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Asia: Heirs and spares

By Amy Kazmin, Patti Waldmeir and Girija Shivakumar

The political, economic and social consequences of a preference for sons is alarming policymakers



Finery: a bride at a mass marriage in India. Boys help till the fields and can support parents in old age; girls require dowries and are meant to be loyal to their husband's family

In the Indian farming village of Medina, 200km from Delhi, the narrow lanes are clogged with high-end sport utility vehicles, reflecting the prosperity brought by rising land values to this traditional community. In their mud-floored homes, residents display flatscreen televisions, refrigerators and other modern conveniences.

But Medina's families are also using their new wealth to acquire a scarce local commodity: teenage girls to act as wives for the community's growing cohorts of unmarried men.

A shortage of young women arising from decades of aggressive use of sex-selective abortion in northern breadbasket states – including Haryana, where Medina is located – is prompting families to turn to the impoverished east to secure females. Communities once fussy about caste are now prepared to buy young girls who do not even speak their language, though such unions are usually without formal weddings. “At first, people were ashamed of bringing wives from outside, but now they don't care – they pay and they bring,” says Ram Niwas, 68. “A woman is a child-bearing machine. Her only work is to bear children and cook.”

Three years ago, Mr Niwas paid Rs80,000 to buy Suman, now 19, from Assam state for his 35-year-old son. While some girls are cast out after delivering and weaning a boy, Suman still lives in the household following the birth of her own, though she says she is beaten when she displeases her in-laws. For Mr Niwas it has been a good deal. “A water buffalo is still more expensive than one of these girls,” he says.

Officials in Asia's fast-growing economies are less sanguine. India, China and also Vietnam are becoming increasingly alarmed by a shortage of girls that defies assumptions that gender imbalance will fall as wealth rises. They point to the social and political consequences of rising numbers of unmarried men and the potential impact on economic growth.

Prostitution and forced marriage are rising in both India and China. India has recorded an upsurge of violent crime against women, including gang rape and honour killing, while in China there has been a spate of kidnappings of school-age girls taken to be reared as future brides. Meanwhile security experts warn the glut of unmarried young men is increasing tensions in societies already in ferment from rapid economic change.

In the long term, a shortage of girls contributes to “the criminalisation of society”, says G.D. Bakshi of Vivekananda International Foundation, a Delhi security think-tank. “It will aggravate aggressive tendencies – whether they manifest in internal conflict, armed rebellions or you try and externalise conflict.”

In China, the sex ratio among newborns is about 120 boys for every 100 girls, compared with the ratio of 105 boys per 100 girls that is considered normal. So concerned are authorities that last month Li Bin, minister of the national population and family planning commission, told state-owned Xinhua news agency: “One of the important tasks in the [recently adopted] 12th five-year plan is to ease the unbalanced gender ratio.”

Delhi, in turn, was jolted by census data showing the number of boys under the age of seven rose from 107.9 per 100 girls in 2001 to 109.4 in 2011, even as the economy grew at unprecedented speed. The influential National Advisory Council headed by Sonia Gandhi, leader of the ruling Congress party, has set up a committee to discuss how to reverse the trend.

Communist-ruled Vietnam shows a similar trend of rising affluence and increasing imbalance. After a decade of blistering growth, it reported 110.5 boys born for every 100 girls in 2009, up from a more “normal” ratio of 106.2 boys in 2000. Nguyen Thien Nhan, a deputy prime minister, has warned that 3m men may be unable to find wives by 2030, and Hanoi is grappling for a response.

Traditional preferences for sons are deep-rooted in Asia, particularly in agricultural communities. Boys help till the fields and are responsible for caring for their elderly parents. Girls require dowries and, once married, are expected to be loyal to a husband’s family and are therefore unable to support their own parents in their dotage.

Confounding long-held expectations, the preference appears to persist even as development creates new opportunities for women, potentially reducing long-held perceptions that daughters are solely economic liabilities and altering the relative costs of raising sons and daughters. “You see this rising affluence, and high standards of living, but in terms of social values, and social thinking, a large part remains extremely primitive,” says A.K. Shiva Kumar, a member of India’s NAC. “The social pressure for sons is phenomenally high, particularly among the middle class. The symbols of modernity surround them, but you don’t have any change in thinking.”

With the spread of ultrasound machines, what families in Haryana casually call “the wipeout” has become much easier. “The intensity of daughter aversion may reduce, but parents’ ability to act on that aversion is much higher now,” says Ena Singh of the UN Population Fund in Delhi.

India, China and Vietnam have all banned sex-selective abortions and prohibit medics from disclosing a child’s gender before birth. But enforcement is erratic, with few prosecutions for violations. Chinese and Indian doctors in urban areas may follow the rules but clinics elsewhere operate with few controls. In Vietnam, the sex-selective abortions is seen as a routine medical service.

In China, “villagers who have even a little money or good connections will be able to find out the gender before birth”, says Cheng Zhu, whose six-year-old daughter was kidnapped six years ago, probably to serve as a child bride, as she waited to be picked up from school.

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China and India have both launched schemes to encourage families to raise daughters. Under Beijing’s “care for girls” policy, parents of lone females may receive up to Rmb900 (\$140) a month in old-age pension payments. In some rural areas daughters are awarded extra points on university entrance exams, or a college fund of up to Rmb3,000.

In Henan, one of the less developed provinces, single-girl families receive a 20 per cent discount on medical care. The countryside is filled with billboards, banners and barn sides like the one in Guizhou, the poorest province, asking: “If you don’t give birth to girls, where will all the daughters-in-law come from?”

Some Indian states offer girls small sums for reaching life-cycle milestones. However, while sex selection is increasingly common in more affluent groups, only poor families are eligible. There is little in the way of public campaigning. “We are still groping for what to

tell them," says Mr Shiva Kumar.

To the east, however, Beijing's carrot-and-stick policies – coupled with rapid economic changes – are having some impact. After two decades of a worsening gender imbalance – severely exacerbated by the one-child policy adopted in 1979 – the newborn sex ratio has stabilised, while the excess of boys has even begun to go into reverse in some regions.

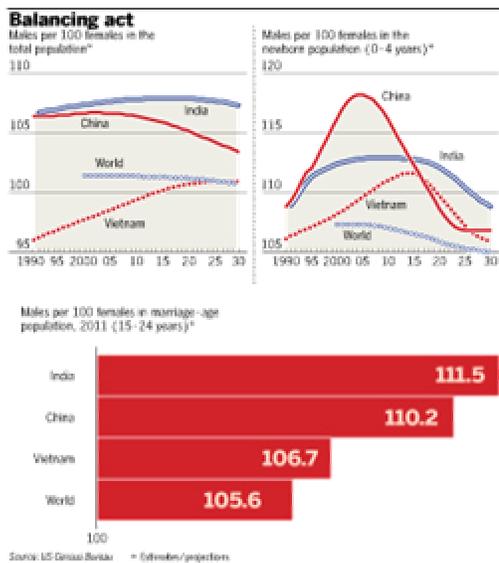
In any case, says Cai Yong of the University of North Carolina, China's imbalance may never have been as severe as figures showed, since many girls' births were simply never registered. "School enrolment data suggest that the sex ratio of school-aged children is not as high as sex ratio at birth, suggesting that a considerable number of girls are 'hidden' in the population," he argues.

In China, sons are increasingly seen as the greater financial burden. Faced with growing competition for brides, young men must save to buy an apartment before they can marry. Meanwhile, as growing industrialisation brings more job opportunities in factories, women's economic value and independence has risen too.

The expansion of the social safety net into rural areas has changed the value of girls and boys, too. As pensions become more common, parents grow less eager to have sons. Women's improving economic situation also provides more autonomy to support their own parents, compared to when they were dependent on their husbands. "Sons bring economic pressure ... a daughter is a warm jacket for a mother when she is old," says Zhang Yun, who lives in Shanghai.

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Yet China will live with the consequences of its intense son preference for decades to come. Its 2010 census showed 34m more men than women – comparable, says retired military officer Yao Cheng, who runs Huijiawang, a charity dedicated to rescuing abducted children, to the male population of France. "What if all the men of France did not get married?"



One result is a growing trade in young girls and toddlers, who are abducted and sold to families to be raised as future brides. Many young women from Vietnam and Burma are also trafficked, or otherwise sent, into China for the same purpose.

The impact on Chinese savings rates, too, is significant. Wei Shangjin, a professor at Columbia University, believes parents accumulating wealth for their sons' marriages helped drive the rise in private savings between 1990 and 2005, exacerbating global trade imbalances.

Professor Li Jianmin, a demographer at Nankai University, warns of the outlook for childless males. "Elder care for these single men will be a social problem," he says.

In India the trends are even more worrying. There has been some improvement in the northern states with the most severe imbalances for children below the age of seven in 2001 – Punjab and Haryana – though rates are still 118.2 and 120.5 boys per hundred girls respectively. At the same time, the tendency to prevent the birth of daughters is spreading to regions that once had much healthier balances, leading to a worsening of the national ratio.

This has alarmed a political establishment that once assumed the bias against daughters was caused by poverty and would fade with rising wealth. Authorities are debating how better to enforce the ban on sex selective abortions and are re-evaluating existing incentive schemes.

Yet experts believe more fundamental changes to the status of Indian women – better education and job opportunities – are required to give greater value to daughters and reverse the trend. These shifts are beginning, though at a far slower pace than in rapidly industrialising China.

"If the situation of women in India were to radically transform tomorrow," says the UN's Ms Singh, "parents would make different decisions about having daughters."

Additional reporting by Girija Shivakumar, Ben Bland and Shirley Chen

China's child brides: Brought at Birth, raised to marry her 'brother' and deliver a boy for the family

The 28-year-old in stonewashed jeans and white lace top says always knew she was destined to marry her brother – she just did not know there was anything unusual about it, writes *Patti Waldmeir*. "My parents bought me for Rmb260," she says of the couple that raised her from infancy so that she could marry their son. "I was a bit expensive," she says, blushing with pride.

The woman, who is afraid to give her name, is one of a growing number of "child brides" in China – girls sold as infants to families frantic for daughters-in-law, in a culture acutely short of women. Trafficking in child brides has grown dramatically in recent years, demographers say – a sign of the high price that China has begun to pay for its gender imbalance.

Sitting in a diner in Hefei, an up-and-coming city in the province of Anhui, which has long had one of the country's worst gender imbalances, the young woman insists that she is devoted to the parents who bought her – and marrying their son was the least she could do for them.

"My parents treated me very well," she says. "If I was starving, and there was only one bowl of rice left, I would give it to my mother," she says of "Ma", the woman who bought her.

"Ma" told her that the family adopted her because they wanted a daughter. But in the village in Fujian province where she grew up, and where many of her friends were also child brides – four within the extended family – everyone knew the score: they were purchased for procreation.

And not just any kind of procreation: the goal was to produce a son and heir, and nothing less would do. So when at age 18 she bore a daughter, she was pressured to stop nursing so that she could conceive again immediately. Not until she delivered a boy did the family formalise her union with a marriage licence (procured with a Rmb500 bribe to a local official).

Her children, nine and 11, are now asking awkward questions. "Why is your mother the same as Dad's mother?" they ask. "Why don't we have a maternal grandmother?"

Finding that missing grandmother is now a necessity because the marriage has failed. Her adoptive family says it does not care if she takes the girl but she cannot have her son. She has enlisted *Huijiawang*, a volunteer group that helps reunite child brides and other abducted children with their families. She hopes that, if she finds her birth parents, they will help her obtain a divorce.

The chances are slim: she was probably sold to a go-between – known as a "matchmaker" – who may not know the birth parents. Having been trafficked at less than one month old, and unlike many other child brides, she has no memory of her birth name or even her hometown.

Brother-husband and sister-wife and children – they are all victims of China's gender imbalance. And, as the bulge of surplus men reaches marriageable age, demographers say the child bride problem could get worse before it gets better.

Additional reporting by Shirley Chen

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