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Imbalanced Sex Ratio at Birth and
Comprehensive Intervention in China

Executive Summary

CHINA



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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Discrimination against girls has existed throughout Chinese history. However, the abnormally high sex ratio at birth (SRB) and excess female child mortality (EFCM) recorded in China in recent years reflect not only women's continuing low social status, but also the deteriorating survival environment for girls. This paper reviews studies on survival rates of girls in China, as well as the corresponding intervention activities of the Government of China.

Using data from several past censuses and studies, this paper analyzes the current uneven sex ratio and high mortality rates among girls in China. It discusses the causes of the deteriorating survival environment for girls, as well as its demographic and social implications. The discrimination against girls occurs in both pre-natal and post-natal periods: sex-selective abortion of female foetuses leads to abnormally high SRB, while neglect of girls results later in excess female child mortality. The sex ratio of children age 0-4 in China has been abnormal for the past two decades, a trend caused mainly by high SRB and EFCM. Indeed, SRB has increased steadily since the 1980s, with higher levels observed in rural areas, increasing values with birth order (the second, third born, etc.), and abnormally high levels in provinces with strong traditional culture.

The reasons behind China's imbalanced sex ratio are complex, and vary in different periods and areas. The patrilineal family system, coupled with the country's traditional culture, constitute the fundamental root of son preference. Meanwhile, sustained low fertility, immature social-security systems, and the lower status accorded to Chinese women are the practical conditions for son preference. Finally, sex-selection services for non-medical reasons-though illegal-are still available and affordable. In addition, discriminatory treatment against girls in curative medical care also directly contributes to high SRB and EFCM. These subsequently lead to imbalance of the sex structure of China's population, which will have a significant impact on critical socio-demographic issues in the future, such as population size, ageing, a "marriage squeeze", women's rights and social stability.

The Chinese Government has adopted and carried out a series of policies, laws and strategic actions to address the issue of abnormally high SRB, in order to improve survival rates among girls, as well as to increase women's status, and promote gender equality. A comprehensive programme to address these issues has now been scaled up to the countrywide level.

Key conclusions

- Sex selection is most prevalent in rural areas, particularly those that are very traditional;
- The reasons behind China's imbalanced sex ratio are complex, which will have a significant impact on critical socio-demographic issues in the future;
- Both comprehensive programme implementation by the Government and participation of civil society are crucial in addressing sex-ratio imbalance.

Way forward

- Promote “Care for Girls” campaign and participation of civil society;
- Introduce workable pension systems;
- Promote equal rights to enhance gender equality.