

Box 1.2 High-Tech Feticide: Sex-Selective Abortions

Historians report that most human societies have practiced and condoned infanticide (the killing of one's infant, up to age 1) in one form or another. Some scholars maintain infanticide was the most frequent crime in all of Europe before modern times and remained a relatively common practice until about 1800 (Piers, 1978). In a world generally ruled by patriarchy, most commonly it has been young girls who have been killed.

Although infanticide is no longer condoned internationally, this does not mean it does not occur. One way to estimate rates of female infanticide is with sex ratios. Male-to-female ratios should be approximately 1:1. Certain human practices, however, can alter the ratios. Wars, for example, tend to produce low male-to-female ratios because men are more likely to be killed in battle, whereas infanticide tends to produce high male-to-female ratios because females are more likely to be victims of infanticide.

During the Middle Ages, the practice of infanticide was not openly condoned, but with sex ratios of approximately 170 males for every 100 females in Europe in 1400 CE, it seems clear that infanticide was common. The practice continued there through the 19th century. In London, for example, dead babies lying in the streets were not uncommon as late as 1890 (deMause, 1974). In 19th-century China, male-to-female ratios were nearly 400:100 in some rural areas primarily dependent on farming (Ho, 1959).

In modern times infanticide is rare. (See Chapter 3 for a discussion of child fatalities in the United States.) However, sex-selective **feticide**—killing a fetus—has become increasingly common. As medical

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