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New “common sense”:
Family-planning policy
and sex ratio in Viet Nam

Executive Summary

VIET NAM



United Nations Population Fund



One of the most alarming changes in Asia's population dynamics in recent decades has been a dramatic increase in the proportion of males within its local populations. Unfortunately, these changes were not identified immediately, due to lack of data. A new phenomenon was underway: sex ratio at birth was – and is – tilting towards boys, in a way that had never before been recorded. Indeed, if the continent's overall sex ratio was the same as elsewhere in the world, in 2005 Asia's population would have included almost 163 million more women and girls.

The ramifications of such an imbalance will not only continue for decades, but will affect an enormous proportion of the Asian population. While men of marriageable age will suddenly find a dramatic shortage of potential brides, it is girls and women of all ages who will truly feel the brunt of this dynamic. In addition to forecasted increases in gender-based violence, trafficking, discrimination and general vulnerability of women and girls, it is crucial to understand what has led to this imbalance in the first place: a deeply rooted preference for sons, which leads parents across cultures and geographic locations to decide against allowing a girl to live, even before her birth, and the increasing availability of technology that enables them to do so with ease.

The issue of sex selection drives directly at the core of UNFPA's central priorities of addressing sexual and reproductive health and rights of all women, men, children and young people; using population data to inform policies and programmes; and ensuring that gender equality is a core part of all interventions. UNFPA has taken a central role in facilitating the awareness-building process on the issue of sex selection, within countries struggling with the growing impact of 'missing girls' and others who are experiencing spill over effects as well as at the regional level. On the understanding that effective strategies cannot be formulated in the absence of solid data, UNFPA has commissioned a series of studies in four Asian countries, some for the first time, looking at sex-selection practices as well as a regional analysis to provide insight into the causes, manifestations and future scenarios that will confront Asian societies unless concerted action is taken.



UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, is an international development agency that promotes the right of every woman, man and child to enjoy a life of health and equal opportunity. UNFPA supports countries in using population data for policies and programmes to reduce poverty and to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, every young person is free of HIV/AIDS, and every girl and woman is treated with dignity and respect

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Viet Nam

Viet Nam has the third-largest population in Southeast Asia, with 84 million people in 2006. Population growth rates vary substantially between provinces, as do local rates of sex ratio at birth (SRB), which nationally stands at around 110 male births for every 100 female births. The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the issue of pre-natal sex selection in Viet Nam, including the causes and influencing factors.

Key thematic findings from this inquiry show strong son preference, with respondents willing to share both their knowledge and strategies concerning how to give birth to a son. It can be firmly stated that both men and women respondents have adopted various tactics to meet the desire for sons. These strategies range through a spectrum from the traditional to the scientific, while women seem to be more active than men in seeking various strategies.

A variety of conditions must be present for the practice of sex selection, which causes the sex ratio in Viet Nam to be skewed toward males. First, there exists an adherence to a tradition of son preference, with sons being considered necessary for the continuity of family lineage, as well as for ancestor worship and security in old age. The common trend found here is that almost all people want to have a son as their first child – or even two sons, to be “safe” about the future of the family. To some respondents, having a son is associated with masculinity (of being a “real” man), and with being blessed. Furthermore, a woman’s status in her family depends significantly on her “ability” to produce a son. Second, Viet Nam has pursued a policy of fertility decline since the 1960s, which has likewise affected sex selection. Third, the accessibility to hi-tech ultrasound services at public and private clinics is allowing for pre-natal sex selection.

Regarding the public’s perception and understanding of Viet Nam’s sex-ratio imbalance, despite general awareness most Vietnamese remain unconcerned with the long-term consequences of sex-ratio imbalance, and do not conceive of the issue beyond their individual perspective. In contrast, local leaders and health providers are aware of the consequences relating to sex-ratio imbalance. They not only express strong awareness of lessons learnt from China and India, but also recognize that son preference remains a prime factor in decision-making regarding the composition of a family.

Key conclusions

- Sex ratio at birth is not a significant problem now, but could be within a decade;
- Viet Nam is in almost the same situation now as China was ten years ago, in terms of the socio-cultural context of its sex-ratio imbalance

Way forward

- Institute more comprehensive awareness campaigns on the consequences of sex-ratio imbalance;
- Begin to wear down the tradition of son preference by educating the public on issues of gender equality;
- Promote stories of successful women, and involve leaders in disseminating gender-equality messages;
- Existing social policies such as social security, social welfare and basic social services should be improved.