

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

New debate looms over sex-selective abortion motion

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OTTAWA -- A second abortion-related motion proposed by a backbench Conservative MP could trigger a new debate about the parameters of a woman's right to choose in Canada.

Mark Warawa's private member's motion, which asks the House of Commons to condemn the practice of sex-selective abortions, was tabled last Thursday, one day after MPs voted down a separate motion to study whether a fetus should have rights before it is born.

Pro-choice activists staunchly opposed MP Stephen Woodworth's fetus-rights motion, suggesting it could open a national debate on a woman's right to access abortion - something Prime Minister Stephen Harper promised not to do during the last federal election campaign. And although Mr. Harper made it clear that he did not support that motion, 10 Conservative cabinet ministers and nearly half of the party's caucus voted in its favour.

Mr. Warawa says his motion is unrelated to Mr. Woodworth's and intends only to formalize what he believes is a cross-party consensus that sex-selective abortions are inappropriate.

He said he was compelled to draft the motion after an editorial in the Canadian Medical Association Journal cited research suggesting women from some communities in Canada were aborting female fetuses because of a preference for males. The author, Rajendra Kale, proposed that health-care professionals avoid revealing the sex of a fetus until about 30 weeks of pregnancy - a point at which it would be more difficult for a woman to obtain an abortion.

A separate Ontario study published in the journal presented evidence that women born in India and South Korea were significantly more likely to have a male baby than women born in Canada when it came to their second or third child.

"I think we have something [in the motion] that everyone should be able to support," Mr. Warawa said. "My motion is focusing specifically on the discrimination that people would end pregnancies simply because the unborn child is female. And that should never be tolerated anywhere." Mr. Warawa said he has no plans to reopen a debate on abortion and believes condemnation of sex selection could serve an educational purpose. The motion is expected to come up for debate next spring.

Andrea Mrozek, a researcher with the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada and founder of the blog ProWomanProLife, said she sees the motion as one way of appealing to Canadians who don't have strong opinions about abortion. "Some people think you should never call into question any reason for an abortion. I think that doesn't jive with mainstream public opinion," she said.

Julie Lalonde, a board member for the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada, said the group maintains that a woman's right to choose is absolute. "People have the right to be appalled by sex-selective abortion. But we don't believe for a second that this is a genuine attempt at opposing sex selection in Canada," she said. "It is anti-choice MPs and anti-choice organizations that seem to be fixated on sex-selective abortions because it is a seemingly touchy subject, so it gets people who are on the fence about abortion to sympathize with their viewpoint."

A spokeswoman from the Prime Minister's Office declined to comment directly on Mr. Warawa's motion, noting that it would not come before the House for several months. "The Prime Minister has been clear that we do not intend to reopen the debate on abortion," Julie Vaux wrote in an e-mail.

Liberal health critic Hedy Fry said she would not support the motion as it stands. "I don't think [sex-selective abortion] is okay, but I also don't think the state has a right intervening in this issue. It is a medical decision between the physician and the patient," Ms. Fry said.

The NDP declined to say on Monday whether it would support the motion, but NDP MP Niki Ashton said she believes the motion "misses the point" of broader gender equality concerns and is aimed at furthering an anti-abortion agenda. "We're seeing a rehashed attempt to reopen the abortion debate," she said.