

AUGUST 2015

**SEX
SELECTION**

JESSE FARIA



DEBATING MATTERS
**TOPIC
GUIDES**

MOTION:

**“THE UK SHOULD
BAN SEX SELECTIVE
ABORTION”**

ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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[Autonomy](#)

INTRODUCTION

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In February 2015, the issue of female reproductive rights was back in the news when Fiona Bruce, a Conservative MP, tabled a parliamentary amendment to the Serious Crime Bill to outlaw sex-selective abortion [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Although ultimately defeated in the House of Commons, Bruce argued the purpose was to “oblige the Government to think of ways to support women who are under pressure to abort on grounds of the sex of their baby” [Ref: [Stop Gendercide](#)]. Supporters of the Bill argued it would help to ensure that sex-selective abortion is not allowed in the UK by a “simple clarification specifying that the 1967 Abortion Act does not allow abortion simply on the grounds of foetal sex” [Ref: [Spectator](#)]. However, critics claim that there is no reliable evidence for sex selective abortion in the UK, and argue the Bill was being used to serve a much wider anti-choice agenda, which will impact negatively on female reproductive rights [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Some also suggest that further legislation would make access to abortion harder overall, as well as potentially criminalising women and doctors in the process [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. At stake within this debate are issues of female autonomy and choice, as well as broader questions regarding the ethics of when abortion should be available and for what reasons. With this in mind, how should we view sex-selective abortion? Should we see it as a fundamental right, integral to female reproductive choice, or is it an unethical practice that society should reject, even if it encroaches on reproductive rights? Should women have the right to sex-selective abortion, or are those campaigning for controls in this area right to question the ethics of abortion provision based on gender?



THE SEX SELECTION DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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Sex-selective abortion in the UK

Sex-selective abortion, many campaigners argue, is prevalent in the developing world, particularly in parts of China, India and Pakistan. According to a non-governmental organisation (NGO), Invisible Girls Project, more than one million baby girls a year are lost to this practice [Ref: [Invisible Girls Project](#)]. In the UK, however, it is disputed that 'gendercide' exists on any significant scale. The Department of Health's research into birth ratios conducted in May 2013 [Ref: [Department of Health](#)], could not find any evidence of sex-selective abortions [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. In addition, other research shows that the great majority of abortions - 91 per cent - take place before the sex of the foetus can be determined [Ref: [Guardian](#)], leading critics to assert that the proposed Bill was merely an attempt to "erode women's reproductive rights, since it recognises the rights of the 'unborn' independent of the woman" [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Those campaigning for legislation in this area, however, counter by pointing to a 2012 newspaper investigation in which The Telegraph reported that 14 NHS hospitals had been formally censured after regulators found they were conducting potentially illegal abortions [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Furthermore, commenting on the ethical dimension of the discussion, writer Tim Stanley observes that: "The definition of social decay is when you have to restate blindingly obvious moral truths, because too many people have forgotten them" [Ref: [Catholic Herald](#)], and suggests that abortion based on gender is one such moral truth that we cannot allow to become permissible.

Tackling the issue through education or legislation?

It is argued in some quarters that sex-selective abortion encourages retrograde attitudes towards females and diminishes the value of female life more broadly. Affirming this position, columnist Christina Odone is scathing of the assertion that abortion on the basis of sex should be defended, arguing that it is "the most anti-woman, patriarchal and cruel position anyone could sustain" [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. As such, a clear statement in law would be an important first step, not only for the purpose of clarification, but also to provide the opportunity for the government to tackle a practice that, it has been argued, has been widely utilised by a number of immigrant communities in the UK [Ref: [Spectator](#)]. Failing to outlaw sex-selective abortions, continues Tim Stanley, "implies some tolerance of the notion that girls are worth less than boys" [Ref: [Catholic Herald](#)], adding: "It would make far more sense for society...to oppose sex selective abortion and the chauvinism that makes it happen, rather than lamely accepting that some men will always hate women" [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Although those in favour of a woman's right to seek a sex-selective abortion recognise that there are certain communities within the UK where male fetuses have greater social value, they disagree that legal change would be a way to alter a male-centric mentality. Columnist Frances Ryan believes: "We should be asking why women feel pressured to abort female fetuses, not descending into an anti-choice panic about sex-selective abortion without evidence" [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]. Ann Furedi, chief executive of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (Bpas) goes further, arguing that "it is quite simply extraordinary that an amendment, which claims its aim is to protect women, seeks to shift the burden of responsibility for this not on to a



THE SEX SELECTION DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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culture that prizes boys over girls, but on to pregnant women themselves” [Ref: [Independent](#)]. What is necessary, according to Rebecca Schiller, commentator and co-chair of childbirth charity Birthrights, is education that affirms the value of girls in those communities where patriarchal structures prevail [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Reni Eddo-Lodge agrees, noting that: “As long as women are valued less than men, there will be a demand for sex-selective abortion, but curtailing women’s reproductive rights will not solve this issue. Only education will” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)].

Protecting women or curtailing choice?

Some supporters of female choice note that while disguised as a way of protecting women, seeking to prevent sex-selective abortion is, in reality, “a strategic attempt to criminalise abortion, promoting the faulty logic that women are not to be trusted to make decisions about their reproductive futures” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. They argue that this is because any attempt to restrict access to abortion “would lead to an increase in unsafe procedures” and that “unsafe abortions...put women’s lives at risk, and this is not the kind of risk the UK should ever take” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Some, such as Jessica Valenti, go so far as to argue for women’s right to abortion in every circumstance even on the basis of sex – stating that we must “rid ourselves of the hierarchy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ abortions” [Ref: [Guardian](#)], concluding that ultimately a “woman’s bodily integrity must trump politics” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. In addition, others argue that as well as interfering with choice, any proposed legislation would risk making sex-selective abortion a serious crime, meaning that vulnerable women would be “arrested, imprisoned and ultimately blamed for the pressures exerted upon them” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. According to the Observer

newspaper’s editorial on the issue, “criminalising women and doctors, as this amendment would do, is not the answer. A woman subjected by force to agree to a termination is then mistreated again by the state; a double injustice” [Ref: [Observer](#)]. Writer Rahila Gupta though, fundamentally disagrees with this approach, and is suspicious of the “absolutist, pro-choice narrative” which aims to “preserve the purity of the concept of choice”, seemingly at any cost [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. She argues that if one considers that a majority of cases arise from cultures in which women have little control over their own bodies, and where their husbands and families might compel them to look for a termination, “state intervention may be the only thing that saves women from such oppressive cultural practices” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. She concludes by warning: “We must not make a fetish of choice. If the technology allows, and a woman wants a blue-eyed, blond-haired baby, do we support her because we are pro-choice” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]? Furthermore, many of those against sex-selective abortion suggest that their opponents are caught in a contradiction: while believing that they can empower women by putting them in charge of what grows inside their bodies, they seem to disregard those females who are aborted. According to Rani Bilkhu, a true feminist should “defend the unborn girls being aborted in the UK because of their sex” [Ref: [Spectator](#)], and although seemingly paradoxical, critics of sex-selective abortion claim that prohibiting it as a practice “arguably gives women from disadvantaged backgrounds far greater reproductive freedom” [Ref: [Catholic Herald](#)].



ESSENTIAL READING

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[Abortion \(Sex-Selection\) Bill 2014-15 Parliament](#)

Parliament 4 November 2014

[Opinions on abortion](#)

YouGov 14 February 2013

FOR

[We need an explicit ban on sex-selective abortion](#)

Fiona Bruce MP *Conservative Home* 23 February 2015

[A true feminist will defend the unborn girls being aborted in the UK because of their sex](#)

Rani Bilkhu *The Spectator* 17 February 2015

[Now is the time to phone your MP about sex-selective abortion](#)

Tim Stanley *Catholic Herald* 23 January 2015

[On sex selective abortion, we shouldn't make a fetish of choice](#)

Rahila Gupta *Guardian* 8 October 2013

AGAINST

[Criminalising sex-selective abortions would be a terrible idea for women](#)

Ann Furedi *Independent* 23 February 2015

[Why criminalising gender abortions is sinister and wrong](#)

Reni Eddo-Lodge *Telegraph* 4 November 2014

[Campaigns against sex-selective abortion are misogyny disguised as feminism](#)

Frances Ryan *New Statesman* 16 January 2014

[Why women have a right to sex-selective abortion](#)

Sarah Ditum *Guardian* 19 September 2013

BACKGROUNDEERS

[The Left is fanatical about abortion. Here, at last, is the proof](#)

Tim Stanley *Telegraph* 27 February 2015

[Sex-selective abortion is simply indefensible](#)

Cristina Odone *Telegraph* 23 February 2015

[A vote to criminalise gender-selective abortion will be a disaster for women](#)

Rebecca Schiller *Guardian* 23 February 2015

[Why MPs should support New Clause 1 to combat sex-selective abortion](#)

Rob Ffello *Labourlist* 23 February 2015

[The Observer view on the sex-selection debate](#)

Guardian 22 February 2015

[Against the Fiona Bruce amendment: why feminists should oppose the ban on sex-selective abortion](#)

Sarah Ditum *New Statesman* 20 February 2015

[Why MPs should vote against next week's amendment on sex selective abortion](#)

Sunny Hundal *Labourlist* 18 February 2015

[Gender abortion: It's time for urgent action – with or without the Government](#)

Fiona Bruce MP *Telegraph* 22 January 2015

[Sex selective abortions should be illegal](#)

J. David Nolan *First Things* 4 November 2014

[Sex-specific abortion is gruesome – but not explicitly illegal in Britain](#)

Mary Glendon *Spectator* 4 November 2014

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[There is absolutely no reason to restrict women's options for abortion access](#)

Jessica Valenti *Guardian* 6 May 2014

[It would be racist not to intervene and prevent gender-selective abortions](#)

Yasmin Alibhai Brown *Independent* 15 January 2014

[Sex-Selective Abortion 'Widely Practised' By UK Ethnic Groups](#)

Huffington Post 15 January 2014

[The worldwide war on baby girls](#)

Economist 4 March 2010

ORGANISATIONS

[Invisible Girl Project](#)

[Stop Gendercide](#)

IN THE NEWS

[David Cameron: New laws to ban sex-selective abortion are not needed](#)

Telegraph 23 February 2015

[Women's rights groups urge MPs to vote against gender abortion amendment](#)

Telegraph 23 February 2015

[Cooper and Kendall advise Labour MPs to vote against sex selective abortion bill](#)

Labourlist 22 February 2015

[Labour torpedoes attempt to outlaw same sex abortions](#)

Telegraph 22 February 2015

[MPs back ban on sex-selective abortion](#)

BBC News 4 November 2014

[MPs introduce Bill in attempt to ban sex-selective abortion](#)

Independent 3 November 2014

[Sex-Selective Abortion 'Widely Practised' By UK Ethnic Groups](#)

Huffington Post 25 January 2014

[Sex-selective abortions explain boy-girl imbalance](#)

The Times 16 January 2014

[The lost girls: Illegal abortion widely used by some UK ethnic groups to avoid daughters 'has reduced female population by between 1,500 and 4,700'](#)

Independent 15 January 2014

[Decision not to charge over gender-based abortions was right, DPP says](#)

BBC News 7 October 2013

[Law 'does not prohibit' sex-selection abortions, DPP warns](#)

Telegraph 7 October 2013

[Sex-selection abortions are 'widespread'](#)

Telegraph 24 February 2012

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AUDIO/VISUAL

[Getting rid of girls: sex selective abortion in the UK](#)

YouTube 22 January 2015

[MORAL MAZE: Sex selective abortion](#)

BBC Radio 4 9 October 2013

ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS

DEBATING MATTERS
**TOPIC
GUIDES**

www.debatingmatters.com

FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, www.debatingmatters.com

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“A COMPLEX
WORLD REQUIRES
THE CAPACITY
TO MARSHALL
CHALLENGING IDEAS
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**