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Characteristics of Sex-Ratio Imbalance
in India and Future Scenarios

Executive Summary

INDIA



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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India

The proportion of boys in India's child population has been on the rise for the past twenty years, in a way that parallels the experience of other Asian countries, such as China or South Korea. For the most part, this development has been caused by the increasing practice of sex selection, which has led to unusually high values of the sex ratio at birth.

This case-study analysis looks into demographic trends observed in India since 1981, and examines the evolution of the sex ratio over the last decades. India's system of gender discrimination has moved from a regime characterized by high fertility, female infanticide and excess child mortality among girls, to a modern regime based on pre-natal sex selection. At the same time, the significant variations in sex ratio at birth point to the interplay of social, cultural and economic factors in gender preferences.

The paper presents the results of demographic projections conducted for 2006-2050 for India as a whole, as well as for Northwest India, which has been especially affected by rising levels of sex-ratio imbalance. In particular, the future consequences of skewed sex ratios at birth on India's age and sex distribution are examined, as well as their potential implications for social and economic organization, such as a possible marriage squeeze due to a surplus of boys and men in the coming decades.

It is crucial to examine the underlying factors behind the recent reduction in the proportion of female children, distinguishing between the supply- and demand-side factors. The paper reviews the role of new technology in the recent rise of sex ratio in relation to the development of the private health sector; as well as the different social and economic underpinnings of son preference in India in light of traditional attitudes towards girls, as well as recent social change.

Finally, the paper turns to policy responses and future prospects. A review is presented of the legislation introduced by the Government, starting with the prohibition of sex-selective abortion and the ways it can be implemented for increased effectiveness. The Indian response has also included increased and diverse advocacy and sensitization activities, with the press playing a key role in positively informing the discourse on the issue. Recent regulations and dimensions of social change likely to affect gender relations

favourably are also reviewed, as are structural factors and mechanisms that may, on the contrary, cause a further rise in sex-ratio levels in other parts of India.

Key conclusions

- Sex selection is most prevalent in urban areas amongst higher economic quintiles, and even for these groups the practice continues to be fuelled by a patriarchal structure that believes in, values and promotes son preference;
- While sex selection is particularly prevalent in Northwest India, the ideologies and social structures that give rise to this practice could easily spread to other areas, as is already taking place. With income and education not being protective, more girls are likely to go missing with continued modernization and upward economic growth.

Way forward

- Fight gender discrimination; invest in addressing socio-economic constraints that limit the ability of girls to lead a life of equal opportunity;
- Publicize future hardships for families and communities based on imbalanced sex ratio;
- Make eliminating sex selection an immediate priority for Government and civil society, as the ramifications will be felt for decades to come for men, women and communities.