

Joint Briefing

Sex-Selective Abortion



Having closely studied the evidence and experiences of women who have been forced into sex-selective abortion at the hands of violent partners, **we jointly maintain that this is a violence against women and girls issue rooted in gender inequality.**

We believe that the explicit criminalisation of sex-selective abortion puts women at risk of harm – deterring decisions, undermining safeguarding, and restricting access to care.

Background

Abortion law across Britain relies on broad grounds related to women's health and wellbeing and the expected outcomes for their pregnancy. Fetal sex alone is not a lawful ground for abortion in Britain, yet there is some evidence that **a small number of women may have been coerced into obtaining abortions** for this reason.

The legal framework surrounding abortion was updated in England and Wales in April 2026. **Women can now no longer be criminalised** for disclosures they make related to why they are seeking or have accessed an abortion.

The **law is unchanged for violent or coercive partners and family members** who may be involved in seeking sex-selective abortion. This law carries a maximum life sentence. The law continues to apply to medical professionals.

Many anti-abortion proponents sought to exclude sex selective abortion on the back of this important change, which would have kept victims of abuse and coercive control criminalised and deterred them from seeking care or support. **We remain concerned that this issue may be re-opened in Parliament in future.**

Women's experiences of sex-selective abortion

To ensure women can disclose abuse safely, including reproductive coercion, they must not fear that speaking openly will expose them to criminal liability.

The following anonymised cases from the national Honour Based Abuse Charity Karma Nirvana show how criminalising sex-selective abortion would increase risk, silence victims, and obstruct safeguarding.

Karina

Karina discloses that male relatives are forcing her into an abortion and that her family's honour is tied to her behaviour. She is frightened to explain the exact motives behind the coercion and becomes distressed when police or social care involvement is mentioned.

How criminalisation increases her risk:

Criminalisation would place Karina in an impossible position: telling the truth about familial pressure could expose her to legal scrutiny, while staying silent leaves her unprotected. It also risks professionals prioritising compliance with the law over safeguarding – particularly if racialised assumptions lead them to suspect sex-selective motives. This would likely drive Karina away from healthcare entirely, increasing her danger and isolation.

Daljit

Daljit's husband exerts total control, telling her she has "dishonoured" him by giving birth only to daughters. He forces her to undergo gender scans during each pregnancy, and abuse escalates with every girl born.

How criminalisation increases her risk:

Her husband could weaponise criminalisation to tighten control - threatening Daljit with prosecution if she discloses his coercion or forcing her into hidden or unsafe abortions to avoid legal consequences. Criminalising sex-selective abortion would trap Daljit between escalating violence at home and fear of legal repercussions if she seeks help, cutting her off from safeguarding pathways.

Eliza

Eliza is disowned after becoming pregnant and pressured by her family to have an abortion. Eliza's relative working at the local hospital tells her she cannot attend appointments there because of "shame", forcing her to travel out of area and cutting her off from trusted care.

How criminalisation increases her risk:

If sex-selective abortion were criminalised, Eliza would be less able to disclose coercion - fearing that discussing her family's attitudes towards the baby's sex could trigger criminal investigation. This would push her further from healthcare, stop her accessing safeguarding, and leave her more vulnerable to escalating honour-based punishment.

Abortion care and Safeguarding

Abortion care in England and Wales is already delivered within a tightly regulated healthcare and safeguarding framework.

When women attend an abortion provider like BPAS, they are asked explicitly about domestic abuse and coercion, with targeted risk assessments where concerns are identified.

Staff receive regular, specialised training, including on coercive control, sex-selective abortion and honour-based abuse, alongside enhanced domestic abuse training for clinical staff.

Safeguarding is integrated throughout the patient pathway, and providers routinely work closely with NHS, local authority, and police and third-sector partners when concerns are identified.

Specifically where sex-selective abortion is suspected, a multidisciplinary approach is used to assess risk, support informed-decision making, and ensure safe outcomes for women and their families.

Why criminalising sex-selective abortion harms women

Concerns about sex-selective abortion are often raised in the context of protecting women from coercion, particularly within abusive or controlling family environments.

Explicitly criminalising sex-selective abortion does the opposite – it harms vulnerable women who may find themselves living in an abusive relationship or family dynamic.

There are a number of reasons why both violence against women and girls (VAWG) organisations, and abortion providers themselves, believe that criminalising sex-selective abortion specifically is harmful.

1 Criminalisation makes coercion harder to detect

There is no evidence that criminalising women prevents sex-selective abortion. When women fear criminal consequences:

- They are less likely to disclose coercion or violence to healthcare professionals
- Professionals may be forced to prioritise legal risk over safeguarding
- Abusive partners and family members can gain more control

By removing the threat of criminalisation for women, professionals can identify risk and coercion more easily and intervene more appropriately.

2 **Opposing criminalisation as a way of policing minority groups**

Using the criminal abortion law to address concerns about sex-selective abortion risks racial profiling and discriminatory enforcement.

Evidence from past investigations shows that women from minoritised communities are more likely to be reported, investigated, and suspected on basis of stereotypes rather than evidence.

VAWG organisations believe that policing women's bodies is not an effective response to a gender inequality issue, and that this disproportionately harms women who are already marginalised.

3 **Blanket prohibitions on sex-selective abortions can cause serious harm**

Specialist organisations including Antenatal Results and Choices (ARC) and Genetic Alliance UK have repeatedly warned that attempts to further legislate against so-called 'sex-selective abortion' risk causing significant unintended harm to women and families.

For families with a known history of severe sex-linked conditions, knowledge of fetal sex may be the only available indicator of risk. In these circumstances, decisions relating to fetal sex are not about preference or discrimination, but about avoiding profound suffering, intensive medical intervention, or early death.

ARC and Genetic Alliance UK have warned that legislation foregrounding fetal sex creates a 'chilling effect' on clinical decision-making. Doctors may practise defensive medicine, fearing prosecution even where an abortion is sought in relation to serious fetal anomaly or maternal wellbeing. This can result in:

- Women withholding information from clinicians
- Reduced access to counselling and genetic support
- Delays in care
- Increased distress and trauma

Conclusion

Explicitly criminalising sex-selective abortion risks causing serious harm and is an approach that we jointly believe to be deeply concerning.

Criminalising sex-selective abortion will increase surveillance of women's pregnancies, heightens mistrust between patients and clinicians, and disproportionately impacts women from minoritised and marginalised communities.