

Sex Imbalances at Birth:

Current trends, consequences and policy implications



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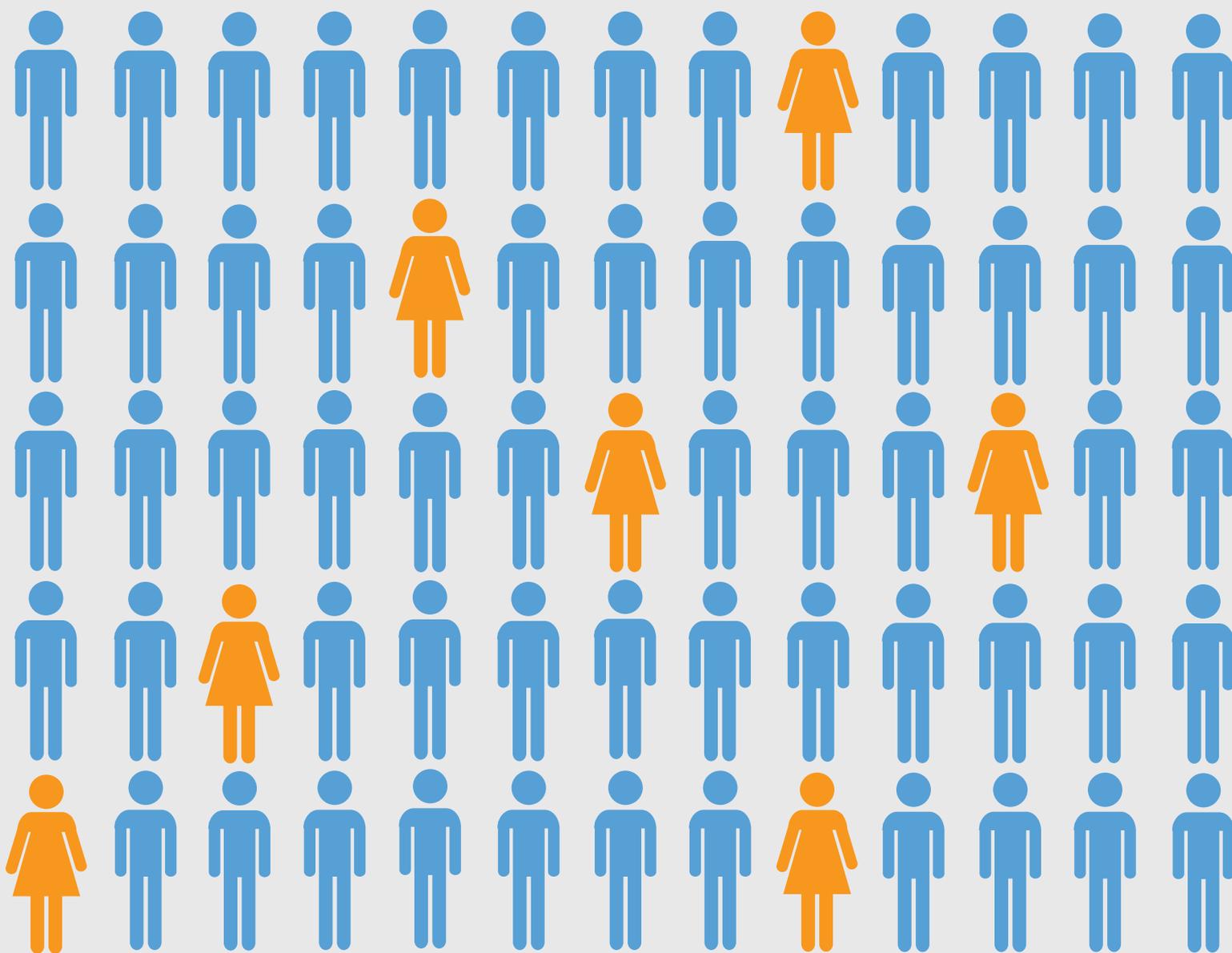
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Foreword

Sex Imbalances at birth: Current Trends, Consequences and Policy Implications

The sex ratio for the entire world population is 101 males to 100 females. Analysis of available national census data indicates that in recent decades, sex-ratio imbalances have grown in favour of boy children in a number of South Asian, East Asian and Central Asian countries. Prenatal sex selection leads today to distorted levels of sex ratio at birth (SRB), reaching between 110 and 120 male births per 100 female births in several countries pointing to the intensity of gender discrimination and son preference. The trend has shifted geographically over time, beginning in a number of Asian countries (China, India, and the Republic of Korea) in the 1980s, followed by some countries of the Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia) in the 1990s, and has more recently been followed by Montenegro, Albania, and Vietnam.

This distorted demographic masculinization, which has serious social and economic implications, is not a natural phenomenon but is achieved through a deliberate elimination of girls. The alarming trends in sex ratio imbalances at birth highlight son preference in several cultures and the misuse of scientific and technical advances in pre-natal sex-detection have combined to create these rising SRBs. Census data have often provided detailed mappings of these variations, both within countries and across social groups.

Sex selection in favour of boys is a symptom of pervasive social, cultural, political and economic injustices against women, and a manifest violation of women's human rights. The growing number of missing women (latest estimates indicate 117 million missing women) speak of a culture in which gender inequality is deeply rooted. Patriarchal structures reinforce son preference and a climate of violence and discrimination against women and girls in society. Declining fertility and rapid developments in the technology that allows parents to know the sex of the foetus have exacerbated this practice.

Present-day sex ratios among children are going to have a lasting impact on population dynamics in Asia. Projections show that in China and India, men will already vastly outnumber women of marriageable age for over two generations. Marriage simulations also suggest that the number of single men trying to marry after 2030 might exceed for several decades the corresponding number of unmarried women by 50-60% in both countries. The expected socio-economic consequences of these trends are alarming including potential risks of human rights violations such as abduction, trafficking and sale of women and girls for the purposes of marriage or sexual exploitation.

UNFPA began focusing on this issue in the 1990s, 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.” The consensus agreement urges governments to “take the necessary measures to prevent infanticide, prenatal sex selection...” and 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....”

Over the last 20 years UNFPA has been supporting national interventions and engaged in research and advocacy to raise awareness and bring the issue of sex selection and the consequent sex ratio imbalance in populations to the forefront of governments’ agendas. Working with UNFPA and independently, governments, civil society, communities and academia in the affected countries have undertaken several initiatives to reduce the trend of sex selection and rising SRBs and to address the many dimensions of this issue –in terms of human rights, social policy and public health.

At the regional level, UNFPA first convened a conference on sex ratio imbalance in the Republic of Korea in 1994 to sensitize, gather experiences and develop responses for countries in the region, followed by conferences in China in 2004, India in 2007 and Vietnam in 2011. UN inter-agency cooperation was strengthened in 2011 through the development of an interagency statement, by United Nations agencies (OHCHR, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women and WHO) noting a joint framework for action on sex selection and identifying the expertise that each agency can bring for tackling this harmful practice. An inter-regional project to support further research, capacity building and south-south collaboration will be supported over the coming three years by UNFPA Asia and the Pacific Regional Office in collaboration with the UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office.

After two decades of these efforts, it is time to see where the world stands on this issue so critical to its progress. This report offers an updated review of the latest trends and differentials in sex selection, the progress and setbacks, the causative factors which differ across countries, governmental and community initiatives and the multi-dimensional implications of rising Sex Ratio at Birth.

The report concludes with a set of recommendations to combat gender discrimination and prenatal sex selection at the national and regional level. UNFPA is committed to contribute to the reduction of gender biased sex selection in affected countries, by strengthening evidence-based national policies and programmes in addressing gender inequality and sex selection at birth.



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