

# Why the Sex-Selective Abortion Debate Scares Feminists

It's been a quarter century since Harvard economist [Amartya Sen](#) published research showing that more than 100 million women were "[missing](#)" from the global population.

Where were they? Two decades later, the answer to that question became clearer.

In her Pulitzer Prize finalist book [Unnatural Selection](#), Mara Hvistendahl detailed how females around the world were being selected out of existence via technology (ultrasounds) and medical procedures (abortions).

The revelation posed serious ethical and philosophical questions. It also intensified a bitter political debate. [Polling](#) suggested a hefty majority of Americans opposed sex-selective abortion, and conservatives quickly opened up a new front.

Fast forward to 2016. Earlier this year, Indiana became the eighth state to pass a law prohibiting abortion on the basis of sex. (The law also prohibits abortions based on race or fetal abnormalities.)

Abortion is [a hot topic](#) again, and feminists are not happy.

Last week, in [an interview with Slate](#), Columbia Law School professor Carol Sanger blasted lawmakers for "trying to hack away at the constitutional right to an abortion." She said women are not required to offer reasons as to why they are having an abortion and that such a question "violates the basic idea of autonomy in *Roe v. Wade* and [Planned Parenthood v. Casey](#)."

What's interesting is how uncomfortable Sanger appears discussing sex-selective abortion.

*INTERVIEWER: But what if these laws were passed in good faith? Leaving aside the politics, is there really something fundamentally wrong with sex-selective abortion bans?*

*SANGER: Well, first of all, do we know if lots of American women are actually getting sex-selective abortions?*

Sanger doesn't answer the question; instead, she asks a question of her own. (This is called the Avoiding the Issue fallacy.)

The interviewer answers Sanger's question. No, he says, the practice is extremely rare in the U.S. (For the record: The practice appears [relatively absent](#) in the United States, but evidence suggests it is proliferating throughout Europe, [including the United Kingdom](#).)

Later, however, the interviewer circled back.

*INTERVIEWER: Personally, do you have any qualms about sex-selective abortions?*

*SANGER: I'm not for abortion for sex grounds. But I don't think the people who proposed these sex-selective abortion bans are interested in improving the status of women in other ways. These laws are an intervention into the abortion right. They diminish women's autonomy.*

Sanger admits she opposes sex-selective abortion. Unfortunately, readers never get to hear why.

The interviewer lets the law professor off the hook; she is allowed to follow up her answer with an attack on the motives of those passing the legislation (the Ad Hominem fallacy). She

never explains why she personally opposes aborting a fetus with the “wrong” genitalia.

One can of course see how difficult this argument becomes for feminists who favor abortion rights. First, the conversation brings to mind the very real genocide taking place before our eyes.

The Population Research Institute [estimates](#) that 1.7 million sex-selective abortions are performed annually worldwide. Why are the vast majority of these taking place? The child had a vagina.

Philosophically, it’s difficult to square a genocide on unborn women with a slogan that says a woman has the right to choose. It pits a collective right (that of society and/or women) against an individual right (a woman’s choice to have an abortion when and why she chooses).

Second, the politics of this are terrible for abortion-rights proponents.

Many Americans believe it is wrong to abort an unborn child; many and more believe *it is wrong and un-American* to abort one because of its gender.

It’s one thing to violate the morals of modern man (he lives in a rather confused state) but quite another to violate his basic conception of fairness.

It’s an argument feminists don’t want to have.

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