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Senate Finance and Public Administration Committees
PO Box 6100
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Australia

Re: Inquiry into the Health Insurance Amendment (Medicare Funding for Certain Types of Abortion) Bill 2013

Introduction

The Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) welcomes this opportunity to make a submission on the Health Insurance Amendment (Medicare Funding for Certain Types of Abortion) Bill 2013.

ACL welcomes this bill and recommends strongly that it be passed without delay. The practice of sex-selection abortion is an abhorrent practice which is overwhelmingly opposed by the public. One recent poll in Tasmania found that 92% of respondents oppose abortion for the purpose of sex-selection.¹ Certainly the use of abortion to actively discriminate against one sex or another has no place in a civil society. Where sex selection is common, it is in favour of boys, which is a result of a lower value placed on girls or on cultural structures in which families will be better supported by having boys rather than girls.

Sex-selection in developing countries

Sex-selection is a practice mostly associated with cultures in certain countries such as China and India. Due to its strict one-child policy and a historical preference for boys for economic and cultural reasons, some areas in China are thought to have a male-female ratio of 130 boys to every 100 girls,²

¹ Emily's Voice (March 15, 2013), 'Tasmanians opposed to abortion', Emily's Voice, <http://www.emilysvoice.com/news-events/news/tasmanians-opposed-to-abortion/>

² The Associated Press (August 9, 2011), 'China vows tougher enforcement to prevent gender-based abortions', *Portland Press Herald*, http://www.pressherald.com/news/nationworld/china-vows-tougher-enforcement-to-prevent-gender-based-abortions_2011-08-09.html

or even as high as 160 to 100 according to some reports.³ Despite an estimated sex ratio of 1.06 (106 boys to every 100 girls) for the whole population, the country's sex ratio is a much higher 1.13 at birth and 1.17 for children under 15.⁴ This compares with a natural birth sex ratio of about 1.06.⁵ The Chinese government has acknowledged the problem and is trying to address it.⁶

Bioethicist Margaret Somerville cites a study in India which found that in 7,000 consecutive abortions, all but three were of girls.⁷ That's 6,997 out of 7,000 abortions performed on girls. Overall the nation's sex ratio at birth is estimated at 1.12, and 1.13 for children under 15.⁸ This again compares with a much lower 1.08 ratio for the whole population.

A number of other countries, such as Vietnam and Armenia (both 1.12 at birth) have similarly high sex ratios. Apart from the social problems resulting from the imbalance between adult men and women, this level of sex-selection also devalues women, treating them as objects or property, diminishing their dignity in comparison to men.

Sex-selection in developed countries

Westerners often believe this is a problem associated with certain cultures, but is not a problem in developed countries like Australia. However, with mostly permissive abortion laws throughout much of the developed world, and with increasing multiculturalism bringing a rapid increase in people from all cultures to these countries, sex selection is an increasing problem in the West as well.

For example, in the USA, a University of California, San Francisco study interviewed 65 migrant Indian women, and found that:

*40 percent of the women terminated prior pregnancies when they found the fetus was female... [and] of the women who discovered they were pregnant with a girl during the interview period, 89 percent underwent an abortion.*⁹

The study sought to:

*Understand how women exposed to cultural pressures to have male children react in an environment where reproductive choice is allowed and sex selection technologies are openly marketed and available.*¹⁰

³ Margaret Somerville (January 12, 2012), 'Focusing on the fetus changes abortion debate', *National Post*, <http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2012/01/24/margaret-somerville-the-abortion-debate-should-focus-on-the-fetus/>.

⁴ CIA World Factbook, 'Sex Ratio', <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2018.html>.

⁵ Victor Grech (27 April 2002), 'Unexplained differences in sex ratios at birth in Europe and North America', *British Medical Journal*, Volume 324, p 1010, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC102777/>.

⁶ AP (August 9, 2011), 'China vows tougher enforcement to prevent gender-based abortions', *Portland Press Herald*.

⁷ Somerville (January 12, 2012), 'Focusing on the fetus changes abortion debate', *National Post*.

⁸ CIA World Factbook, 'Sex Ratio'.

⁹ Karin Rush-Monroe (May 20, 2011), 'Pressure to Bear Sons Leads Some Immigrant Indian Women to Sex Selection, Abortion, Study finds', *University of California San Francisco*, <http://www.ucsf.edu/news/2011/05/9903/pressure-bear-sons-leads-some-immigrant-indian-women-sex-selection-abortion-study>.

It was found that such pressures include husbands and female in-laws, even when the in-laws remained in India.¹¹

It's not just from countries like India that people are travelling to the US to obtain sex selection abortions. There are reports of wealthy British couples, including senior politicians, travelling to New York to choose the sex of their child through this process, because sex selection is illegal in the UK.¹²

Despite being illegal, sex selection abortion is a reality in the United Kingdom. In February, the Telegraph uncovered several doctors and clinics willing to perform abortions despite the reason given being the sex of the child.¹³

In Canada there is currently much debate around sex selection abortion, with evidence of the practice existing in areas with large populations from South and East Asia.¹⁴ A similar proportion of Canadians oppose sex selection abortion as do Australians, but there is no law against it.¹⁵

Sex selection can be used as a means of “balancing” families, particularly among cultures that value boys more highly than girls. For the third child of Canadians who have emigrated from China, Korea, and Vietnam and who already have two daughters the sex ratio is 1.39 – that's 139 boys for every 100 girls, much higher than the natural rate of about 1.06. For third children of Indian migrants that is even higher at 1.90.¹⁶

In Canada, the right to abortion is seen as so absolute that sex selection abortion should be tolerated. In the context of sex selection abortion, the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada said in 2006:

In Canada, women do not have to provide a reason to obtain an abortion, since abortions are available upon request. Also, being pro-choice means supporting a woman's right to decide whether or not to continue for whatever reason, even if one personally does not agree with

¹⁰ Karin Rush-Monroe (May 20, 2011), 'Pressure to Bear Sons Leads Some Immigrant Indian Women to Sex Selection, Abortion, Study finds', *University of California San Francisco*.

¹¹ Karin Rush-Monroe (May 20, 2011), 'Pressure to Bear Sons Leads Some Immigrant Indian Women to Sex Selection, Abortion, Study finds', *University of California San Francisco*.

¹² Stephen Adams (August 28, 2012), 'British couples flying to US for banned baby sex selection', *The Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/9504503/British-couples-flying-to-US-for-banned-baby-sex-selection.html>.

¹³ Holly Watt, Claire Newell, and Zahra Kjimji (February 23, 2012), 'Abortion investigation: Available on demand – an abortion if it's a boy you wanted', *The Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/9099925/Abortion-investigation-Available-on-demand-an-abortion-if-its-a-boy-you-wanted.html>.

¹⁴ Canadian Medical Association Journal (February 21, 2012), 'Sex selection migrates to Canada', <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3281173/pdf/184e163.pdf>.

¹⁵ Margaret Somerville (April 9, 2013), 'Why is Canada's parliament tip-toeing around sex-selective abortion?', *Mercatornet*, http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/view/why_is_canadas_parliament_tip_toeing_around_sex_selective_abortion.

¹⁶ Canadian Medical Association Journal (February 21, 2012), 'Sex selection migrates to Canada', <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3281173/pdf/184e163.pdf>.

*her reasons... it is important to remember that we cannot restrict women's right to abortion just because some women might make decisions we disagree with.*¹⁷

Motions to pass laws similar to this bill have been met with resistance, with Conservative MP Stephen Woodworth's motion defeated last year.¹⁸ More recently a similar bill has also been met with resistance, including by the Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper.¹⁹

Conclusion

These examples show that sex selection is not merely a phenomenon confined to the developing world or countries dependent upon boys or countries culturally biased in favour of boys. Sex selection abortion, specifically in favour of boys, exists in developed countries which purport to uphold the dignity of women and promote equality between the sexes. It is especially prevalent among immigrants from certain cultural backgrounds, of which there are large communities in Australia. It is not accepted in the community but is often fiercely defended by certain pro-abortion groups.

ACL believes that this bill will formalise community feeling on the issue of sex selection abortion in Australia. ACL strongly recommends this bill be passed.

Yours sincerely,

Nick Overton

Chief Strategy Officer

¹⁷ Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada (January 2006), *Position Paper #24*, <http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/postionpapers/24-Sex-Selection-Abortions.pdf>.

¹⁸ Jennifer Ditchburn (September 26, 2012), 'Motion 312: Stephen Woodworth's Controversial Motion On Life Defeated', *Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/09/26/motion-312_n_1915171.html?utm_hp_ref=canada-politics.

¹⁹ Margaret Somerville (April 9, 2013), 'Why is Canada's parliament tip-toeing around sex-selective abortion?', *Mercatornet*, http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/view/why_is_canadas_parliament_tip_toeing_around_sex_selective_abortion.