



# SEX IMBALANCES AT BIRTH IN VIET NAM 2014

Recent trends, factors and variations



Ha Noi, December 2016



LABOUR-SOCIAL PUBLISHING HOUSE



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# Abbreviations

<b>CH</b>	Central Highlands
<b>DHS</b>	Demographic and Health Survey
<b>GBSS</b>	Gender-biased sex selection
<b>GOPFP</b>	General Office for Population and Family Planning
<b>GSO</b>	General Statistics Office
<b>ICRW</b>	International Center for Research on Women
<b>IPS</b>	Intercensal Population and Housing Survey
<b>MRD</b>	Mekong River Delta
<b>NMM</b>	Northern Midlands and Mountains
<b>NSCC</b>	North and South Central Coast
<b>PPR</b>	Parity Progression Ratio
<b>RRD</b>	Red River Delta
<b>SE</b>	Southeast
<b>SRB</b>	Sex ratio at birth
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization

# PREFACE

The monograph, “*Sex imbalances at birth in Viet Nam 2014: Recent trends, factors and variations*”, was developed using the data from the 2014 Intercensal Population and Housing Survey (2014 IPS) and 2009 Population and Housing Census to provide the most updated information about an emerging issue that has received great attention from policymakers and researchers in Viet Nam.

The 2014 IPS was the first-ever sample population and housing survey in Viet Nam carried out at the midpoint between the two national Population and Housing Censuses (2009 and 2019 censuses). This survey was conducted according to the Decision No. 1253/QĐ-TCTK, dated 22 November 2013, by the General Statistics Office (GSO) of Viet Nam. The aim of the survey was to systematically collect basic population and housing data in order to provide the foundation for research, evaluation and formulation of policies and programs, and socio-economic development targets and plans in Viet Nam, especially related to population and housing issues. In addition to the key demographic and housing indicators, disseminated in December 2014, and the Findings Report, published in October 2015, some priority population issues including fertility, migration and urbanization, population sex and age structure, and sex ratio imbalance at birth have also been analyzed using the 2014 IPS’s data to provide further insights and policy recommendations related to these issues.

Results from the data analysis in the monograph on sex imbalance at birth in Viet Nam 2014 show that sex ratio at birth has continued to rise for the last 5 years, yet at a slower rate, from 110.6 boys per 100 girls in 2009 to 112.2 boys per 100 girls in 2014. This analysis also illustrates the differences of this ratio among regions and population groups, the relationship between socio-economic and demographic factors and sex imbalance at birth in Viet Nam. More specifically, the results help us to understand the extent of son preference reflected in reproductive behaviours, and the trend of its diffusion across different population groups.

The monograph also proposes some recommendations to address the sex imbalance at birth issue in Viet Nam, and emphasizes the necessity to have information on aspects of social changes and their impacts on son preference to identify factors relating to gender equality in Vietnamese families.

The report was completed with the technical and financial support of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). We would like to express our special thanks to Dr. Christophe Z. Guilmoto, UNFPA International Consultant, for his great work in analyzing the data and developing this monograph. Our special thank is extended to Ms. Renu Nahata, editing consultant, for her excellent editing the report. Finally, we would like to express our sincere thanks to all UNFPA and GSO staff who provided valuable comments during preparation and finalization of this report.

In this light, it is our great pleasure to introduce this publication that provides an in-depth look into the issue of sex imbalance at birth in Viet Nam, the topic of interest among researchers, managers, policymakers and the broader society. We look forward to your feedback and comments on this monograph to improve the publications in the future.

**United Nations Population Fund**

**General Statistics Office**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sex imbalance at birth can be observed in a handful of countries, particularly in Asia, the Caucasus and Southeast Europe, as evidenced in sex ratios at birth (SRB) that rise above the natural biological level of 105 male births per 100 female births. The primary cause of high SRB levels is found in the practice of gender-biased sex selection, particularly, prenatal sex selection. The present study follows previous work on birth masculinity using the 2009 census results and provides a systematic review of recent SRB trends in Viet Nam based on analysis of the Intercensal Population and Housing Survey 2014 (IPS 2014), conducted by the General Statistics Office (GSO).

That survey led to a new estimate of the national SRB set at 112.2 male births per 100 female births in 2014. This figure, based on recent births recorded 12 months before 1 April 2014, is perfectly consistent with other estimates derived from the sex distribution of the population aged under one year, including the independent figures from the General Office for Population and Family Planning (GOPFP). The use of IPS data leads to a better understanding of the many social, economic and demographic correlates of the skewed sex ratio in Viet Nam. An in-depth analysis of reproductive behaviour reveals the complex interplay between reproductive decision-making and gender objectives.<sup>1</sup> This monograph shows, in particular, that the need for sons is the primary factor behind the parental decision to have a third or higher-order birth; many Vietnamese couples clearly adjust their fertility behaviour to their gender objectives, which means primarily, to ensure the birth of at least one son. The roles of family systems, economic and cultural constraints, and social pressure have already been documented by different studies, but the recent IPS has contributed towards a better estimation of the intensity of the son preference and its implementation through various reproductive decisions.

In addition, the recent diffusion of sex selection technology available throughout the country has allowed couples to avoid unwanted female births, while an overall fertility decline has exerted further pressure on parents. As a result, the birth masculinity level is higher than ever today: an estimated 52,900 excess male births during the past five years. Viet Nam's SRB level is significantly more skewed than ratios observed in neighbouring Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. As birth cohorts gradually age, this male surplus is here to stay and is likely to affect the sex distribution of young adults within the next fifteen years and potentially impact on the opportunities for marriage of young, scarce women and surplus men.

The mechanism of sex selection appears more complex in Viet Nam than elsewhere. Some of the major findings of this report are:

- In addition to skewed sex ratios among higher-order births following the births of successive girls, the presence of prenatal discrimination among first births has also been observed. High birth masculinity among first births accounts for no less than 40 per cent of the entire sex imbalance currently estimated in Viet Nam.

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1 *Gender objectives in this concept mean objectives about the gender composition.*

- Further data analysis confirms that social and economic differentials affect birth masculinity, with lower SRB levels among the poorest quintiles and other underprivileged groups, such as ethnic minorities and the less educated.
- The survey data have once again confirmed the presence of significant regional differentials across the country, with the Red River Delta emerging as a region with the highest SRB levels. In certain provinces where the SRB is especially skewed, the number of unborn girls corresponds to almost a fifth of all female births.
- Statistical analysis shows that the social, regional and demographic profiles of sex selection are quite different among first births and among higher-order births in the absence of male offspring, and therefore, these two categories can also be understood to relate differently to different populations.
- While the overall upward trend since 2005 is well established, 2014 estimates also demonstrate that Viet Nam's birth masculinity level has not diminished over the last five years. There has been an apparent increase in the SRB from 110.6 in 2009 to 112.2 recorded by the IPS 2014. In particular, this increase has taken place among lower income groups through a process of social diffusion and has affected almost all areas of Viet Nam, although the fastest regional intensification has taken place in the Red River Delta.
- In spite of the temporary spike observed in 2012, the increase also appears to have slowed down to the extent that it may not reach the 115 level postulated earlier.

While the IPS 2014 cannot provide any firm evidence of the impact of recent policy interventions, they may have contributed to the apparent stabilization observed after 2010.

The report ends with a few recommendations related to:

1. The continuous need for regular monitoring of SRB trends in the country through all statistical instruments available.
2. The increased call for research into understanding the dynamics of social change and its impact on son preference and to identify factors related to son preference within Vietnamese families.

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