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REPORT OF A SEMINAR HELD IN BOMBAY ON AMNIOCENTESIS

*Prepared by the Research Unit on
Women's Studies at S.N.D.T.
Women's University*

La section de recherche chargée des études sur la femme à l'Université Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thakersey pour femmes de Bombay, a observé en 1984 la Journée internationale de la Femme en tenant un séminaire sur l'amniocentèse. Ce procédé médical, grâce auquel il est possible de détecter les anomalies foetales, permet également de déterminer le sexe, ce qui préoccupe les féministes indiennes car on utilise actuellement ce test pour favoriser l'avortement des fœtus femelles.

On International Women's Day (1984) the Research Unit on Women's Studies at the Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Women's University in Bombay, India held a symposium on "Amniocentesis." It was organised in collaboration with College of Home Science, C.U. Shah College of Pharmacy, Polytechnique and other departments of S.N.D.T. Women's University. The following panelists were invited to speak: Ms. Maithreyi Krishna Raj, Associate Director, Research Unit on Women's Studies; Ms. Flavia, feminist activist from the Women's Centre, Bombay; and Dr. Manda Purandare,

Gynaecologist and Obstetrician from Naoroji Wadia Maternity Hospital, Parel, Bombay.

Dr. Neera Desai, Hon. Director, Research Unit on Women's Studies, welcomed the guests. Dr. Baichwal, Principal, C.U. Shah College of Pharmacy, presided over the symposium. About one hundred feminist activists, researchers, students and members of women's organisations attended the symposium. The following is a brief of the talks:

Ms. Maithreyi Krishna Raj: I would like to provide a feminist perspective on the issue of Amniocentesis and the ideology

of female subordination. The word 'feminist' is considered to be a dirty word: that is wrong. A 'feminist' stands for serious involvement in equal rights for women to live as full human beings. In the last two decades feminists have seen three areas of male domination – the control of female sexuality, female reproduction, and female labour. The male motive is profiteering. Male domination also functions to establish the lineage and kinship systems. The argument given in favour of using Amniocentesis as a method of detecting the gender of a foetus and then encouraging the abortion of girls is that "It is an individual choice of a woman to have a son." But here the "individual choice" is an attempt to get the best of the system. It is to get reward from the system. Failure to have a son leads to penalty. Another argument is "Population control." But why control over the female population only? The reduction of the female population will lead to a population imbalance. The third argument, which is given by economists, is that reduction of the female population will improve the value of women. But in regions where the female sex ratio is high the status of women is also high. If women became scarce there will be higher chances of male domination and the abduction of women.

Ms. Flavia: The Women's Centre is helping the women having different problems. The Amniocentesis test reflects bias against women. The test is being misused to detect and kill the female foetus in India. The Western world has not used this test to kill female foetuses; not even China, where there is a one-child policy, uses it. The reason for this practice is that in India girls are considered to be an economic burden on the family. This practice of using the amniocentesis test to promote the abortion of female foetuses is an extension of the traditional pattern of female infanticide where girls are also killed by neglect and malnutrition. This practice is getting scientific sanction from these tests. The data collected from Harkishan Dass Hospital revealed that ninety percent of their cases came under this category. About ten women go for this test every day. The women who are going in for this test do not condemn this practice like the women who suffered from rape and dowry. The women want to continue this practice because of the male system.

The government is not putting a ban on this practice. Encouraging the test reinforces the inferior status of women which the dowry system has perpetuated. The

attitudes of people should be changed. We should see that government machinery does not continue to encourage this test for terminating female foetuses.

Dr. Manda Purandare: The Amniocentesis test is conducted by examining the amniotic fluid in which the baby floats in the mother's womb. 1520 ml. of amniotic fluid is extracted from the mother's womb, either through pricking the abdomen or through the vagina. The amniotic fluid examination establishes the R.H. group of the blood and diagnoses some potential diseases of the baby. The test also gives knowledge about the sex of the baby. On getting the results of this test, a mother may choose to terminate her pregnancy.

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In India this test came in 1973. Bar and Burton invented this test in 1945. In 1950 Dr. Pinshaw started it in India. In 1972 M.T.P. was legalised. This law was partial to women since the decision for termination of pregnancy was entirely taken by women. Under the law pregnancy can be terminated in case of rape, abnormal baby, failure of contraception, poor health of mother, unwed mother, etc. But no abortion can be done to terminate a female foetus. The M.T.P. can be done up to the twentieth week of pregnancy, but it involves danger to the life of the mother beyond twelve weeks. The Amniocentesis test can be done up to sixteen weeks. One hundred cells from the amniotic fluid are examined under the microscope. If sixty percent of the cells show "X" cells then the baby in the womb is female. This test is very difficult and dangerous. If it is done carefully, there is a ninety-eight percent chance of success. There can be wrong results also, due to the presence of "X" cells in the mother's fluid. There can be a number of complications also; it can cause life-long infections in the uterus, damage to the placenta, or it may result in mortality.

The doctors are not happy to conduct M.T.P. because it has psychological effects on the minds of medical staff. They

refer to this unit as "Slaughter house of foetus" and want to get transferred from here. The M.T.P. is legal but this test is illegal. The doctors are not doing this test to abort female foetuses, but abortion is done under the clause which says "continuation of pregnancy is harmful to the health of the mother." The services for this test are not provided in government hospitals. They are available only in the Research Unit of Harkishan Dass Hospital. Some private practitioners are conducting this test and charging exorbitant rates.

Ms. Lata Dhore, a Researcher with this Research Unit, spoke on behalf of a slum woman. Ms. Shashikala was invited to this seminar to narrate her experience of the Amniocentesis test but could not come due to her ill health. When I met Ms. Shashikala she was pregnant for the eighth time. She had one son and three daughters. She had three induced abortions before. She told me that after two days she would be going for another abortion as the result of amniocentesis confirming that she was carrying a female child. On asking the whereabouts of the clinic where she got these three tests and abortions done, she only said that the clinic was at Dadar. In reply to why she wanted to abort the female child, she said "I want a son and not a daughter. Getting the female foetus aborted is more easy and inexpensive than to bear the lifelong responsibility of a daughter."

Shashikala, when visited three weeks later, had undergone her fourth induced abortion. She had become very weak and was looking pale. She was bedridden. She told Lata that "this time with the termination of pregnancy I have also done my sterilisation despite the wish of my husband for taking one more pregnancy."

A street play on Amniocentesis in Marathi was staged by Ms. Lata Dhore and a few students from C.U. Shah College of Pharmacy. The play was very impressive. The symposium concluded with the vote of thanks by Dr. Ranjan Parekh, Vice Principal, College of Home Science, S.N.D.T. Women's University, Bombay.

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