

# Sex Imbalances at Birth:

Current trends, consequences and policy implications



Published in August 2012



**UNFPA Asia and the Pacific Regional Office**

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Rajdamnern Nok Avenue  
Bangkok 10200, Thailand

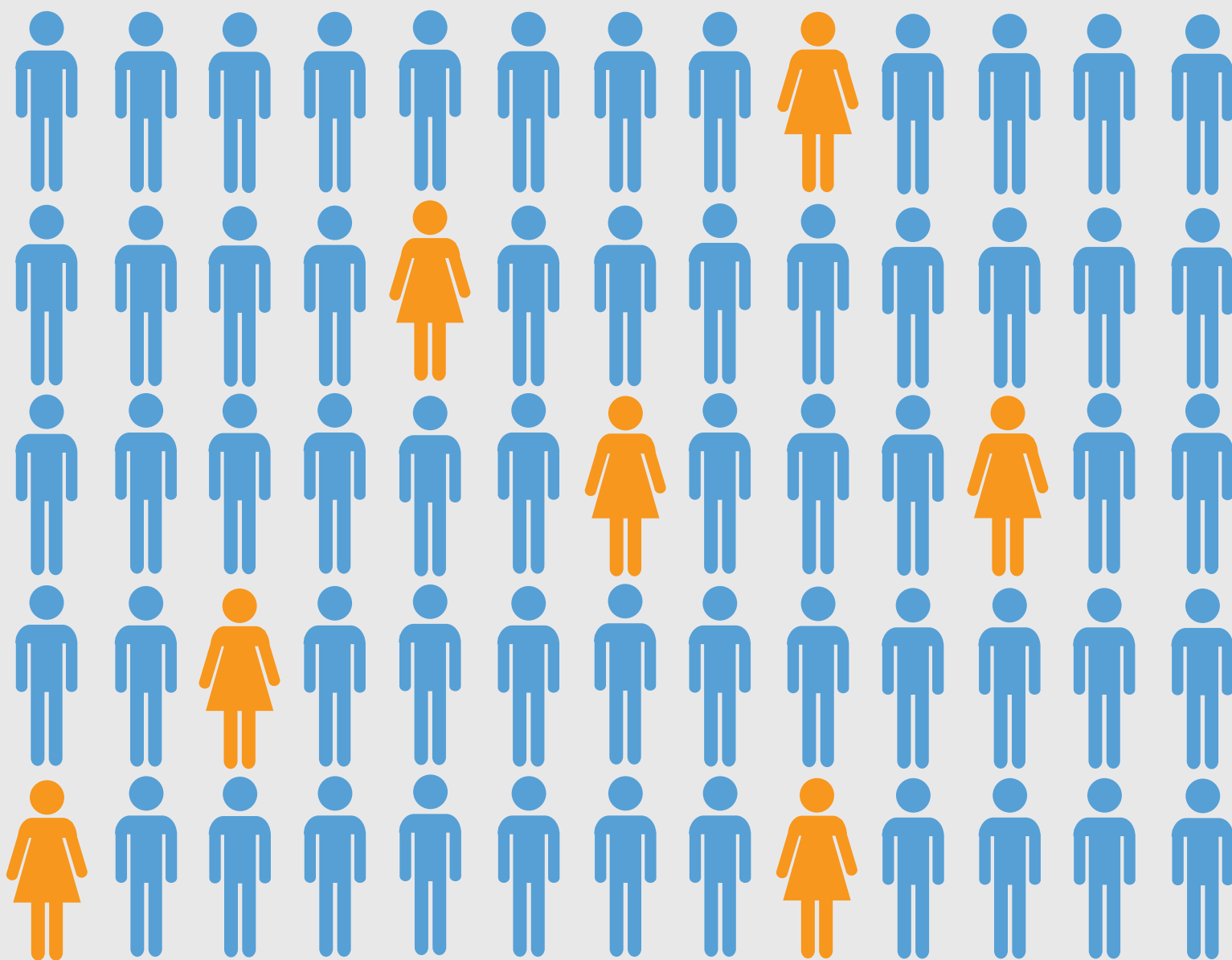
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ISBN: 978-974-680-338-0  
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# Sex Imbalances at Birth:

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UNFPA Asia and the Pacific Regional Office

# Foreword

## **Sex Imbalances at birth: Current Trends, Consequences and Policy Implications**

The sex ratio for the entire world population is 101 males to 100 females. Analysis of available national census data indicates that in recent decades, sex-ratio imbalances have grown in favour of boy children in a number of South Asian, East Asian and Central Asian countries. Prenatal sex selection leads today to distorted levels of sex ratio at birth (SRB), reaching between 110 and 120 male births per 100 female births in several countries pointing to the intensity of gender discrimination and son preference. The trend has shifted geographically over time, beginning in a number of Asian countries (China, India, and the Republic of Korea) in the 1980s, followed by some countries of the Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia) in the 1990s, and has more recently been followed by Montenegro, Albania, and Vietnam.

This distorted demographic masculinization, which has serious social and economic implications, is not a natural phenomenon but is achieved through a deliberate elimination of girls. The alarming trends in sex ratio imbalances at birth highlight son preference in several cultures and the misuse of scientific and technical advances in pre-natal sex-detection have combined to create these rising SRBs. Census data have often provided detailed mappings of these variations, both within countries and across social groups.

Sex selection in favour of boys is a symptom of pervasive social, cultural, political and economic injustices against women, and a manifest violation of women's human rights. The growing number of missing women (latest estimates indicate 117 million missing women) speak of a culture in which gender inequality is deeply rooted. Patriarchal structures reinforce son preference and a climate of violence and discrimination against women and girls in society. Declining fertility and rapid developments in the technology that allows parents to know the sex of the foetus have exacerbated this practice.

Present-day sex ratios among children are going to have a lasting impact on population dynamics in Asia. Projections show that in China and India, men will already vastly outnumber women of marriageable age for over two generations. Marriage simulations also suggest that the number of single men trying to marry after 2030 might exceed for several decades the corresponding number of unmarried women by 50-60% in both countries. The expected socio-economic consequences of these trends are alarming including potential risks of human rights violations such as abduction, trafficking and sale of women and girls for the purposes of marriage or sexual exploitation.

UNFPA began focusing on this issue in the 1990s, guided by the Programme of Action of the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), which recommends the elimination of "all forms of discrimination against the girl child and the root causes of son preference, which results in harmful and unethical

practices regarding female infanticide and prenatal sex selection.” The consensus agreement urges governments to “take the necessary measures to prevent infanticide, prenatal sex selection...” and says “leaders at all levels of the society must speak out and act forcefully against patterns of gender discrimination within the family, based on preference for sons....”

Over the last 20 years UNFPA has been supporting national interventions and engaged in research and advocacy to raise awareness and bring the issue of sex selection and the consequent sex ratio imbalance in populations to the forefront of governments’ agendas. Working with UNFPA and independently, governments, civil society, communities and academia in the affected countries have undertaken several initiatives to reduce the trend of sex selection and rising SRBs and to address the many dimensions of this issue –in terms of human rights, social policy and public health.

At the regional level, UNFPA first convened a conference on sex ratio imbalance in the Republic of Korea in 1994 to sensitize, gather experiences and develop responses for countries in the region, followed by conferences in China in 2004, India in 2007 and Vietnam in 2011. UN inter-agency cooperation was strengthened in 2011 through the development of an interagency statement, by United Nations agencies (OHCHR, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women and WHO) noting a joint framework for action on sex selection and identifying the expertise that each agency can bring for tackling this harmful practice. An inter-regional project to support further research, capacity building and south-south collaboration will be supported over the coming three years by UNFPA Asia and the Pacific Regional Office in collaboration with the UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office.

After two decades of these efforts, it is time to see where the world stands on this issue so critical to its progress. This report offers an updated review of the latest trends and differentials in sex selection, the progress and setbacks, the causative factors which differ across countries, governmental and community initiatives and the multi-dimensional implications of rising Sex Ratio at Birth.

The report concludes with a set of recommendations to combat gender discrimination and prenatal sex selection at the national and regional level. UNFPA is committed to contribute to the reduction of gender biased sex selection in affected countries, by strengthening evidence-based national policies and programmes in addressing gender inequality and sex selection at birth.



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# Acknowledgements

This publication has been prepared by UNFPA Asia Pacific Regional Office (APRO), under the overall guidance of the Regional Director, Nobuko Horibe with lead coordination by Kiran Bhatia, Gender Adviser, and contribution by Christophe Lefranc, Population and Census Adviser, and Petra Righetti, Population Analyst.

APRO would like to express special thanks to Christophe Z. Guilmoto the author of this report and commends his deep understanding of the many facets of the issue and the rich analysis and valuable recommendations in the report that are tailored to each country's "stage of engagement" in their fight against demographic distortions.

Particular thanks go to the review committee for the detailed technical comments they provided on the draft report. They include: Bruce Campbell, Representative, and colleagues from the Vietnam Country Office, Ena Singh, Assistant Representative and Dr. Mangal from the India Country Office, Siri Teller, former Country Representative China and Prof P. Kulkarni.

Recognition for their support to the publication and its recommendations also goes to Upala Devi, GBV Adviser, UNFPA Headquarters, Frederika Meijer, Country Representative India, Mandeep K. O'Brien, Deputy Country Representative Vietnam and Tran Thi Van Assistant Representative, Arthur Erken, Country Representative Bangladesh, Zeljka Mudrovcic, Deputy Country Representative China and Rabbi Royan, Country Representative, Pakistan. Appreciation is also due to Valentine Becquet for her research assistance, to Aruna Dasgupta for her excellent editing of the publication, Natsuda Suwatthanabunpot for her administrative support and to the participants of the International Workshop on Skewed sex Ratios at Birth in Hanoi in 2011 for their observations and comments.

# Contents

Foreword .....	2
Acknowledgements .....	4
Contents .....	5
List of boxes, figures and tables .....	6
Acronyms and Abbreviation .....	7
Executive summary .....	9
1. Introduction .....	13
2. Missing girls and skewed sex ratios .....	15
2.1. The mechanisms of sex selection .....	15
2.2. Skewed sex ratios at birth observed from Asia to America .....	19
2.3 Postnatal gender discrimination among children .....	24
2.4. Variations of sex ratio across households and regions .....	27
2.4.1 Sex selection and family composition .....	27
2.4.2 Regional differences .....	28
2.4.3 Social and economic differentials in birth masculinity .....	31
3. Understanding of gender discrimination in modernizing Asia .....	33
3.1. The preconditions of prenatal sex selection .....	33
3.2. the revolution of the sex selection technology .....	35
3.3. the demand for boys .....	38
3.4. the squeezing effect of fertility decline .....	42
3.5. Synthesis .....	43
4. The present and future consequences of abnormal sex ratios .....	45
4.1. Missing women in 2010 .....	45
4.2. Future population and marriage imbalances .....	48
4.2.1 Adult sex ratio and marriage rates .....	52
4.2.2 The actual extent of the forthcoming marriage squeeze .....	53
4.3. Implications on the adult populations and families in the future .....	54
4.4. Conclusion .....	57
5. Policy responses to sex imbalances .....	59
5.1. Regulating prenatal sex selection .....	60
5.2. Supporting families with girls .....	62
5.3. Broader gender equitable policies .....	64
5.4. Strengthening policy responses .....	67
6. Emerging regional priorities and policy challenges .....	69
6.1. Emerging regional trends .....	69
6.2. Recommendations .....	74
References .....	77

# List of boxes, figures and tables

Box 1:	Sex ratio and measurement issues	18
Box 2:	Parity, sex composition and the impact of sex selection	22
Box 3:	The geography of gender discrimination	29
Box 4:	The need for sons as seen from Viet Nam	39
Box 5:	Measuring the gender gap in 2010	46
Box 6:	Population projections and marriage simulations	50
Box 7:	The downturn of birth masculinity in northwest India	72
Figure 1:	Factors affecting sex ratios at different ages	16
Figure 2:	The preconditions for prenatal sex selection	44
Figure 3:	Sex ratios by age groups, countries with sex discrimination and rest of the world, 2010	47
Figure 4:	Adult sex ratios weighted by marriage rates in China and India according to two SRB scenarios (no transition and rapid transition), 2005-2100	52
Table 1:	Most recent estimates of the sex ratio at birth in various countries, 2007-2011	20
Table 2:	Excess female infant and child mortality in various countries, 2005-2010	26
Table 3:	Sex ratio by birth order, South Korea, Armenia, China and Viet Nam, 2000-2009	28
Table 4:	Social, demographic and economic factors affecting prenatal sex selection	31
Table 5:	Gender gap in various countries, 2010	40

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