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SEX SELECTION

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& ED NOEL**



DEBATING MATTERS
**TOPIC
GUIDES**

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MOTION:

**“THE UK BAN ON
USING ASSISTED
REPRODUCTIVE
TECHNOLOGY FOR
SEX-SELECTION
SHOULD BE LIFTED”**

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KEY TERMS

Embryo

Eugenics

Family Balancing

In-vitro fertilisation (IVF)

Microsort Technology

Pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD)

Sex vs gender

Sperm Sorting

INTRODUCTION

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Attempts by parents to influence their chances of giving birth to a baby of a specific sex, historically usually a boy, are as old as civilization. Whether involving unusual diets or specific sexual positions, efforts have been both unscientific and unsuccessful. Recent scientific advances have transformed this age-old desire of some parents into a genuine, if expensive, choice. Sperm-sorting technology, where sperm is filtered according to whether it is carrying the X or Y chromosomes and used to either inseminate directly or – via In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) – to create an embryo in the laboratory to be implanted in the womb, has a 70-80% accuracy rating. Even more accurate is Pre-Implantation Genetic Diagnosis (PGD), in which male and female embryos are produced, and an embryo of the selected sex is implanted [Ref: [Wellcome Trust](#)]. However, in the UK it is illegal for licensed fertility clinics to offer sex selection except for medical reasons –assisted reproductive technology (ART) can only be legally used to choose the sex of a child when it is medically justified to avoid producing a child with a serious sex-linked genetic disorder such as Duchenne muscular dystrophy or Haemophilia A [Ref: [BioNews](#)]. In some other countries, most notably the United States, fertility clinics may offer sex-selection services entirely legally and there are numerous reports of British couples travelling abroad to make use of them [Ref: [Evening Standard](#)]. Is it time, as some have recently argued, for UK authorities to adopt a more liberal approach to reproductive choice and allow sex selection for non-medical reasons?



SEX SELECTION:

“The UK ban on using assisted reproductive technology for sex-selection should be lifted”



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Parental choice and societal concerns

The UK body which regulates the provision of ART treatments – most notably IVF and complementary treatments such as PGD – is the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA). Following an HFEA public consultation exercise some years earlier, and debate in Parliament and elsewhere, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 introduced an explicit ban on selecting the sex of offspring for social reasons [Ref: [HFEA](#)]. One major societal concern raised about allowing sex-selection for social reasons is the danger of it resulting in a skewed population towards one gender – males. Those arguing for the UK ban to be lifted point out that whilst skewed populations, driven by preferences for male children, may be a legitimate concern in countries such as India and China, there is no evidence that this would be the case in the UK where, they argue, would-be parents are as likely to want to choose a girl as a boy [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Others counter that lifting the ban would, nevertheless, undermine the importance of women's equality “in communities where sex-selection for male children is most likely to occur” and that this provides sufficient reason for the continuation of the prohibition [Ref: [IJFAB](#)]. Another argument made by the HFEA for the prohibition was that 80% of respondents to its public consultation objected to sex-selection for non-medical reasons; though a leading ethicist points out that such views are based on what has been dubbed the “wisdom of repugnance” and do not provide any ethical basis for prohibition at all [Ref: [Practical Ethics](#)].

Welfare of the child

The HFE Act of 2008 places a requirement on clinics to take account of ‘the welfare of the child’ when providing fertility treatment. Though the risks associated with PGD are relatively low, critics of sex-selection argue that if there is no benefit to the child to be born – only its parents – any risk is unacceptable. The other major ‘welfare-of-the-child’ concern raised by sex-selection is the potential impact on the psychological welfare of the child that is born. Critics argue that the desire to have a child of a specific sex is based on stereotypical assumptions about the behavioural characteristics of each sex, old-fashioned notions that boys and girls should be raised differently and, in these enlightened times, such gender stereotypes are surely outdated? [Ref: [Patheos](#)]. For others it is perfectly understandable why parents with several children of one-sex might want to choose to have a child of the opposite sex and to have the “kind of relationship they feel will only be possible” with a child of that sex [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Furthermore, as one defender of parental choice argues, “why should parental expectation be stigmatised” when parental expectations are an integral and creative aspect of family relations? [Ref: [spiked](#)]. On the other-hand, do we really want to be in a situation where choosing the sex of your child is offered as a retail choice – albeit, at around \$20,000, currently a very expensive choice? [Ref: [National Post](#)].

Reproductive freedom

One of the key arguments made for the lifting of the UK's prohibition on sex-selection is that it is unethical and unjustified because the reasons given for the prohibition do not warrant trampling on the principle of reproductive freedom [Ref: [IJFAB](#)].

THE SEX SELECTION DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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The bioethicist Professor John Harris has argued that it is fundamental to liberal democracy that “the liberty of its citizens should not be abridged unless good and sufficient cause can be shown as to why this is required” [Ref: [Journal of Medical Ethics](#)]. On this basis the case against the prohibition does not turn on the merits of using sex-selection for social reasons, but on whether the likely consequences of allowing parents to do so if they wish are sufficiently problematic to outweigh the principle of reproductive freedom. Others argue that when it comes to ART, which opens up all manner of possibilities not available to parents conceiving naturally, the question of reproductive freedom takes on a new dimension. From this perspective, making the sex of your child a legitimate choice sets society on a slippery slope to even more problematic attempts to design our children: from eye colour to skin colour or even intelligence [Ref: [New Scientist](#)].

ESSENTIAL READING

Is sex selection illegal and immoral?
Stevienna de Saille *BioNews* 28 March 2011

Sex selection: Getting the baby you want
Amanda Mitchison *Guardian* 3 April 2010

FOR

Embryo Sex Selection Shouldn't Be Illegal
Stephen Wilkinson & Eve Garrard *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics (IJFAB)* 16 August 2013

Medical ethicist: Ban on sex selection of embryos is not justified
Steve Connor *Independent* 3 July 2013

Can Liberals Support a Ban on Sex Selection?
Julian Savulescu *Practical Ethics* 13 January 2011

No sex selection please, we're British
John Harris *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2005

Policing parents-to-be
Frank Furedi *spiked* 2 December 2003

AGAINST

Rethinking Sex Selection: A Feminist Critique
Alana Cattapan *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics (IJFAB)* 13 August 2013

Sex selection has the potential to skew future generations
Kishwar Desai *Guardian* 6 July 2013

Gender selection: The West wants girls – but who decides?
Melanie McDonagh *Telegraph* 6 July 2013

Why Allowing Parents to Choose Their Baby's Gender is Wrong
Ellen Painter Dollar *Patheos* 24 September 2012

How To Buy a Daughter
Jasmeet Sidhu *Slate* 14 September 2012

IN DEPTH

Eugenics and the Ethics of Selective Reproduction
Stephen Wilkinson & Eve Garrard *Keele University Press* 2013

Ethical issues with prenatal and preimplantation genetic diagnosis
Prof. Lawrence Nelson *The Technological Citizen* 20 October 2009

The case against perfection
Michael Sandel *Atlantic* April 2004

Sex Selection: Report Summary
HFEA

Gender Selection Cost
Gender Selection 101

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BACKGROUNDEERS

Designer babies are on the horizon but aren't here yet

New Scientist 10 July 2013

Should PGD be used for elective gender selection?

John A Robdertson & Timothy Hickman *Contemporary OB/GYN*
1 July 2013

The impact of China's one-child policy

The World Outline 5 March 2013

What is PGS for Gender Selection?

Youtube 16 December 2011

Why British Parents still cannot choose the sex of their children

Mark Henderson *The Times* 22 August 2009

Designer Babies

CNN 11 February 2009

Bias against girls in embryo selection has proved unfounded

Mark Henderson *The Times* 17 October 2007

The case against sex selection

Human Genetics Alert Campaign Briefing December 2002

Medical Reasons for Gender Selection

Gender Selection Authority

Review of sex selection

HFEA

IVF The Law

HFEA

Debating Sex Selection

Wellcome Trust

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ORGANISATIONS

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA)

IN THE NEWS

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IVF ban on baby sex selection is not justified, says ethicist

Telegraph 3 July 2013

Wealthy couples flock to USA to avoid UK sex selection ban, IVF medic claims

BioNews 3 September 2012

The sex factor... Brits are jetting to New York to select their baby's gender

Evening Standard 28 August 2012

U.S. fertility clinic targets baby gender-selection ads at Indo-Canadian community

National Post 17 April 2012

Manchester doctor in 'wrong gender' abortion ban

BBC News 12 March 2012

Clinics granting sex-selection abortions to be investigated by health officials

Guardian 23 February 2012

Liverpool hospital to investigate 'sex selection' claims Antony Blackburn-Starza

BioNews 21 February 2012

Sex determination possible at five weeks after conception

BioNews 23 January 2012

Select your baby's sex for £14,000

Daily Mail 13 February 2011

Parents queue to select baby gender

BBC News 29 October 2008



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