

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** urges leaders to fulfill the commitments they made at the 1994 Cairo Population Conference. The consensus urged governments **"to take the necessary measures to prevent infanticide, prenatal sex selection, trafficking in girl children."**



STOP SEX SELECTION: A Threat to Women's Lives, Human Rights

IN MANY COUNTRIES, the number of male and female adults is roughly the same. This is due to a slightly higher number of male births (usually about 105 boys for every 100 girls), offset by more deaths among males than among females at all ages. These features are recognized as the main characteristics of human populations. However, in China, Azerbaijan and Armenia, it is currently observed that as many as 115 male births take place for every 100 female births.

This skewed population sex ratio reflects a preference for sons, in combination with increasing access to new sex-selection technology. The result is millions of "missing" women – a growing crisis for women and for their societies.

THE SITUATION

The deliberate elimination of girls and women through neglect and discrimination has long been documented in India, China, and other parts of Asia and other regions.

- As a result of son preference, the sex ratio of the whole population has for decades been higher in Asia (105 males of all ages to 100 females of all ages) than anywhere else. A more recent trend, also specific to Asia, lies in the increase in the sex ratio at birth, which can be related to increased access since the 1980s to new technologies that allow foetal sex determination. This trend has particularly affected the most populated countries in Asia, such as China and India, as well as some Eastern European and Central Asian countries, such as Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.
- In Viet Nam, the sex ratio at birth was normal for the region in 2000 at an estimated 106.2 boys to 100 girls, but rose to 112.1 in 2008.^[iii]
- Declining family size can raise pressure for sons: in China in 2005, for example, the sex ratio at birth for first children was 108 boys to 100 girls; for second children it was 143 boys to 100 girls and for third children it was 156 to 100.^[iii]

- Son preference reflects socio-economic influences and deep-rooted traditions where sons alone inherit property, care for ageing parents, conduct funeral rites and carry on the family name, while daughters may require dowries and leave their families once they are married.
- Women may fear violence, ostracism or desertion if they bear girls. They need counselling and support to resist family and social pressure and to be able to make informed decisions.
- In an unexpected finding, sex selection sometimes occurs more in prosperous urban areas and among educated people than among rural poor families with less schooling.
- Son preference can turn females into commodities, leading to harmful and unethical practices, such as prenatal sex selection, infanticide, neglect, discrimination and violence against girls and women, including abduction, rape, incest, trafficking and other forms of exploitation.
- Recent research estimates that 2,000 girls go "missing" in India every day as a result of illegal sex determination and female elimination – 700,000 per year, or 10 million between 1981 and 2005.^[iv]

CURRENT TRENDS

- Cohorts of Asian young people with skewed sex ratios are now reaching adulthood, showing some indication of bride trafficking, polyandry and so on.
- The greatest impact is on poorer men who may be unable to find wives, and on poor women who may be trafficked, sometimes "purchased" for joint use by several brothers.
- In the only known successful campaign against sex selection, the Republic of Korea targeted health-care providers and religious leaders with ethics-based arguments. Its sex ratio at birth fell from 116 boys to 100 girls in 1991 to near-normal in recent years.

■ Producers and providers of sex-selection technology and services may see it as a lucrative industry: a beta ultrasound machine costs only a few hundred U.S. dollars in India and tests are widely advertised for only \$15-30.

■ While access to amniocentesis, ultrasound sex testing and other health services are necessary to safeguard women's lives, a 1986 study found that 64 per cent of gynaecologists interviewed in India's Uttar Pradesh region were performing amniocentesis solely for sex determination. Only 10 per cent of cases were for detecting genetic defects.^[v]

■ A 1994 law, strengthened in 2003, made it illegal in India to test the sex of a foetus for non-medical reasons, with penalties including up to three years in prison. However, enforcement has been weak.

■ Newer sex-determination methods can be ordered over the Internet for \$30-40, further making it increasingly difficult to enforce any bans.

THE UNFPA RESPONSE

■ For more than 20 years, UNFPA has called attention to issues raised by son preference by building media interest, supporting community networks to advocate against sex selection, and sensitizing health-care providers, young people and faith and community leaders to view sex selection as discrimination against women.

■ UNFPA works with governments to improve and harmonize data on sex at birth and infant death. However, more than half of Indian children are born or die at home and may not be registered.

■ UNFPA promotes legislative efforts to reduce son preference by ensuring women's rights to inherit-

ance, employment and pensions; access to credit and political participation; and the enforcing bans on sex-selective procedures.

■ UNFPA supports regulations to limit and control the use of technology that assists in sex selection, limiting aggressive advertising and requiring registration of equipment and clinics and usage.

■ UNFPA's 2008-2013 Strategic Plan calls for sex-selection issues to be included in dialogues and reports on the Millennium Development Goals, reproductive health-care studies and other experience-sharing international forums, as well as online.

UNFPA's efforts are 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."* (Paragraph 4.16). The consensus agreement also 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. One of the aims should be to eliminate excess mortality of girls, wherever such a pattern exists."* (Paragraph 4.17). It then urges governments to *"take the necessary measures to prevent infanticide, prenatal sex selection, trafficking in girl children..."* (Paragraph 4.23).

The Key Actions on Implementing the Cairo Programme add: *"Governments should give priority to developing programmes and policies that foster norms and attitudes of zero tolerance for harmful and discriminatory attitudes, including son preference, which can result in harmful and unethical practices such as prenatal sex selection, discrimination and violence against the girl child."* (Paragraph 48).

[i] UN Population Division, World Population Prospects 2008: <http://esa.un.org/unpd/index.asp>

[ii] General Statistics Office: "The 2008 Population Change," Labour Force and Family Planning Survey: Major Findings. Ha Noi. 2009

[iii] UNFPA, Note on Sex Selection, http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2010/guidenote_prenatal_sexselection.pdf,

[iv] Kulkarni, P. M., Estimations of Missing Girls at Birth and Juvenile Ages in India, Centre for the Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, UNFPA, New Delhi, September 2007. http://www.unfpa.org/gender/docs/missinggirlsatbirth_india.pdf

[v] Mishra, U.S., et al., Declining Child Sex Ratio (0-6 Years) in India: A review of Literature and Annotated Bibliography, Centre for Development Studies, UNFPA, New Delhi, p. 9 <http://india.unfpa.org/drive/Bibliography.pdf>, Accessed 9/6/11

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES:

1) Addressing pre-natal sex selection in India (a fact sheet): <http://india.unfpa.org/drive/Pre-NatalSexSelection.pdf>

2) Trends in Sex Ratio at Birth and Estimates of Girls Missing at Birth in India: <http://india.unfpa.org/drive/SRBBooklet.pdf>

3) Why do daughters go missing: <http://india.unfpa.org/drive/Whydodaughtersgomissingwebcopy.pdf>

4) Sex-Ratio Imbalance in Asia: Trends, Consequences and Policy Responses (four case studies) http://www.unfpa.org/gender/case_studies.htm