

**4th Asia Pacific Conference on
Reproductive and Sexual Health and Rights**

October 29-31, 2007
Hyderabad, India

Sex-ratio imbalance in Asia:
Trends, consequences and policy responses

Executive Summary

Regional Analysis



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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Regional overview

This paper offers a regional overview of the mechanisms and consequences of the growing gender imbalances observed today in Asia. The sex ratio at birth started to increase in East Asia from 1980-85, and in South-Central Asia from 1985-90. Meanwhile, the situation remained normal elsewhere in Asia. In some regions, this differential has reached values above 130 male births per 100 female births. There are, however, important variations in SRB levels within each country in Asia, as well as between religious, ethnic and socio-economic groups. Since, on the whole, the sex ratio itself has remained relatively stable in Asia, the growing contribution of the younger generation to the overall sex-ratio imbalance has evidently offset the opposite progress in sex ratio being made by adults, among which mortality improvements have particularly benefited the female population.

A set of population projections for two countries (China and India) and two regions therein over the 2000-50 period illustrates the potential implications of imbalanced sex ratio on society. Following different scenarios, the analysis presents in detail the long-term effects of current high SRB levels on men and women in China and India, highlighting the growing surplus number of men among adults of marriageable age.

This analysis then presents a general explanatory framework accounting for increasing sex ratio among children, examining the respective role of son preference and of the newly available sex-determination technology. The rise in sex ratio at birth is linked to the introduction of pre-natal sex selection in many Asian countries. This development followed the arrival of ultrasound and amniocentesis technologies in the late 1970s, which made it possible for parents to know in advance the sex of their child. But to changes in the supply side of sex-selection technology must be added a long list of demand factors, which, in Asia, are related to son preference: social customs, marriage costs, old-age support, amongst others. The last part of this review is devoted to the future prospects of gender imbalance in Asia. The responses by government authorities and civil-society organizations to this rising peril are discussed.

In a nutshell, the sex-ratio situation in Asia resembles a *tragedy of the commons*, wherein normal sex ratio needs to be considered as a public good - one that is currently being threatened by the opportunistic behaviour of families who want to beget more sons than are biologically determined. The main question now concerns the intensity and tempo of the sex-ratio transition in relation to spontaneous social and economic changes, and to government actions. These are, to a large extent, the dimensions that will determine the severity of the crisis, and the overall number of men, women, boys and girls affected.

Key conclusions

- Asian countries are in different phases of their sex-ratio transitions;
- Gender discrimination, son preference and the resultant unequal status of women and girls have contributed to an increasing demand for sex-selection services;
- In many regions, several generations will be affected by a severe marriage squeeze, regardless of what is done today;
- Initiatives taken today will shape the Asian society in which young generations will live tomorrow.

Way forward

- Provide better monitoring of recent trends and differentials in sex ratio at birth and other discriminatory behaviours;
- Coordinate further research on the harmful impact of imbalanced sex ratio already observed in Asia;
- Make eliminating sex selection an immediate priority for government and civil-society organizations;
- Facilitate the sharing of policy experiences across regions and countries in Asia;
- Develop strategies and interventions for greater engagement and accountability by men and boys on confronting violence against women – particularly sex selection – and for promoting gender equality, and women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights.