

Religious alliance backs ban on gender abortions

By Steven Swinford
Deputy Political Editor

ABORTION on grounds of gender must be outlawed because "not enough is being done" to stop the practice, an alliance of religious and women's groups representing Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus has warned.

More than 25 organisations – including the Muslim Women's Network, the Hindu Council and the Sikh Council – said that they had witnessed at "first hand" the pressure that women come under to abort daughters.

They say in a letter: "We support women who have been or are in danger of being coerced into sex-selective abortion in the UK, particularly in communities where there still exists a preference for a son.

"Since news broke of the sex-selective abortion amendment to the Serious Crime Bill, we have been concerned by how much airtime has been given to radical voices opposing the initiative.

"We know that this amendment will help because we see first-hand that mixed messages about the law are causing confusion in communities. We are confident that this contributes to complacency in the minds of those who, for whatever reason, do now want a girl.

"Our experience tells us that practical help is needed in areas where women are sometimes devalued and degraded to the extent that people try to stop them from being born. Not enough is being done. We believe the government can and

should play a part." The possibility of sex-selective abortion in the UK was exposed in a *Daily Telegraph* investigation in which two doctors were filmed agreeing to carry out terminations because the unborn babies were girls.

Police investigated, but the Crown Prosecution Service later refused to bring charges against them, saying that it was not in the public interest.

The decision exposed uncertainty over the law. Ministers insisted that the practice was illegal, but guidance from the British Medical Association says there could be circumstances in which it "would be lawful".

Significantly, the UK's biggest abortion provider, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (Bpas), maintains that gender-selective abortion is not illegal under the 1967 Abortion Act and that the law is "silent" on the subject.

The alliance of faith and women's groups has backed an amendment effectively adding a clause to the Serious Crime Bill explicitly outlawing gender abortion.

The Bill, which contains new measures to combat domestic violence and female genital mutilation, has already completed its committee stage in the Commons and is on course to become law before the general election in May.

The amendment, tabled by Fiona Bruce, a Conservative, has already been signed by 73 MPs.

Letters: Page 19

2015
Tel February 9th