

Motives matter in the abortion debate

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There are only two polemically unassailable positions on abortion: (1) never, because it is always murder; and (2) whenever, because an unborn baby is part of the mother's body, hers to dispense with as she wants.

The vast majority of Canadians' views may not stand up to perfect logic and consistency. Nevertheless, they fall somewhere in between. Most of us condone abortion: In the first trimester; where there is risk to the mother; in cases of incest and rape; and for known, serious birth defects.

My libertarian colleague Chris Selley is a pro-choice absolutist, as I would define the term. He therefore concludes that any dilution of Canada's freedom-of-choice model will likely be "fruitless" (good pun, even if unintended).

But nowadays, as Mr. Selley himself concedes, even many hardliners of the it's-my-body camp find themselves staggering under the increasingly weighty burden of their ideology. Shifting technological and cultural plates beneath society's crust are dislodging bio-ethical boulders. They are crashing down upon the moral high road feminists have occupied for decades.

Thanks to early-pregnancy sex-revealing technology, over the last decade in Asia, an estimated 163 million female unborn babies have been selectively aborted. The ratio of boys to girls in India is now 112/100. In fact, abortion for any reason has become banalized amongst elites: Some Indian women abort over such trivial matters as an unwanted zodiacal sign.

In China, the ratio is verging on 150/100 in some areas. In South Korea, amongst second births, the ratio is 113/100 (the parents will "tolerate" a female for their first child, but are less forgiving the second time around). Amongst fourth-borns, it is a shocking 209/100. Laws against gendercide have proved unenforceable in these and other female-devaluing countries. These practices continue in the Western diaspora: Gendercide is an open secret in Canada's South Asian community.

Globally, the male-female ratio stands at 107/100. Such imbalance has grave consequences. In her book, *Unnatural Selection*, Mara Hvistendahl notes: "Historically, societies in which men substantially outnumber women are not nice places to live. Often, they are unstable. Sometimes, they are violent."

We cannot turn our backs on the gendercide problem, because we will all be affected by it sooner or later. But neither should we retreat from an examination of other moral considerations.

Most Canadians believe that no Canadian doctor would consent to abort a viable fetus (after 22 weeks of gestation) for reasons that do not involve the health of the mother or the fetus. Yet at least 400 post-viability abortions take place annually in Canada, and many are done strictly for discretionary motivations. Of Quebec's 29,000 annual abortions (about one in three Quebec women will have an abortion in her lifetime), some are performed, privately, after 30 weeks. In 2003-4, Ontario paid almost \$400,000 for 56 "out of country" late-term abortions.

Most abortions are not what any reasonable person would call "necessary." Nearly foolproof birth control is available to every Canadian girl from puberty onward. Few unmarried girls or women today endure crippling social stigma for pregnancy, the original impetus for legalizing abortion. Excellent prenatal care is fully funded. No woman is forced to keep an unwanted child if she would prefer to go the route of adoption. Moreover, abortion, with well-documented medical risks (few women are informed of) has never been animal-tested, the legal sine qua non for most other medical technologies and procedures.

And yet, absurdly, a women's "right" to terminate any number of pregnancies at any stage for any reason at public expense and without regard to societal consequences, fathers' wishes or rights, and doctors' consciences, has become the litmus test for allegedly enlightened thinking in our culture.

Let's get real on democratic "rights." Freedom of speech is a right. Freedom of association is a right. Such rights are timeless and universal. They were not invented out of whole philosophical cloth 40 years ago. They can be exercised without extorting money and technical assistance from people who don't approve of what you say or whom you associate with.

Pregnancy is not a medical infirmity. It is a natural state. Abortion is not a medical "treatment"; it is a service. Women seeking abortions of healthy fetuses out of convenience or sexism - that is, women who are not seeking relief from authentic psychological or physical suffering - are not "patients." They are clients.

Clients have wishes; they do not have inalienable rights. When the wishes of clients run counter to society's health, or other people's natural rights - and by "people" I include unborn babies who were viable before their skulls were surgically crushed - then regulation of the practice is not only admissible, it is desirable, and nobody should have to fear censure from powerful special interest groups for saying so.

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