



## Statement by Southall Black Sisters, Centre for Secular Spaces and others

Southall Black Sisters, the Centre for Secular Space and other individuals and organisations, believe that MPs should vote against the amendment on sex selection abortion in the Serious Crimes Bill. We urge a NO vote, even though we acknowledge the threat to women of pre-natal sex selection. We simply consider this measure to be unnecessary and to have unintended consequences, which will be harmful to individual women.

We consider that sex selection abortion is a major human rights crisis in many parts of the world, notably China, India and Korea. We are concerned that the debate so far has not captured the issues that Parliament needs to consider. We see pre-natal sex selection as a form of discrimination against women, a major threat to gender equality. But the measure proposed does nothing to address gender discrimination and inequality and may have the consequence of worsening coercion, and leading to unsafe abortions, which will endanger women.

Unfortunately, most Western health rights advocates have ignored the widespread impact of widening sex ratios or in Prof Amartya Sen's words 'disappearing women.' In a recent article in the British Medical Journal, Professor Sen amended his original estimate of 50 million missing women in India. Worldwide, the number has been calculated at over 100 million. While education and health care measures have reduced maternal mortality, sex selection has nullified this gain. It remains, therefore a growing problem, whose basis is still not fully understood and needs further research<sup>1</sup>.

### **No evidence base for sex-selection in Britain, has been provided by proponents of the amendment**

- Is this problem occurring in Britain? The majority of the case studies that have been produced by organisations like Jeena International, highlight not the pervasive practice of sex selection abortion but of domestic violence in which women are harassed, threatened or assaulted for giving birth to girl children. The conflation between sex selection abortion and domestic violence is dangerous since it undermines important efforts that are being made to highlight culturally specific forms of harm in the UK and the need for more in depth research on such forms of harm and appropriate state intervention in the UK.

### **Sex- selection is already unlawful under existing law.**

- The current laws on abortion already make clear that sex selection abortion is unlawful, except for specific medical (genetic disorder) reasons. There is no reason why existing criminal laws that already cover acts of domestic violence including an assault causing a miscarriage, cannot be used. The newly created domestic violence law on coercion can also be invoked in cases where women are coerced into sex selection abortion.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC286281/>

### **Measures to address coercion already exist and should be better implemented**

- The problem of coercion to undergo sex selection abortion can be addressed by other measures such as a robust implementation of the recently developed NICE guidelines requiring medical professionals, including GPs and midwives to screen for coercion and domestic violence during routine medical checks. Screening measures like these can be assessed for their effectiveness and improved. Other measures for screening for sex selection abortions, including those that involve some degree of community profiling may be justified if undertaken for protection purposes, in the same way that targeting protection for vulnerable women in minority communities from forced marriage or FGM is justified. However, further research and consultation is needed with a wide range of black and minority women's organisations and others working on reproductive rights that have a track record in promoting women's human rights.

### **Learn from experience – criminalisation of FGM alone has neither protected women from FGM nor brought about any convictions.**

- The British state has repeatedly sought 'resource neutral' solutions to violence against women in minority communities. This amendment is the latest in a long line of criminal law measures aimed at ostensibly protecting black and minority women. But these criminal laws are not backed by the provision of adequate resources, needed to ensure that state protection is meaningful or to meet international human rights obligations. Austerity measures have had a disproportionate impact on black and minority women; they have led to the closure of refuges, counselling and support services for black and minority women and to the withdrawal of legal aid needed to access protection and justice. The lack of resources is now an acute problem and yet without them, black and minority women cannot be empowered or supported to assert their human rights.

### **Some advocates of the amendment are using this issue to promote an anti-abortion agenda, not the protection of individual women's rights or gender equality.**

- Christian right advocates are promoting this issue to further their goal to restrict abortion. For instance, MPs Nadine Dorries and Fiona Bruce have very poor records of voting against equality and human rights including for same-sex marriage among other issues. Fiona Bruce MP has the support of a large evangelical Christian network and Hindu, Sikh and Muslim fundamentalist or fundamentalist linked organisations that claim to act on behalf of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim women even though historically they have no interest in or supported the human rights of minority women. Nor have they sought to initiate a democratic public debate on the matter in minority communities.

The issue of sex-selection has been steadily ignored by most international reproductive rights advocates. Indian feminists have tried raising this issue at international conferences and been ignored. We understand their frustration at the lack of action regarding sex-selection. But this is a bad faith amendment, which will not protect women or result in more girls being born. We urge you to reject it and pledge to work on the wider problem.