

The Unwanted

EXTENDING THE ARGUMENT AGAINST SEX-SELECTIVE ABORTION

Created 06/14/2010 - 10:15am

Jo McGowan

Extending the argument against sex-selective abortion

I've changed my mind about the outcry against sex-selective abortion. Since the 1980s, when the issue emerged here in India and neighboring China, I've been skeptical of feminist objections to aborting baby girls on the basis of their sex. As someone long opposed to abortion of any kind, I've found such objections inconsistent: if you are truly prochoice, you can't second-guess a woman's reasons for what she chooses.

People who refuse to acknowledge the humanity of the unborn child in general but speak movingly about "female feticide" or the "brutal destruction of unborn girls" seem to contradict themselves. In my own writing I've tried to point out that inconsistency: if it's true for girls, it's true for all babies.

But now I've begun to see the matter somewhat differently. It's not a foundational change for me, but a strategic one. I have come to see the merit of the feminist case against gender-selective abortion. Its reasoning doesn't go far enough, but as a position I think it is instructive and maybe even a cause for hope.

Feminists argue correctly that women who choose to abort their babies because they're girls are not really making a free choice. They are responding to society's bias against women.

Anyone can see that, taken to its logical conclusion, sex-selective abortion leads inexorably to community suicide. Indeed, there are communities in India where brides are now being "imported" because there aren't enough to go around; in China, it's even worse. But few women think in those terms when making their individual decisions. In fact, feminists argue, women who abort their daughters aren't really "thinking" at all. They are responding to pressure from their husbands or in-laws, who, in turn, are influenced by community biases that dictate such realities as dowry amounts, who pays for the wedding, and inheritance rights.

This is a subtle and nuanced argument that analyzes the social factors forcing women to act against their own self-interest. Women's groups that organize against female feticide seldom view it as a single issue. Most are activist organizations working for women's empowerment by advancing education, job training, and political change. They are trying to address the root causes of gender discrimination and violence, and to make the world a place where the birth of a girl is as welcome as the birth of a boy.

Rather than focusing on the inconsistency of that position, prolife activists could learn from the feminist strategy of highlighting one aspect of a much larger issue. This is true in all prolife activism (we need to focus on the reasons why women feel they need to abort), but it is especially true wherever abortion is *selective*, wherever a particular group of babies is singled out and targeted.

The most obvious group is children with disabilities. Ultrasound and amniocentesis are now used as ruthlessly to detect “flaws” as to detect a child’s sex, especially in developed countries. But unlike feminists, disability activists have not yet succeeded in mobilizing public opinion against the practice. Everyone knows that we need to have girls in order for the species to continue, but there is as yet no consensus on the inherent value of people with disabilities. In fact, very few see it as an issue to grapple with: if you have the option and the disability is detected early, abortion is seen as the first choice. Everyone, clearly, wants a “perfect” baby.

We who consider ourselves members of advanced societies look down our noses at cultures that reject girls. But what about our own attitudes toward people with disabilities? How welcoming are we to them? How difficult do we make it for parents to accept the birth of a child perceived to be defective?

Progressive thinking begins with the premise that everyone has the *right* to be here, and that a community can be judged on how it plans for and includes the most vulnerable. People with special needs become handicapped only when their environment refuses to accommodate those needs. Wearing glasses, for example, is a mainstream accommodation. How many of us would be legally blind without them?

At the moment, most communities make accommodations for only a certain range of human needs. But with all we now know about how the human body and brain function, and with all that technology can now accomplish, we could do much more. Our planning could take into account the ways different people learn and perceive; it could allow for the fact that while some of us are visual learners, others are auditory or kinesthetic. And rather than being a burden, this recognition could make the world more interesting, productive, and efficient.

Making things work for people with special needs moves us toward the day when parents will welcome a child with a disability the way parents in the developed world now welcome girls.

Sound like a pipe dream? In Rajasthan, India, when a woman learns she is pregnant, her mother-in-law plants a seed that will bear fruit around the time the baby is due. It’s a poison—to be administered should the baby be a girl. Most of us cannot even imagine such a thing. The day will come—you saw it here first—when we will be as enlightened about babies with disabilities as we are now about baby girls.