the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PNDT) Act, passed in 1994], genetic laboratories may not directly or indirectly reveal the sex of the fetus, except in cases of sex-linked diseases” (Madan and Breuning 426). Despite the presence of strict regulation by the government and even additional amendments to this particular law, there was

no drastic improvement in the sex ratio, conveying that these practices were still existent.

According to figures in Madan and Breuning's article, the sex ratio from 1991 to 2001, which is around the same time as the introduction of the PNDT Act, abnormally decreased from about 945 to around 927 (number of girls per 1000 boys). This suggests that the government law didn't have an effect on the sex ratio at all and just shows the necessity of having stricter punishments for such behavior in the near future.

This also poses a question of female discrimination possibly by the government itself as it chooses not to enforce proper laws and thus, almost promotes sex selection and the killing of women. The government ultimately intensifies the discrimination towards women by not properly regulating reproductive technology use. In talking about the intensity of this issue about gendercides that the government is responsible for, author Mary Evans and her colleagues write: "though the statistics evince a welcome decline in recent years, this gendercidal institution still claims roughly half a million female lives each year- a death toll far eclipsing most political-military genocides in recent decades" (Evans et al. 571). This clear depiction of the intensity of the issue shows that while many political and military genocides might be highlighted through media, gendercides mainly remain in the dark, thus leading to the lack of awareness about such issues. Mary Evans also writes, "if developing-world governments choose not to pursue them, in full knowledge of the scale of the crisis and the gender-specific mortality that it perpetuates, then a case can be made not only for culpable negligence, but for *gendercidal intent*" (571). Here, Evans illustrates the strong contrast between "culpable negligence" and "gendercidal intent" and accuses the government of actually participating in the genocide of women. Rather than an innocent mistake or simple negligence, she proposes that the lack of government regulation is an indication of its encouragement of sex selection, which is a huge problem since if the

government itself is involved in sex selection, there won't be a way to eradicate the practice of sex selection since the government holds most of the power to regulate such behavior. This also relates back to Madan and Breuning's article where they convey that despite the presence of the PNDT Act, there isn't strict enforcement of the law by the government so it hasn't improved the sex ratio in India. The government is mostly responsible for worsening the issue of sex-selection since it fails to enforce proper laws, thus eventually leading to unrestrained use of reproductive technology.

The feminist and ethical theories also come into conversation in this topic of government regulation as in addition to the deterioration in status of women, the government and medical professionals engage in unethical behavior such as promoting sex determination and subsequent abortion. Sital Kalantry mentions, "Anti-subordination feminist theory (albeit in a different context) points out that in determining whether or not a law promotes or contravenes women's equality, we must look not only at the language of the law but also at the actual impact of the law" (78-79). Here, Kalantry points out that what truly matters is the "actual impact of the law" rather than simply the presence of the law without any proper regulation of it. Here, again, the government is seen at fault since even though it has introduced some laws such as the PNDT Act to outlaw sex selection and subsequent abortion, there is no successful enforcement of the law.

In addition to criticizing the lack of government regulation of sex selection directly, there is also a lack of regulation of power of medical professionals. Most times when sex-selective abortion is performed, it occurs in urban hospitals by licensed doctors. Hesketh and Min write about this: "The fact that in China and India sex-selective abortion is still carried out with impunity—by licensed medical personnel and not even in backstreet establishments—makes the

failure of the government to enforce the law all the more obvious” (491). Here, the authors clearly state that sex-selective abortion, being illegal, is still carried out in countries like India and China and that too by licensed professionals. Hesketh and Min draw an indirect connection between the lack of government oversight and flagrant unethical medical practices. This connection is significant because it unmasks the true identities of the government and medical professionals. By referring to sex-selective abortion as being “carried out with impunity”, the authors suggest that the medical professionals as well as government officials are being unethical and disrespectful towards their respective professions. Further, when Hesketh and Min use “failure”, they convey that laws such as the PNDT Act are rendered useless if not implemented properly and as a result, the sex ratio progressively worsens.

IV. Adverse Effects of Reproductive Technology

There are many consequences of sex-selection, most of these seen to segregate women, and reproductive technology only serves to encourage sex-selective behavior and abortion. One of the major consequences is a negative effect on the sex ratio. As state by Steinbacher, Swetkis, and Gilroy, “An increased willingness to use technology to select sex, combined with the rapidly approaching ability to predetermine sex through genetic engineering, represents an alarming potential for a serious sex-ratio imbalance” (Steinbacher et al. 236). This conveys that technology is one of the major causal factors of an abnormal sex ratio. In addition to just the availability of technology, however, the willingness of people to use this sex-selective technology is also an important factor as that determines how that technology will be used- for sex selection to just determine the presence of any genetic abnormalities. Further, sex-selection almost always leads to selective abortion, which causes many complications in young women

including mental and physical health complications: “Repeated abortions can have an adverse effect on the mental and physical health of women, especially on child brides. As the number of marriageable women declines, men tend to marry younger girls” (Madan and Breuning 429). Abortions are not only a form of unethical discrimination against the unborn female fetus, but also a way to have an “adverse effect on the mental and physical health” of the young potential mothers as well. These women are forced to go against their will and perform abortion, which strips them of their basic right to have control over their own bodies.

Furthermore, this has a long-term impact on the women physically and mentally, which causes further complications for future pregnancies. Thus, as seen from the ethics perspective, this is clearly unethical: “[a] person is a moral category and that person’s command respect in virtue of being persons; furthermore, ‘respect for persons’ necessitates an acknowledgment of a person’s right to life while imposing a corresponding duty on others to not deprive a person of that right” (Steffen 12c). As conveyed here, it is unethical and immoral to deprive a person of the right to live. By forcing women to unwillingly abort, the fetus’ right to live as well as the woman’s right to decide for herself are both violated. Thus, the theory of ethics as well as the feminist theory attempt to convey the discrimination against women that is involved in sex-selection and even the immoral aspects of selective abortion and improper use of reproductive technology.

V. Dehumanization of Women

Prenatal technology leading to sex selection and abortion has consequences like an imbalance in sex ratio or physical and mental health issues in women, but the gravest consequence of it is the sheer dehumanization of women. In terms of the most basic rights that all humans deserve,

son preference leads to discrimination between sons and daughters: “Research studies suggest that parents with strong son preference consider their daughters to be less valuable and provide inferior care to daughters in terms of food allocation, prevention of diseases and accidents, and treatment of children” (Arnold et al. 302). Here, the authors convey that girls are treated unequally for basic resources necessary for survival such as food provision or medical treatment, showing the lack of care towards them from their own parents. Furthermore, the authors write “less valuable” and “inferior care” to convey that son preference and sex selection have caused such a wide status gap between girls and boys that discriminative behavior exists even by parents. In one particular study, mothers reported being biased towards their sons as research found that “when girls become ill, they are less likely than boys to be taken to a medical facility or medical practitioner for treatment in every state except Goa” (Arnold et al. 307). This statistic proves the discriminative behavior of parents as in every single state in India except for one, girls were devalued by not being provided the same medical care as boys. Thus, many parents behave in an unethical manner and treat their sons and daughters differently, thereby promoting the dehumanization of women.

One specific case that exemplifies the extremity of the devaluation of women is the rape case in 2012 of Jyoti Singh Pandey, better known as “Nirbhaya” meaning “the fearless one” in Hindi. This incident occurred late at night in Delhi when Jyoti got on a bus with a male friend. The violent incident was described as follows in a New York Times article: “the men attacked the pair, took Ms. Pandey to the back of the bus and raped her, at one point penetrating her with a metal rod and perforating her colon. The two were dumped on the roadside, naked and bleeding” (Barry). The disturbing depiction of this incident shows the complete devaluation and disrespect of women that results from the inferior status of women in India society. This dehumanization

can also be seen as a result of sex selection as the sex ratio imbalance is shown to cause higher violence rates in men as Oomman and Ganatra predict: “If girls are systematically eliminated from society, the long-term effects of a declining sex ratio may make women more of a “commodity” or increased violent crimes against them” (185-86). The rape case displays commodification or objectification of women as men are able to perform horrible acts such as rape and murder and still as if their rights are being violated when being punished for the same. Women, on the other hand, are victimized and forced to face the consequences of situations they are placed in through no fault of their own. Additionally, the authors predict “increased violent crimes” against women, again relating to the rape case and its brutality. Furthermore, rather than blaming the men responsible for this horrible act, some found the victim responsible for what happened to her. The bus driver of the bus on which Nirbhaya was raped offers his opinion: “when being raped, she shouldn’t fight back. She should just be silent and allow the rape” (BBC). By placing the blame on Nirbhaya, the bus driver represents thousands of men who have a superiority complex as compared to women, thus displaying the hierarchy of power in Indian society where men are seen as stronger than women. This can also be seen as one lawyer expressed his opinion about Jyoti spending time with her male friend at night: “If my daughter or sister engaged in pre-marital activities and disgraced herself and allowed herself to lose face and character by doing such things, I would most certainly take this sort of sister or daughter to my farmhouse, and in front of my entire family, I would put petrol on her and set her alight” (BBC). The choice of diction here is important as phrases like “disgraced herself” and “lose face and character” convey that the blame is being put on the victim and that it was her fault in almost provoking the men. By also openly threatening to literally kill his sister or daughter if they participated in such acts, this man clearly represents the top tier of the hierarchy of power and

status as he sees himself as having control over the lives of the women in his house. All in all, this case study conveys the objectification and dehumanization of women in a myriad of ways that stem from the lack of power that women hold in India, which itself is further promoted through sex selection.

VI. Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I proposed that even though reproductive technology may be useful to a certain extent in detecting major genetic abnormalities, it has had a great influence on worsening the issue of son-preference and sex-selective abortion through various mediums including offering a cheap and easily accessible way of sex-determination as well as by allowing greater advancement in scientific research to, then, further provide more efficient ways to sex-select. This sex selection has also had multiple consequences including physical and mental health problems in young women as well as the dehumanization of women. Through all the research I conducted for this paper in the form of a case study, scholarly articles, theories, as well as credible sources, I conclude that my evidence supported my thesis. Prenatal technology has played a major role in exacerbating sex selective abortion and the inferior status of women, thus leading to many grave consequences. The feminist theory used throughout my paper explained how sex selection is a strong form of discrimination towards women and is continuing to worsen currently as women are treated as objects by men. The theory of ethics shows how the behavior of the Indian government and medical professionals is unethical as there is lack of regulation of laws preventing sex selection and suppression of women. In addition, the ethics theory also delineates the abnormal hierarchy of power in which men occupy the higher levels of the social ladder and thereby oppress women. These findings led me to use this paper as a call for action

and spread awareness not only to reduce son preference, but also increase the status of women. If action isn't taken soon, this problem will worsen rapidly in the near future, leading us to have a society predominantly with men, putting us in the vicious cycle where the status of women will keep deteriorating.

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