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Center for Genetics and Society Identifies Two Eugenic Threats to Communities of Color

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Next to Nazi Germany, the United States may have had the second largest eugenic movement historically. From forced sterilization and population control to dangerous contraceptives, eugenics has been cloaked in and marketed as the solution to many social and health concerns.

Sujatha Jesudason, Director of the Program on Gender, Justice and Human Genetics at the Center for Genetics and Society, states, "We have a long history of eugenics in this country, especially in the state of California, which enacted laws of forced sterilization and segregation in the early 1900." She also noted that California, along with North Carolina, South Carolina, Oregon and Virginia, issued public apologies for forced sterilizations practiced as late as the 1970s. According to Jesudason, new genetic and reproductive technologies are raising the specter of eugenics again. Two of these new technologies are pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) and sex selection. PGD is used to test embryos before implanting into the uterus for severe genetic diseases like Down's Syndrome, Huntington's Chorea and Tay-Sachs disease. The disability rights community has been extremely critical of PGD's usage. Who decides what is abnormal? They argue that the problem isn't the different abilities, but societies' inability to accommodate differences.

In terms of sex selection, while sex selective abortions have been going on for a while in countries like India and China, new technology is now making it possible to select gender and ability before pregnancy. These new pre-pregnancy technologies allow for a broader range of de-selection, and can open the door to "designer babies". "Given that gender is one of the most important determinants of life experience" says Jesudason, "and if we allow for the selection of gender, on what moral or ethical grounds will we be able to oppose selection on other characteristics such as eyes, skin color, height, or brain size? Selecting for sex and de-selecting for ability, puts us at the threshold of a form of "consumer eugenics" where future parents, who can afford to pay, will be able to choose the height, weight, eye color, intelligence or any other desirable trait of their babies."

Jesudason notes that the marketing strategies for sex selection is becoming more visible, citing how she's read advertisements in the New York Times magazine and in American Airlines in-flight magazine.

"We are seeing ads asking "Do you want to choose the gender of your next baby?" Where do we as a society draw a line in this kind of a "choice"?"