FAQs on Sex Selection
15 June 2011

“To eliminate 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…Governments are urged to take the necessary measures to prevent infanticide, prenatal sex selection”—Cairo Population Consensus

1. Which countries does this practice take place and which countries are the worst offenders?

The issue is not which countries are worst. There are great variations also within countries. The issue is that wherever this is a problem it needs to be addressed urgently through a set of measures that address the root causes and not just bans on technology.

If pressed for numbers: In most countries, the normal sex ratio at birth varies between 102 and 106 males per 100 females. In several countries, particularly in some South, East and Central Asian countries, the sex ratio is higher than normal and a ratio as high as 130 males to 100 females has been observed in some places. China, India, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Viet Nam are among the countries where there have been increases in sex ratios at birth whereas in the Republic of Korea after the sex ratios peaked in the 1990s they have decreased.

Within these countries there are also disparities in the skewed male-to-female sex ratios at birth based on socio-economic status, urban-rural and birth order.

- In China, the ratio is more skewed in rural areas, but is also increasing in cities.
- In India, more skewed ratios were observed in the western parts of the country than southern. However, the 2011 census data show that this practice is also an issue in other parts including the south and north-east. Contrary to what some may assume, it occurs more among the more educated and affluent households.
- In general, there is also a marked preference for the male child after families have their first child if the first child is a girl - i.e. second, third, fourth child.

2. What factors lead to this practice?
Sex selection and skewed sex ratios reflects strong son preference which in turn results from a tradition of inheritance that goes to sons, a reliance on sons to provide economic support and ensure security in old age and to perform death rites.

As a result, women are often under immense family and societal pressure to produce sons. These and other social norms result in families placing greater value on sons than daughters. Failure to do so may lead to consequences that include violence, rejection by the marital family or even death.

In addition, there has been a general trend towards declining family size, occasionally fostered by stringent policies restricting the number of children people are allowed to have, reinforcing a strong social preference for boys.

3. How have countries responded to it?

Governments have undertaken a number of measures in an attempt to address sex-ratio imbalances. For example,

a) **legal restrictions on the use of technology or abortion for sex selection purposes** have been put in place in five Asian and South Asian countries. These restrictions include laws that prohibit determination and disclosure of the sex of the foetus (except on medical grounds), those that prohibit abortion for sex-selection purposes and those that bar any advertising relating to prenatal sex determination.

b) **Supportive policy reforms** have been put in place in several countries. In India, for example, the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act passed in 2004 makes it possible for daughters to inherit family property at par with sons, and the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act passed in 2007 that requires both sons and daughters to be responsible for the care of parents.

c) **Incentives for families with girls.** Some countries provide direct subsidies at the time of birth, scholarship programmes, school quotas and financial incentives to families with girls.

4. Are there countries where this practice has been successfully reversed and if so, what has worked in these countries?

Yes, the Republic of South Korea successfully reversed the imbalanced sex ratio from a high of 116 in the 1990s to 107 by 2007. The country experienced two decades of exceptional economic growth. Fundamental changes in society included an increasing desire for small families, urbanization, a greater participation of women in the workforce with better employment opportunities, and the creation an old-age pension system that enabled parents to have retirement savings for the old-age, reducing dependence on male children. These factors contributed to an increase in the status and value of women. Laws
allowing women rights were beneficial, as was a Love Your Daughter media campaign. In addition, the health system in the Republic of Korea was able to effectively regulate sex determination tests.

5. **What are the challenges in ending this practice?**

Despite the introduction of laws to prohibit the use of ultrasound technology for sex selection, it is difficult to enforce them. It is difficult to prove that any particular ultrasound examination was used to determine sex rather than for other appropriate and legitimate reasons. An ultrasound examination has many appropriate medical uses, such as determining the age of the foetus, monitoring its healthy development and detecting abnormalities. Communicating the sex of the foetus can be done discretely, even silently, and prosecuting offenders is, therefore, very difficult. Similarly, proving that a particular abortion was sex-selective is equally difficult.

A key lesson learned from the experiences of the countries that have responded to this practice in various ways has been that these laws have largely had little effect in isolation from broader measures to address underlying social and gender inequalities. There is broad agreement that combating son preference requires changing social norms and empowering girls and women. These long-term processes will require sustained effort and political commitment.

6. **Should these countries then just restrict access to abortion for women?**

Countries should abide by their commitments under the Programme of Action of the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development. It says that where abortion is legal it should be safe.

7. **The practice of gender-biased sex selection and increasing sex ratios at birth has long been observed, so why is it relevant now and why is the UN issuing this statement now?**

The statement addresses a real need and social problem that governments, civil society, communities and women are facing. The UN has long been concerned with women's and girls' health and rights and discrimination against them. We see this as a contribution to the search for solutions that address discrimination against women and girls and support their rights, both long-standing concerns of the Human Rights Council.

Furthermore, UNFPA has been campaigning for the rights of women for a long time. Moreover, son preference and sex selection were discouraged by governments at the 1994 Cairo Population Conference.

8. **What are the recommendations for countries to address this practice?**
a. We need more reliable data to understand how big the problem is, what are the factors driving it and its consequences, and which strategies improve the situation.

b. We need to promote the responsible use of technology without reinforcing discrimination, inequities and without restricting women's access to services. (Technology is not the root cause of sex selection.)

c. Putting in place measures and policies to promote gender equality for women and girls including through education, equal rights to inherit and own property, incentives for families with girls, and increasing the value of girls.

d. Advocacy and communication and working with communities to increase awareness and support change to reduce the need and demand for this practice.