



**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 Lives of Women and Girls

The sex ratio at birth (SRB) ranges from 104 to 106 male births per 100 female births in most countries of the world, but its level has gradually increased over the last 25 years in several Asian countries, particularly in China and India.

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

### FACTS AND FIGURES

#### Sex ratio at birth:

- Albania: 111.5 in 2008
- Armenia: 115.8 in 2008
- Azerbaijan: 117.6 in 2009
- China: 118.1 in 2009
- Georgia: 111.9 in 2006
- India: 110.6 in 2006-08
- Montenegro: 111.6 in 2005-09
- Pakistan: 109.9 in 2007
- Viet Nam: 111.2 in 2010

#### Sex ratio at birth by birth order:

- Armenia: 106.8 (first birth), 110.4 (second birth) and 176.9 (third birth) in 2001-08
- China: 108.4 (first birth), 143.2 (second birth) and 156.4 (third birth) in 2005.
- India: 111 (first birth), 112 second birth) and 116 (third birth) in 2001.
- Viet Nam: 110.2 (first birth), 109 (second birth) and 115.5 (third birth) in 2009.

*Source: Country's Birth Registration; Census; Surveys: UN Population Division*



as some Eastern European and Central Asian countries, such as Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

- Declining family size can raise pressure for sons: for example, in China in 2005, the SRB was 108.4 for the first birth; 143.2 for the second birth; and 156.4 for the third birth. In Viet Nam in 2009, it was 110.2 for the first birth; 109 for the second birth; and 115.5 for third birth.
- 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<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

## 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 or sometimes “purchased” for joint use by several brothers.
- In the only known successful campaign against sex selection, the Republic of Korea targeted healthcare 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<sup>2</sup>.
- 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.

---

<sup>2</sup> 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



- Newer sex-determination methods can be ordered over the Internet for \$30-40, 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 healthcare providers, young people and faith and community leaders to view sex selection as discrimination against women and girls.
- 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 inheritance, 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.
- A joint interagency statement (OHCHR, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women and WHO) in 2011 reaffirms the commitment of United Nations agencies to encourage and support efforts by States, international and national organisations, civil society and communities to uphold the rights of girls and women and to address the multiple

manifestations of gender discrimination including the problem of imbalanced sex ratios caused by sex selection.

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).

### ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

- 1) Addressing pre-natal sex selection in India.
- 2) Trends in Sex Ratio at Birth and Estimates of Girls Missing at Birth in India.
- 3) Why do daughters go missing
- 4) Sex-Ratio Imbalance in Asia: Trends, Consequences and Policy Responses (four case studies).

