

Gendercide Crisis

CAN THE LETHAL PREJUDICE AGAINST GIRLS BE CHANGED?

An estimated 160 million babies in China, India and other Asian countries have been aborted or killed over the last 30 years — just because they were girls — in a phenomenon some are calling “gendercide.” A strong cultural preference for sons has existed for centuries in Asia. But in recent decades anti-female bias has combined with falling fertility rates, China’s coercive one-child policy, new, high-tech prenatal gender-detection tools and widespread access to abortion to produce unprecedented gender imbalances in the region. An alarming shortage of females is changing the fabric of societies, with many villages so devoid of women the men cannot find wives. Governments are struggling to reverse societal attitudes toward daughters, but the changes will be too late for the 30-50 million Chinese men who over the next 20 years won’t be able to marry. The gender imbalance already has led to increased kidnapping and trafficking in women and higher prostitution rates in the area. And experts worry that having so many unmarried men could threaten stability and security, because studies show that having large numbers of unattached young males leads to “the criminalization of society.”

A New Delhi billboard encourages parents to save their baby girls. Some 600,000 female fetuses are aborted in India each year. Governments in India and other Asian countries have launched mass publicity campaigns to promote the value of daughters and reverse an alarming gender imbalance across the region.



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Gendercide Crisis

BY ROBERT KIENER

THE ISSUES

As attendants in a morgue in Karachi, Pakistan, tenderly washed the bodies of two tiny lifeless infants — both girls — volunteer Mohammed Saleem explained that they had been found dead in a garbage dump.

“They can only have been one or two days old” when they were left to die, he said.¹

In another Karachi morgue a visitor was shown a walk-in freezer containing five linen pouches, each about the size of a loaf of bread. Inside each was the tiny corpse of a newborn, also abandoned at birth.

Such gruesome scenes are common in Pakistan, where last year more than 1,200 newborns were killed and abandoned — about 100 a month.² About nine out of 10 of the victims were girls.³

“Sometimes they hang them, and sometimes they kill by the knife, and sometimes we find bodies which have been burned,” said Anwar Kazmi, a manager of the Edhi Foundation, Pakistan’s largest private social service agency.⁴ The number of such murders in Pakistan was up 20 percent in 2010 over 2009, and many officials say hundreds of other bodies are never found.⁵

Why is this horrific slaughter of infants happening? In Pakistan, as in several other countries, girls are often killed at birth or aborted because they are viewed as economic liabilities for whom an expensive dowry could be required. Boys are preferred because in such cultures males traditionally care for their aging parents, while daughters leave home to



AFP/Getty Images/Philippe Lopez

Far more boys than girls are born in China, creating a massive shortage of females. Abortions of female fetuses have skyrocketed since 1980, when prenatal gender-detection technology came into widespread use just as China was instituting its one-child population-control policy. The resulting shortage of females means that by 2030, when these two young boys from Shanghai will be looking for brides, only one in five Chinese men — up to 50 million — won’t be able to find a wife.

care for their husband and his family. Many other girls die soon after birth from neglect or starvation — part of what some experts call “a global war on baby girls.”⁶

Indeed, over the last 30 years at least 160 million baby girls have been aborted or killed because of their sex in South and East Asia alone, according to demographers such as Christophe Guilmoto, at the Paris-based Research Institute for Development (IRD).⁷

“The number of these ‘missing girls’ is more than the entire female popu-

lation of the United States,” says award-winning journalist Mara Hvistendahl, a Beijing-based correspondent for *Science* magazine and author of the 2011 book *Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys Over Girls and the Consequences of a World Full of Men*.⁸

In addition to China and India, “sex-selective abortions,” or pregnancies terminated solely because of the gender of the fetus, have claimed thousands of female lives in Taiwan, the Balkans, Armenia, Georgia and even among some immigrant populations in the United States and other industrialized nations.

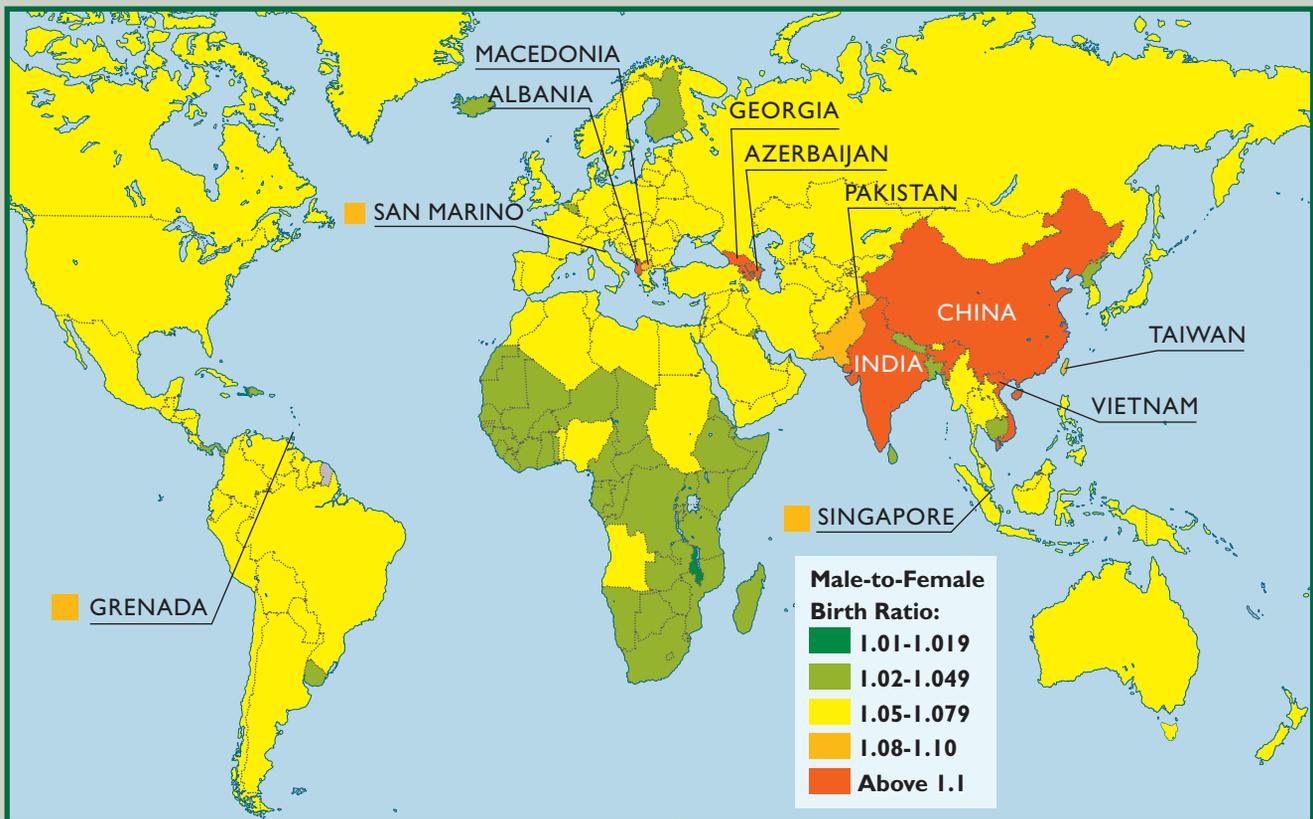
And the toll is rising, as modern ultrasound and abortion facilities have become increasingly widespread in recent decades. Up to 12 million girls were aborted in India alone over the past 30 years, according to a recent *Lancet* study. While about 2 million girls’ deaths were attributed to gender-selective abortions during the 1980s, the toll in India increased to 6 million during the 2000s — or about 600,000 per year.⁹

Although abortion statistics are not generally released in China, the state-run media reported in 2009 that more than 13 million abortions were performed that year alone.¹⁰ While no one really knows how many of those were female, a Chinese researcher in 1996 found that 85 percent of all aborted fetuses in rural Zhejiang Province, on the southeastern coast, were females.¹¹ And demographers point to China’s heavily skewed ratio of male-to-female births to further confirm that the vast majority of abortions must have been females.

China and India Have the Most Male Births

Far more boys than girls are born in China, India and a handful of other countries with traditional preferences for boys. According to demographers, at least 160 million baby girls have been aborted or killed after birth because of their sex in South and East Asia alone over the last 30 years — more than the entire female population of the United States. Experts say the increases are the result of easy access to inexpensive sonograms (to determine fetal sex) and gender-selective abortions. China's one-child policy is also blamed for part of the country's gender imbalance: 113 boys are born for every 100 girls (a 1.13 ratio of male-to-female births).

Comparing Global Sex Ratios



Source: "Sex Ratio," The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2018.html>; and "Pakistan Demographic Survey," 2007. Map by Lewis Agrell

Worldwide, between 102 and 106 males normally are born for every 100 females — a ratio that has held constant for as long as populations have been measured. In China, however, that ratio jumped to around 108 males per 100 females in the late 1980s, and to a significantly skewed 124 males by the early 2000s. Today, according to the United Nations Population

Fund, 113 boys are born for every 100 girls in China; the ratio is 112 to 100 in India and 110 per 100 females in Pakistan.¹² (See chart, p. 480.)

Population experts say such high sex ratios are biologically impossible without outside intervention. "These sex ratios have become completely unhinged," wrote Nicholas Eberstadt, a demographer with the conservative

American Enterprise Institute (AEI). "This is a phenomenon utterly without natural precedent in human history."¹³

"Girls are seen as a burden, as a property which belongs to somebody else, so people see that as a waste of money and the wasting of an education of a girl," explained Bhagyashri Denge, executive director of Plan India, a children's advocacy group in New Delhi.

“Then, when the girl gets married, the families have a big, heavy dowry.”¹⁴

In a handful of Asian cultures, tradition obligates brides’ families to pay cash or goods to a groom’s family. (See sidebar, p. 478.) Although banned in India since 1961, the practice is still widespread, especially in rural areas, where a dowry can cost a family several times its annual income.

As a World Health Organization (WHO) report notes, “Female infanticide is still practiced in many parts of the world, sometimes through direct violence but also by intentional neglect or starvation. This is particularly the case where male children are considered more valuable than females. This attitude may also be manifested in traditions such as costly dowry obligations placed on the families of prospective brides.”¹⁵

Many refer to the prejudice for males as “son preference,” and it is reflected in ancient traditions. A Chinese poem from the first millennium B.C. proclaims: “When a son is born/Let him sleep on the bed/Clothe him with fine clothes/And give him jade to play . . . /When a daughter is born,/Let her sleep on the ground,/Wrap her in common wrappings,/And give broken tiles to play.”¹⁶

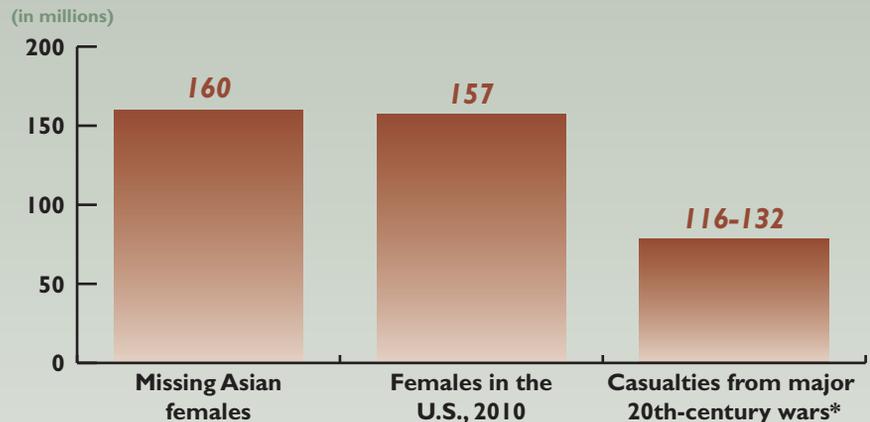
In India, the well-known saying, “raising a daughter is like watering your neighbor’s garden,” reflects the belief that sons are typically seen as breadwinners who will eventually care for their aging parents, while daughters will leave to take care of their husband’s family. An Indian proverb bluntly notes, “Eighteen goddess-like daughters are not equal to one son with a hump.”

Although cultural preferences for sons go back for millennia, the number of female abortions has skyrocketed since 1980, when China instituted its one-child policy, aimed at controlling runaway population growth. That’s also the year when the General Electric Co. (GE) began selling ultrasound machines

The Scope of Asia’s “Missing” Female Problem

Asia is “missing” 160 million females who were either aborted or killed at birth over the last 30 years. The total exceeds the 2010 female population of the United States as well as the total number of casualties from all of the major wars of the 20th century.

Putting Asia’s Missing Females in Perspective



* Korean War (2 million); Vietnam War (350,000); Soviet Revolution (7 million); Stalin’s Great Purge (10 million); World War I (35 million); World War II (including Holocaust and Chinese Revolutions) (62-78 million).

Sources: Christophe Z. Guilmoto, “Sex-ratio imbalance in Asia: Trends, consequences and policy responses,” UNFPA; U.S. Census Bureau; Digital History; Spartacus Educational; BBC News; PBS; Telegraph, October 2008

in Asia, allowing a fetus’ gender to be determined safely and cheaply.

Use of the machines spread rapidly in India and China. A clinic ad in India, for instance, reminds customers of the huge economic costs of bearing a female child: “Better 5,000 rupees [about \$100] now than 500,000 later.”¹⁷

Sex-selective abortions boomed as patients who wanted a son, but could never bring themselves to kill a baby daughter, chose abortion. So many females were aborted that China and India eventually made it illegal for ultrasound operators to disclose the sex of the fetus to parents. Today 36,000 registered sonography centers operate in India — and countless others illegally.¹⁸

Falling birth rates also contributed to the rise in sex-selective abortions. As education and income levels rise,

women have fewer babies. In the late 1960s, for instance, the average Asian woman had 5.7 children, one of them likely a boy. By 2006 family size had dropped to 2.3 children, and the chances of having a boy had fallen to 24 percent.¹⁹ In China, meanwhile, the government decreed that couples should have only one child. To get a son, couples would often sacrifice their unborn daughter.

“It’s a combination of factors,” says demographer Eberstadt. “There is the longstanding and widespread preference for boys, rapidly spreading prenatal sex-determination technology and declining fertility rates.” *

Population-control programs funded by Western organizations, such as

* The fertility rate is the average number of children a woman has over her lifetime.

the World Bank and the International Planned Parenthood Federation, further contributed to the problem, claims Hvistendahl. Many of the programs, which advocated abortion and family planning, influenced strict population targets in China, India and elsewhere, she says.

Due to China and India's massive populations, their sex-ratio imbalances are affecting the global ratio of men to women. "The world is undergoing a demographic shift that is tilting our population in favor of men," Hvistendahl explains, predicting massive repercussions in the future.

"For example," she notes, "by 2030 one in five Chinese men will not be able to find a wife." Already there are reports of Chinese men having to import foreign brides, and human trafficking, kidnapping, forced marriages

and prostitution are on the rise — all attributed at least in part to the gender imbalance.

As demographers, human rights experts and policymakers confront what some have called a rising tide of gendercide, here are some of the questions they are asking:

Should China rescind its one-child policy?

When China introduced its one-child policy in September 1980, the government said it was a temporary measure to offset high unemployment and food shortages. "In 30 years, when our current extreme population growth eases, we can then adopt a different population policy," the Communist Party Central Committee said.²⁰

Since then, however, the policy has become a cornerstone of China's eco-

nomics and social planning, and last year, on its 30th anniversary, the government showed no signs of scrapping it.

Li Bin, head of China's National Population and Family Planning Commission, confirmed there were no immediate plans to change the policy. "Historical change doesn't come easily, and I . . . extend profound gratitude to all, to the people in particular, for their support of the national course," Li said. "So, we will stick to the family planning policy in the coming decades."²¹

According to its backers, the one-child policy has played a key role in China's stunning economic progress by:

- Reducing the nation's population growth by as much as 400 million people;
- Helping China conserve food and energy;

Banned Dowry System Perpetuates Infanticide

Families kill or abort baby girls to avoid — or get — the illegal payments.

In Sagarpur, a lower-middle-class area in New Delhi, Kulwant wept as she described how her husband and his family — desperate for a male heir — beat her regularly and forced her to have abortions until she bore a son.

After she had three daughters, she said, the family became enraged and once even tried to set her on fire. "They were angry. They didn't want girls in the family," she recalled. "They wanted boys so they could get fat dowries" from the brides' families.¹

The mother-in-law told Kulwant that her husband would divorce her "if I didn't bear a son," Kulwant recalled. Whenever she got pregnant again, the family forced her to have a sonogram to determine the sex of the fetus and then ordered her to abort female fetuses three times until she finally produced a boy.

Such stories are commonplace in India and other countries where a preference for sons is driven in part by the dowry system, a traditional marriage custom that India outlawed 40 years ago. Dowries — once observed in much of the ancient world — have disappeared in most cultures but still hold sway in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and parts of China.

Dowries typically are cash or goods, such as expensive television sets and appliances, that a bride's family must give the groom and his family at marriage. The amount demanded today

often can be the equivalent of several years of income, which can ruin a poor family. Moreover, dissatisfaction with the amount of the dowry often results in violence, such as "bride burning," torture, murder or the forced suicide of a young wife. Dowry-related crimes are difficult to prosecute, however, because they often are disguised as accidents or suicides.

To avoid having to pay a dowry, many poor parents who cannot afford prenatal gender testing or an abortion will kill their infant girls instead. In Pakistan last year, about 100 newborns a month (most of them girls) were killed and left in garbage dumps or by the side of the road. (See *main story*, p. 475.)

Families also are driven to abort or kill baby girls by the Asian tradition that a son supports his elderly parents while married daughters care for their husbands and aging in-laws. Sons "are the equivalent of an Indian 401(k) retirement plan," writes Prabhat Jha, director of the Centre for Global Health Research at the University of Toronto. (See "At Issue," p. 491.)

"The parents feel that the boy is a help for the future, where the girls are a liability," said Kailash Satyarethi, a founder of the India-based human rights group Global March. "If we spend money on her, then we have to spend money on her marriage, dowry probably, and then if something goes wrong, then we are always sufferers. So better that that girl is not born."²

Dowry abuses led to the 1961 Dowry Prohibition Act, which prohibits the request, payment or acceptance of a dowry. Violations are punishable by fines and up to six months in jail, but enforcement is lax. More than 8,300 dowry-related deaths were reported in India in 2009; only one-third resulted in convictions.³

Ironically, with up to 160 million Asian women “missing” due to sex-selective abortions and the murder of newborn girls, a critical shortage of marriageable women has developed in countries such as India and China. As a result, experts say, some families will be able to demand a higher “bride price” for their daughters — money or goods paid by a groom’s family to a bride’s family. Much less common than dowries, the paying of a bride price is another ancient marriage tradition still practiced in some rural areas of India, China, Thailand and parts of Africa.

Already, many men in India who cannot afford a bride price are becoming resigned to the fact that they may never marry. Babulal Yadav, a 50-year-old farmer from the Indian state of Haryana, where men far outnumber women, said, “I’m used to being alone. But I want a son.”⁴

— **Robert Kiener**

¹ Geeta Pandey, “India’s unwanted girls,” BBC, May 22, 2011, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13264301.



Reuters/B. Mathur JSG/DL

New appliances — part of her initial dowry — surround Indian bride Nisha Sharma as she displays her wedding invitation. Sharma balked when her fiancée’s family made additional dowry demands. She called off their wedding just hours before the ceremony in New Delhi. Fear of someday facing ruinous dowry demands prompts many Indian parents to abort female fetuses.

² Corey Flintoff, “Selective abortions blamed for girl shortage in India,” NPR, April 14, 2011, www.npr.org/2011/04/14/135417647/in-india-number-of-female-children-drops.

³ See National Crimes Records Bureau, “Figures at a Glance, 2009,” <http://ncrb.nic.in/CII%202009/cii-2009/figure%20at%20a%20glance.pdf>.

⁴ “Haryana’s lonely bachelors,” *The Economist*, March 4, 2010, www.economist.com/node/15604465.

- Allowing children to be better educated and receive better health care; and,
- Allowing parents to save more money, which in turn has enabled banks to fund huge infrastructure expansion projects.

Furthermore, say one-child proponents, a smaller population helps boost personal income, improves the environment and guarantees a better quality of life. “People who oppose the family-planning policy should consider some pressing problems we are already facing: depleting water sources, receding underground water tables, pollution of rivers and lakes, desertification, accelerating extinction of species, rising emission of greenhouse gases and fast-disappearing natural resources,” said Li Xiaoping, a researcher with the Institute of Population and Labor Economy at the Chinese Acad-

emy of Social Sciences. “All these are obstacles to economic development and environmental protection. The government is already finding it difficult to control the birthrate because of the huge population. Even if we follow the existing family-planning policy, the population will grow by more than 10 million a year.”²²

But critics say it is time to abolish the policy. Many, especially anti-abortion advocates, claim it violates reproductive rights. Reggie Littlejohn, an American attorney who founded Women’s Rights Without Frontiers, an international coalition that opposes forced abortion and sexual slavery in China, says, “For the Chinese Communist Party to function as ‘womb police,’ wielding the very power of life and death over the people of China is a terrible violation of both women’s rights and human rights. After 30 years of such a legacy, it is time for

the international community to pressure China to revoke the one-child policy.”

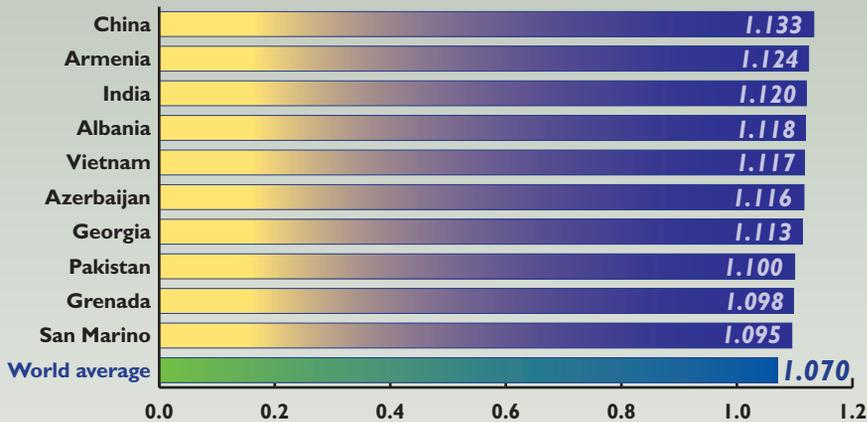
When U.S. Vice President Joe Biden visited China recently and told his hosts, “Your policy has been one which I fully understand — I’m not second-guessing — of one child per family,” he was immediately attacked for appearing to sanction the policy. House Speaker John Boehner, R-Pa., like Biden, a Roman Catholic, echoed many Western critics of the policy: “No government on Earth has the authority to place quotas on the value of innocent human life, or treat life as an economic commodity that can be regulated and taken away on a whim by the state.”²³

Critics say the policy not only has resulted in the deaths of millions of girls but also has skewed China’s sex ratios to the point that today millions of Chinese men cannot find wives.

Asian Countries Have Most Males

Seven of the 10 countries with the world's highest male-to-female birth ratios are in Asia, led by China with 113 males born for every 100 females (a sex ratio of 1.13).

Countries with Highest Male-to-Female Birth Ratios, 2011 (est.)



Source: "Sex Ratio," The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2018.html>; "Pakistan Demographic Survey," 2007

"The one-child limit is too extreme," said Ye Tingfang, a historian at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. "It violates nature's law, and in the long run will lead to Mother Nature's revenge."²⁴

Other observers note that the drop in China's fertility rate, from 5.8 children per woman, on average, in 1950 to an estimated 1.4 children today, reduces the need for the policy.²⁵ "The one-child policy was unnecessary," says Steven W. Mosher, president of the Population Research Institute, a self-described "pro-life" group in Virginia. "Birth rates were already falling in the 1970s and would probably have continued to fall to today's rates because of China's urbanization, industrialization and rising levels of education."

Many observers say Mother Nature's "revenge" already can be seen in the rapid aging of China's population, the result of the one-child policy, lower fertility rates and increased

longevity. Eventually, experts say, each child from a one-child family will have to care for two parents and four grandparents. By 2040, according to some estimates, China will have 400 million people over 65, a quarter of the population. Chinese companies are already reporting shortages of young workers.²⁶

As *The Economist* noted recently, 13.3 percent of China's population is over age 60 — up from 10.3 percent in 2000, while those under 14 dropped from 23 percent of the population to 17 percent. "A continuation of these trends will place ever-greater burdens on the working young who must support their elderly kin, as well as on government-run pension and health-care systems," the magazine said. "China's great 'demographic dividend' (a rising share of working-age adults) is almost over."²⁷

Seniors' pensions and health-care expenses will become a "very severe burden" on China's budget, said Chen

Wei, a professor at Renmin University's Population and Development Research Institute. And there will be fewer working-age citizens to support this aging population, he added.²⁸

Despite the mounting criticism of its one-child policy and the resultant jump in sex-selective abortions, China shows little evidence that it plans to abolish the policy. "The momentum of fast growth in our population has been controlled effectively, thanks to the family-planning policy," explained Ma Jiantang, head of the National Bureau of Statistics.²⁹ China has, however, attempted to stave off female abortions by allowing rural families, where son preference is strongest, to have a second child if their first is a girl.

Some experts say the jump in sex-selective abortions and skewed sex ratios should convince the government to change its stance. Mu Guangzong, a professor of demography at Beijing University, noted, "Having a balanced population is more important and challenging than curbing the size of the population."³⁰

Activist Littlejohn is more critical: "China's one-child policy causes more violence against women and girls than any other policy on Earth, than any official policy in the history of the world."

Should abortions be more restricted, in order to prevent sex-selective abortions?

The shocking reality of Asia's 160 million "missing girls" has intensified the debate over the morality of — and justification for — abortion.

Abortion foes — especially those in the West — call the region's hundreds of thousands of sex-selective abortions "murders," and describe the aborted female fetuses as "victims." For abortion opponents, voluntarily terminating a pregnancy is not a right, and is never acceptable. *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat says the debate over sex-selective abortions should not be about the morality of sex selection but about

abortion itself: “The tragedy of the 160 million missing girls isn’t that they’re ‘missing,’ ” he wrote recently. “The tragedy is that they’re dead.”³¹

But women’s-rights activists argue that banning or drastically restricting abortions takes away a woman’s right to choose whether to have an abortion. Legal abortions are relatively new to Asia, they note, and outlawing them would curtail women’s rights. “No one in Asia who is combating sex selection is arguing that the appropriate reaction to decades of violating women’s rights is to swing in the opposite direction and violate them further,” says author Hvistendahl. “Just as a woman should not be forced to abort a wanted pregnancy, she should not be forced to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term.”

And prohibiting all abortions will force women to “seek out back-street, unsafe abortionists,” warns University of Toronto professor of public health Prabhat Jha, founder of Toronto’s Centre for Global Health Research.

Carmen Barroso, regional director of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), noted, “Sex-selective abortion will not be eliminated by restricting access to abortion. In fact, it will only increase the already high risk of death or injury due to unsafe abortion. The solution to skewed sex ratios is simple: invest in the health and rights of girls and women.”³²

New Delhi obstetrician Puneet Bedi believes India should do more to clamp down on the illegal sex-selective abortions. “There are medical justifications for some abortions, and I am not in favor of banning those,” he explains. “But there is no excuse for a sex-selective abortion, which is simply female feticide. You can choose whether you want to be a parent, but once you do, you cannot choose whether it’s a boy or a girl, tall or short, black or white.”

Bedi explains that in India there is often little guilt connected with having

an abortion. “We call them ‘coffee-bar abortions,’ ” he explained, “She comes in for an abortion and relaxes at a coffee bar afterwards. By the early 1990s, no one who didn’t want a daughter needed to have one.”³³

For anti-abortionists the argument against sex-selective abortion is clear-cut: Abortion is wrong under any circumstances. Period.

But organizations that support abortion or family planning face a

issue of sex-selective abortion?” asks Mosher, of the Population Research Institute. “I challenge the National Organization for Women and other feminist groups to join us in the battle to ban this terrible form of sex discrimination that is killing so many unborn baby girls. Their continued silence only facilitates the killing.”

When asked to explain the organization’s position on sex-selective abortion, NOW president Terry O’Neill never



Women’s-rights activists in New Delhi in May 2006 protest the continued use of sex-selective abortion to eliminate female fetuses. Because of a cultural preference for sons, pregnant women in India are often coerced by their husband’s families to abort a fetus if it is determined to be a girl, even though it is illegal to perform an ultrasound or an abortion for gender-preference purposes.

AFP/Getty Images/Raveendran

tricky dilemma: After years of campaigning for a woman’s right to decide whether to keep or end a pregnancy, it’s hard now to attack women for abusing that right. Thus, many are reluctant to condemn sex-selective abortions outright. The U.S.-based National Organization for Women (NOW), for example, has been largely silent on the issue. And its reticence leads many to believe NOW is reluctant to be seen opposing an indefensible type of abortion.

“Where are the feminists on the

replied to *CQ Global Researcher’s* repeated requests for an interview.

Some abortion advocates claim that anti-abortionists are using the sex-selective abortion issue to advance their own agenda. “Anti-abortion groups and pundits have proven all too eager to take on the issue, though they seem far more interested in driving home restrictions on abortion than they do in increasing the number of women in the world and protecting the rights of women at risk,” writes Hvistendahl.³⁴

With many countries already banning sex-selective abortions, few activists think they can get nations to ban or further restrict abortions. Activists do, however, hope they can get governments to enforce existing laws banning sex-selective abortions and abuses of ultrasound.

Often criticized by both pro- and anti-abortionists, international agencies such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) must walk a fine line when addressing the issue of abor-

tion to the full extent of the law," the statement said. "Such an outcome would represent a further violation of their rights to life and health as guaranteed in international human rights treaties and committed to in international development agreements."³⁵

Eberstadt, the American Enterprise Institute demographer, has called for a global war on abortion. "To eradicate sex-selective abortion, we must convince the world that destroying female

West during the 1960s, with many scholars predicting an imminent population explosion, including Stanford University professor of population studies Paul Ehrlich, author of the 1968 bestseller *The Population Bomb*.

If "a simple method could be found to guarantee that first-born children were males, then population-control problems in many areas would be somewhat eased," he wrote, pointing out that in many countries "couples with only female children keep trying, in hope of a son."³⁷

Ehrlich was not the only one to suggest that approach to curbing population growth. "Before long, sex selection emerged as a favored solution for the world's growing population, especially in the developing world," says Hvistendahl.

Birth-control programs, some advocating abortions, were supported by a wide range of organizations. Indeed, even President Nixon's Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, in 1974 signed a classified U.S. government memo that stated, "Abortion is vital to the solution" of world population growth."³⁸

Efforts to study sex-selective abortion were extensive. For example:

- In 1975, with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, doctors at a government hospital in India began sex-selective abortion trials, offering free amniocentesis* for poor women and then helping them, if they so chose, to abort the fetus on the basis of sex. An estimated 1,000 women carrying female fetuses underwent abortions. The doctors touted the study as a population-control experiment, and sex-selective abortion spread throughout India.³⁹
- In 1976 International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF)

* Amniocentesis involves removing some amniotic fluid from a pregnant woman's uterus to diagnose genetic disorders but was also used to determine the sex of the fetus before sonograms were introduced.

"There is no excuse for a sex-selective abortion, which is simply female feticide. You can choose whether you want to be a parent, but once you do, you cannot choose whether it's a boy or a girl, tall or short, black or white."

**— Puneet Bedi,
New Delhi obstetrician**

tions. "These are human rights issues," explains Aminata Toure, chief of the UNFPA's Gender, Human Rights and Culture Branch. "We are not about to go into a country and begin dictating on such sensitive issues. Our main aim is to solve this problem by raising the status of women."

In June, the UNFPA and four other U.N. agencies issued a joint statement on sex-selective abortions for the first time. Although it referred to "gender-biased sex selection" rather than using the term "sex-selective abortion," the statement warned against banning abortions outright.

"States have an obligation to ensure that these injustices are addressed without exposing women to the risk of death or serious injury by denying them access to needed services, such as safe

fetuses is horribly wrong," he wrote. "We need something akin to the abolitionist movement: a moral campaign waged globally, with the victories declared one conscience at a time."³⁶

Did the West cause Asia's epidemic of sex-selective abortions?

When journalist Hvistendahl began researching sex-selective abortion several years ago, she didn't know it may have been exported to developing countries by Western nations such as the United States.

"It wasn't until I went to India and met activists who told me to investigate the history of American population organizations that I found the link," she explains.

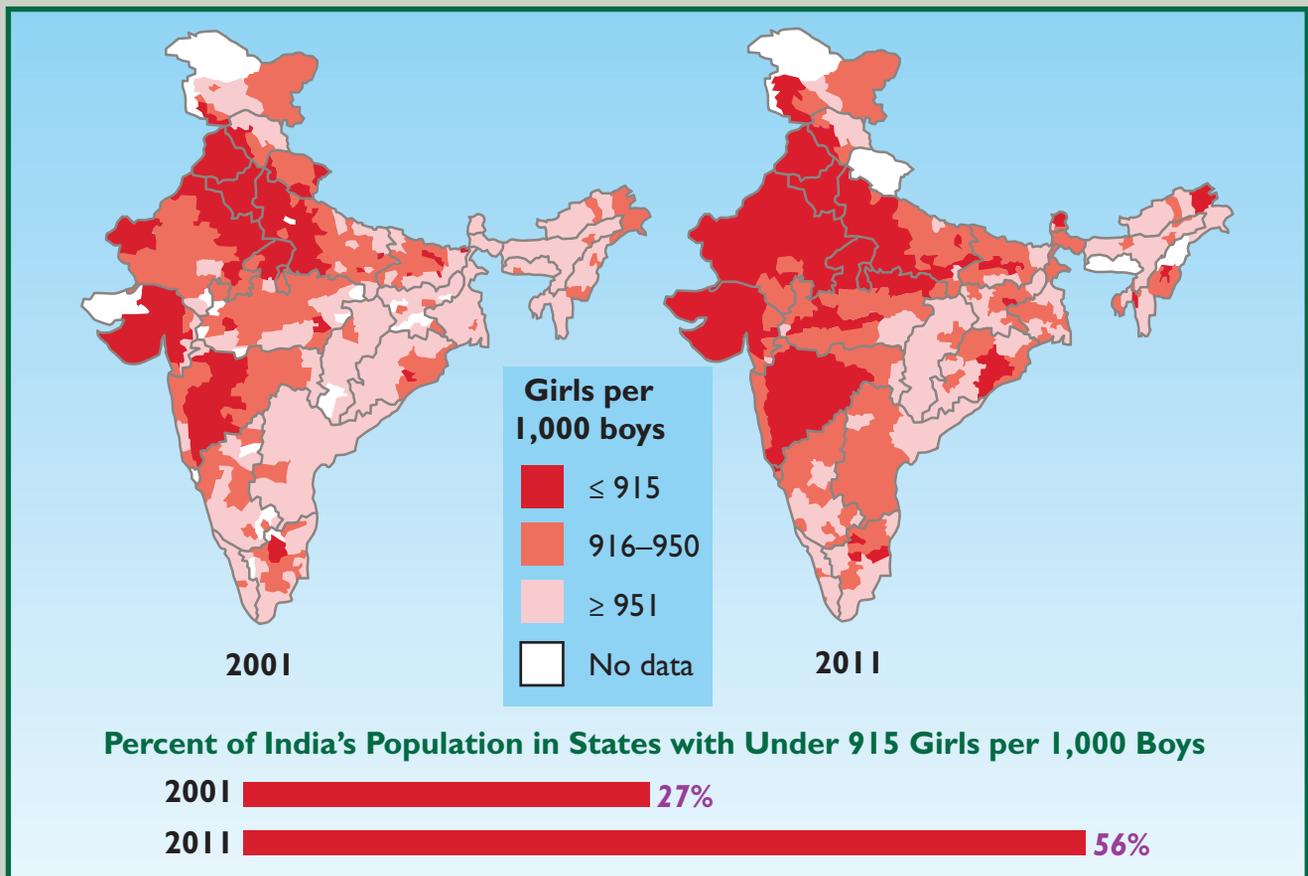
Concern about uncontrolled global population growth was intense in the

India's Gender Gap Is Growing

Gender-selective abortions have spread across India, resulting in up to 12 million fewer Indian girls being born over the past 30 years, according to a new study. Boys are more valued in Indian culture, and inexpensive sonograms are now widely available, making sex-selective abortions popular. Over the last decade, the percentage of the Indian population living in states with a very low ratio of fewer than 915 girls per 1,000 boys has more than doubled (bar graph).

Ratio of Girls to Boys, 2001 and 2011

(per 1,000 boys under age 6)



Source: "Selective Abortion May Account for Up to 12 Million Missing Girls in India," Centre for Global Health Research, University of Toronto, May 24, 2011, www.cghr.org/index.php/2011/05/selective-abortion-may-account-for-up-to-12-million-missing-girls-in-india-new-lancet-study/. Map by Lewis Agrell

medical director Malcolm Potts wrote, "Early abortion is safe, effective, cheap and potentially the easiest method to administer."⁴⁰ Others supported sex selection in academic papers and government-sponsored seminars.

- Although many reports described coerced and sex-selective abortions in China after the one-child

policy was instituted, agencies such as the UNPFA and the IPPF nonetheless increased funding of China's population-control program. "For example, notes Hvistendahl, "as late as 1983 IPPF requested increased funding for China."

- Also in 1983, the UNPFA praised one-child policies, noting, "We must record our deep apprecia-

tion for the way in which their governments have marshaled the resources necessary to implement population policies on a massive scale."⁴¹

Bedi, the Delhi-based obstetrician and anti-sex-selection activist, says that both before and after abortion was legalized in India in 1971, "huge amounts of Western money flowed into this

country to fund population control. Many of India's elite doctors were trained by the West, and they were encouraged to see sex-selective abortion . . . as a medical procedure."

Early sex-selective abortions in India were performed openly at government hospitals. ⁴² "The West had a lot of influence in making abortion acceptable here," says Bedi. "Eventually, with the coming of amniocentesis and the ready availability of ultrasound technology, sex-selective abortions proliferated. They were actually marketed here in India." Bedi now describes ultrasound machines as "weapons of mass destruction."

Others strongly disagree that the West is responsible "for the proliferation of ultrasound machines and their use in India and China," explains the University of Toronto's Jha. "They are a medical innovation and would have been adopted regardless of who was funding or promoting them. This is simply a worldwide diffusion of technology that was inevitable."

Likewise, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins at Oxford University said, "The ability to know the sex of a fetus is an inevitable byproduct of medical benefits such as amniocentesis, ultrasound scanning and other techniques for the diagnosis of serious problems. Should scientists have refrained from developing useful techniques, for fear of how they might be misused by others?" ⁴³

Others argue that it's "demeaning" to think that the West could have so much influence abroad on such a sensitive issue. "Do you really believe that China or India could be that influenced by the United States?" asks Paris-based demographer Guilmo. "It's ridiculous."

China was essentially closed to the West at the time, and there is little evidence that it was influenced by the West, said a reviewer of Hvistendahl's book: "China's coercive population-control policies were developed in the late 1970s, at the end of the Cultural Revolution and the early reforms of

Deng Xiaoping. This was a period of isolation and modest opening-up, when China was not much interested in Western advice." ⁴⁴

Others note that while the West may have influenced and funded earlier population programs in developing countries, sex-selective abortions have steadily increased without Western support. "The American establishment helped create the problem, but now it's metastasizing on its own," explained *New York Times* columnist Douthat. "The population-control movement is a shadow of its former self, yet sex selection has spread inexorably with access to abortion." ⁴⁵

Stung by criticism of its earlier role in funding such programs, the United Nations Population Fund no longer supports population-control programs. But critics like Hvistendahl and others believe the UNFPA is not doing enough to directly combat sex selection, partly because it is afraid of getting tangled up in abortion politics. "The agency's legacy in the developing world continues to haunt its leaders, to the detriment of women worldwide," she says. "It is reluctant to address sex selection directly."

The UNFPA's Toure disagrees, saying the agency "has been raising alarms about this odious practice for more than 20 years. We called attention to China's skewed sex ratio when it first became apparent in the 1990 census, and our advocacy helped persuade the government to outlaw sex selection in 1994." Since then, the fund has sponsored forums and studies on the causes and likely consequences of sex selection in China and elsewhere. "UNFPA has been a prominent leader in advocating against sex selection and other practices that discriminate against girls and women," she adds.

Rather than the West and other outside influences, many believe the true blame lies with "the cultural and religious practices that despise and discriminate against women in the first place," said biologist Dawkins. ⁴⁶ ■

BACKGROUND

An Ancient Practice

Anthropologists believe that infanticide has been practiced throughout history. Some historians claim that infanticide rates ranged from 15-50 percent of children born during prehistoric times. ⁴⁷ Finding enough food was a persistent problem, and killing offspring was seen as a way to prevent starvation.

As famed British biologist Charles Darwin noted in his landmark 1871 book, *The Descent of Man*, "[Thomas] Malthus has discussed these several checks, but he does not lay stress enough on what is probably the most important of all, namely infanticide, especially of female infants, and the habit of procuring abortion. These practices now prevail in many quarters of the world; and infanticide seems formerly to have prevailed." ⁴⁸

Prejudice against daughters — or a preference for sons — was another common reason for female infanticide. In ancient Greece and Rome, infants who were handicapped or the "wrong" sex sometimes were left "exposed" after birth — typically placed inside a pot left beside a road. A letter written by a first century B.C. Roman husband to his pregnant wife warned, "if it is a male, let it live; if it is a female, expose it." ⁴⁹

Because girls required expensive dowries in Roman times, they were considered of less value than males. In addition, sons could become wage earners and contribute to the family's upkeep. A Roman maxim observed, "Everyone raises a son, including a poor man, but even a rich man will abandon a daughter." ⁵⁰

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Chronology

1950s-1970s

Abortion as population-control method spreads throughout Asia, with help of Western funding.

1953

Abortion becomes widely accessible in China.

1960

Vietnam legalizes abortion.

1962

Concerns about burgeoning population prompts South Korea to institute a national family-planning campaign.

1968

Stanford professor of population studies Paul Ehrlich warns in *The Population Bomb* of impending disaster if world population growth continues unchecked.

1971

Law legalizing abortion goes into effect in India.

1973

South Korea legalizes abortions.

1975

Rockefeller Foundation funds sex-selective abortion trials at a government hospital in India.

1976

Alarmed at India's growing population, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi establishes a program that sterilizes more than 7.8 million men between in 1976-1977.

1980s-1990s

China's one-child policy and drooping fertility rates lead to skewed birth ratios.

1980

China's "temporary" one-child policy begins nationwide.

1987

Bombay (now Mumbai) has 248 ultrasound clinics offering sex-determination services, up from fewer than 10 in 1982.

1983

U.N. Fund for Population Activities — predecessor of today's U.N. Population Fund (UNFPA) — praises China's one-child policy.

1985-1989

China allows couples in rural areas and those with daughters to have a second child.

1987

South Korea bans prenatal sex determination. . . . Indian society of obstetricians and gynecologists finds that out of 8,000 abortions, 7,999 occurred after tests showed a female fetus.

1989

China bans prenatal sex determination and pre-implantation sex selection.

1990

New York Review of Books publishes Nobel-Prize winning economist Amartya Sen's essay on Asia's 100 million missing females. . . . More than 116 Korean boys are born for every 100 girls.

1991

UNFPA raises the issue of China's gender imbalance — the first international agency to speak out about the problem.

1994

China, with more than 100,000 ultrasound machines, bans sex-selective abortion. . . . India bans prenatal

sex determination. . . . South Korea raises penalties for physicians who provide prenatal sex determination.

1995

U.N.'s Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing, classifies female infanticide and prenatal sex selection as acts of violence against women.

2000s-Present

As sex ratios at birth become increasingly skewed, nations try to alter the gender misbalance.

2002

Nepal legalizes abortion but bans prenatal sex determination and sex-selective abortion. . . . China's census indicates the sex ratio of newborns is 116 boys to 100 girls.

2003

Vietnam bans sex-selective abortion and all forms of sex determination.

2006

The average number of children an Asian woman will have (her fertility rate) drops to 2.3 children — from 5.7 in the late 1960s.

2010

India's fertility rate drops to 2.7 children per woman — from 5.7 in the mid-1960s.

2011

Publication of book *Unnatural Selection* re-ignites the global debate on sex-selective abortion when it claims that 160 million females are "missing" from Asia. . . . China announces a crackdown on anyone using ultrasound to determine fetal gender or performing sex-selective abortions.

How South Korea Reversed Anti-Female Bias

Within a generation, women's roles changed dramatically.

In South Korea, long one of Asia's most patriarchal societies, having a son was the dream of almost every young couple. "One son is worth 10 daughters," goes a once-common saying. So when amniocentesis and ultrasound enabled couples to discover the sex of their unborn child, more and more couples began aborting female fetuses. By 1990, so many were opting for sex-selective abortions that more than 117 Korean boys were born for every 100 girls — one of the highest birth sex ratios in the world.¹

The heavily skewed ratios prompted the government to ban prenatal gender selection. To underscore its concern, officials launched media campaigns designed to raise the status of females. For instance, the Love Your Daughter campaign featured the slogan, "One daughter raised well is worth 10 sons!"²

Because of the country's closely controlled health system, the ban on sex selection and other factors, the sex ratio gradually improved. By 2007 it had dropped to a much less alarming 107.³ Today it is around 106.⁴

"Enforcement and media campaigns were only part of the solution," says Paris-based demographer Christophe Guilmo. "You also have to take into account South Korea's changing society." Two decades of dramatic economic growth had transformed the nation's agrarian society into an industrialized one, he points out, resulting in fundamental changes.

Rapid urbanization and a growing desire for smaller families also helped lower the ratio. Strengthening of the nation's social safety net also helped to undercut the necessity of having a male child who, tradition dictated, would support his parents in their old age. Parents also began making and saving more money, having to depend less on their grown children for economic support in their later years.

"The changing role of women has also made a major difference," explains Guilmo. "They are working more and in better jobs, have more rights and have become more valuable. Their status and respect have vastly improved." In 1981 fewer than one in 10 Korean women attended college, now it's more than six out of 10.⁵

A 2010 survey reflects the startling change in preference for sons. Thirty-eight percent of expectant Korean mothers wanted a daughter, compared to 31 percent who wanted a son. Among fathers-to-be, 37 percent wanted a daughter and 29 percent a son.⁶

The diminished concern about sex-selective abortions led the government recently to remove the ban on learning the gender of a fetus.

But Korea's population problems are not completely solved. There are 190,000 more men ages 29-33 than women ages 26-30. By 2013 male 29-33-year-olds in Korea will outnumber women by 360,000.⁷ A large group of marriageable Korean

men will soon find it difficult to find a wife. And because the nation's birth rate has dropped dramatically, the government is urging couples to have children — boys or girls.



AFP/Getty Images/Jung Yeon-Je

Daughters are now treasured in South Korea thanks to a massive government campaign to reverse patriarchal, anti-female attitudes that by 1990 had severely skewed gender ratios. Above, a girl plays happily in a fountain in downtown Seoul on June 20, 2011.

Newspaper executive Park He-ran, now in her 60s, remembers how in an earlier era, when other women learned that she had three sons and no daughters, they would enviously ask what her secret was. Today, "They say they are sorry for my misfortune," she said. "Within a generation I have turned from the luckiest woman possible to a pitiful mother."⁸

— Robert Kiener

¹ "Gendercide: the worldwide war on baby girls," *The Economist*, March 4, 2010, www.economist.com/node/15636231.

² Choe Sang-hun, "Where boys were king, a shift toward baby girls," *The New York Times*, Dec. 23, 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/12/23/world/asia/23skorea.html?pagewanted=all.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ CIA *World Factbook*.

⁵ Sang-hun, *op. cit.*

⁶ Lim Yung Suk, "S Korean parents now prefer daughters over sons," *Channel News Asia*, Feb. 18, 2010, www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/eastasia/view/1038190/1/html.

⁷ "The gender ratio gets worse for marriageable Korean men," *Chosun Ilbo*, June 14, 2011, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/06/14/2011061400321.html.

⁸ Sang-hun, *op. cit.*

Continued from p. 484

In male-dominated ancient Persia, females also were seen as an economic burden to a family with limited resources, and infant girls were sometimes buried alive immediately after birth.⁵¹

In the seventh century A.D., the Muslim Prophet Muhammad expressly forbade female infanticide. According to the Koran, “buried girls” will rise out of their graves on Judgment Day and ask why they were killed.⁵² “And do not kill your children for fear of poverty,” the Koran also warns, “we give them sustenance and yourselves too; surely to kill them is a great wrong.”⁵³

In China, instances of female infanticide are recorded as early as the sixth century B.C. Because girls would leave home when married, they were seen an “expendable luxury,” historian Stephen Milner wrote. According to an ancient Chinese proverb: “As to children, a father and mother when they produce a boy congratulate one another, but when they produce a girl, they put it to death.”⁵⁴

Female infanticide continued throughout Chinese history. In the late 19th century, a missionary in China interviewed 40 women, who reported having given birth to 183 sons and 175 daughters. But only 53 of the girls had survived to age 10, compared with 126 of the boys. The missionary noted, “by their own account the women had destroyed 78 of their daughters.”⁵⁵

According to American historian and anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, “In large cities like Beijing, wagons made scheduled rounds in the early morning to collect corpses of unwanted daughters that had been soundlessly drowned in a bucket of milk while the mother looked away.” One mother, Hrdy writes, reported killing 11 newborn daughters.⁵⁶

While girls are much less valued than boys in India today, that was not always the case. From 1500 to 800 B.C., Indian women enjoyed equal status with men. They could become priests, had an equal say in choosing a part-

ner and were heads of their households. Under Mogul rule, however, restrictions were placed on women, and their social status declined. By 600 B.C. women had become subservient to men, were largely confined to their homes and could marry only if their families paid big dowries.⁵⁷

“It is clear that the onerous costs involved with the raising of a girl, and eventually providing her an appropriate marriage dowry, was the single most important factor in allowing social acceptance of the murder at birth in India,” explained Milner.⁵⁸

The cultural preference for sons, who traditionally take care of their elderly parents, also helped lower the status of women. The murder of baby girls is so common in India that it has its own term: *kuzhippa*, or “baby intended for the burial pit.”⁵⁹

Nineteenth-century British colonial overlords in India were so shocked by female infanticide that they tried to quantify the problem. After a special 1868 census showed that only 22 percent of the people in communities suspected of committing infanticide were females, they passed the Female Infanticide Act, which punished infanticide with a jail term of up to six months and allowed undernourished girls to be taken from their parents.⁶⁰

By the 1901 census the situation had improved markedly to an overall male-to-female sex ratio of 102.9 boys per 100 females. Within a century, however, India’s sex ratio imbalance would climb to alarming heights.

Population Worries

In the middle of the 20th century, when Mao Zedong’s Communist Party took control, China boasted that its half-billion population — more than triple the size of the United States — gave China an economic advantage over other countries.

“Even if China’s population multiplies many times, she is fully capable of finding a solution; the solution is production. . . . Of all things in the world, people are the most precious,” said Mao, outlawing birth control and contraceptives.⁶¹

China’s population exploded, and birth control was introduced in 1958, only to be banned under the ruinous Great Leap Forward, Mao’s attempt to modernize the economy. By 1962 the population had outstripped food supply, and a massive famine claimed more than 30 million lives.⁶² A propaganda campaign and a government-sponsored population-control program saw China’s population drop by half between 1970 and 1976. Overpopulation was still a concern, however, and the one-child policy was introduced in 1980.

Meanwhile, birth control was introduced in Indian hospitals in the 1950s, but the government did not institute family-planning programs until the late 1960s. In 1971, the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act legalized abortion for several reasons, including “the failure of a contraceptive device.”⁶³

By 1977 the population had reached 620 million, and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi pushed through a harsh program that called for mandatory sterilization of males who had already fathered two children. Between April 1976 and January 1977, more than 7.8 million sterilizations were performed. The government untruthfully claimed the sterilizations were voluntarily accepted, and the controversial program contributed to Gandhi’s failed re-election bid.⁶⁴

In 1962, South Korea, then one of the world’s poorest countries, instituted a family-planning campaign after the government of Park Chung-hee became concerned that the nation’s rapidly growing population was undermining economic growth. The fertility rate fell from 6.1 in 1960 to 4.2 in 1970.⁶⁵

East Asia Has Highest Gender Imbalance

The East Asia-Pacific region has the world's highest number of baby boys — 113 per 100 girls — and South Asia has the second-highest number. Sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest number of boys born per 100 females. Blamed largely on the use of sex-selective abortion, high gender disparities at birth in China and India — which together account for more than a third of the world's population — have significantly skewed the average global birth ratio, which is now 1.07.

Male Births by Region, 2010 (per 100 females)

East Asia and Pacific	113
Excluding China	105
South Asia	107
Excluding India	105
Central, Eastern Europe and former Soviet republics	106
Middle East and North Africa	105
Latin America and Caribbean	105
Sub-Saharan Africa	104
Developing countries (including India and China)	107
World	107

Source: "Boys and Girls in the Life Cycle," UNICEF, 2011, www.childinfo.org/files/Gender_lo_res.pdf

With Asia adding millions of citizens to the global population, Western observers were growing increasingly concerned. Ehrlich's 1968 book painted a grim picture: "The battle to feed all of humanity is over," he wrote. "In the 1970s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now. At this late date, nothing can prevent a substantial increase in the world death rate."⁶⁶

During the 1960s and '70s the Rockefeller Foundation, World Bank and other organizations widely promoted — and funded — birth control and population-control programs in the developing world. The efforts led to claims the programs reflected the West's view that Asia's growing population posed a threat.

"Many in Washington were more concerned with the effect population growth was having on geopolitics as opposed to the environment or the economy,"

wrote journalist Hvistendahl. They believed that larger populations resulted in more poverty, which was a fertile ground for the spread of communism.

The introduction of amniocentesis to Asia in the mid-1970s gave prospective parents an expensive and risky way to discover the sex of their coming children. By the early 1980s, the procedure was so common in India that it was known as the "sex test."⁶⁷ In fact, in a study of 11,000 couples who had undergone the procedure, nearly all admitted to using it "for the purpose of aborting unborn female fetuses."⁶⁸

The arrival of far less expensive ultrasound technology in the 1980s brought the sex test to the masses. In the late 1970s China imported ultrasound machines from the United States, most made by General Electric, and in the 1980s began manufacturing them; by 1994 the country had more than 100,000.⁶⁹ The machines also proliferated in South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and especially in India, where they appeared in the remotest villages.

erated in South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and especially in India, where they appeared in the remotest villages.

Clinics offering ultrasound services popped up throughout India. In Bombay alone, the number jumped from less than 10 in 1982 to 248 by 1987.⁷⁰

There are between 70,000 and 100,000 ultrasound machines in India today, but fewer than half are registered with the government, even though it is required by the 1994 Pre-natal Diagnostics Technique Act.

The widespread availability of ultrasound testing had a dramatic effect on sex-selective abortions. According to a 1987 study of 8,000 abortions, 7,999 occurred after tests showed a female fetus. In another large study, 97 percent of the fetuses were female; the rest were of undetermined sex.⁷¹

'Momentous Problem'

After demographers, other experts and journalists began publicizing the fate of Asia's "missing" girls, governments began to take action. Many cited Nobel-Prize winning Indian economist Amartya Sen's 1990 essay in the *New York Review of Books*, "More Than 100 Million Women Are Missing," as a wakeup call. Missing females, Sen wrote, are "clearly one of the more momentous, and neglected, problems facing the world today."⁷²

By the late 1980s governments realized that sex-selective abortions were producing skewed sex ratios and instituted strict controls on prenatal sex selection. South Korea led the way in 1987, followed by China in 1989, India in 1994, Nepal in 2002 and Vietnam in 2003. Restrictions included limiting ultrasound use to authorized clinics and making it illegal to reveal the sex of the fetus (except on medical grounds).⁷³ Sex-selective abortions were also banned in most countries. At the Fourth World Conference

on Women in Beijing in 1995, the United Nations listed both female infanticide and prenatal gender selection as acts of violence against women.

Despite the bans, ultrasound usage has steadily increased and, based on sex ratios, so have sex-selective abortions. Enforcement has been spotty, and there have been few prosecutions. It is hard to prove that an ultrasound operator has revealed the sex of a fetus; they may use verbal clues or nonverbal gestures (such as a “thumbs up” if it is a boy). And while there are frequent government crackdowns, few violators are caught.

Proving an abortion is sex selective is equally difficult. Because ultrasounds and abortions are often done at separate facilities, it is hard to prove a link.

Few believe laws or prohibitions will do much to change the skewed sex ratios that have resulted from the widespread killing of unborn females unless societies stop valuing boys over girls. “Laws are good because they may act as a deterrent,” but sex-selective abortions continue underground because “people find more devious ways,” said Ravinder Kaur, a professor of sociology at New Delhi’s Indian Institute of Technology.⁷⁴ ■

CURRENT SITUATION

‘Bare Branches’

The alarming shortage of females caused by sex-selective abortions and female infanticide is changing the fabric of Asian societies.

In Banzhushan, a village perched high in the mountains of China’s central Hunan Province, 35-year old farmer Duan Biansheng confesses sadly that



AFP/Getty Images/Aamir Qureshi

An abandoned baby girl sleeps safely at the Edhi Foundation, Pakistan’s largest charity. To battle the nation’s rampant gendercide, the foundation provides rows of empty cradles outside its offices, with signs urging: “Do not murder. Lay them here.” In 2010, about 100 newborns — mostly girls — were killed and dumped in Pakistan each month, up 20 percent over 2009.

his chance of finding a wife is “almost zero.” Like tens of millions of other single men in China, known as “bare branches,” he is the victim of the nation’s skewed sex ratios.

Male residents of dirt-poor rural settlements like Banzhushan — dubbed “bachelor villages” — have annual incomes of less than \$100, and the very few marriageable women born in the village usually are lured away by more prosperous suitors from other villages.⁷⁵ Duan’s problem is common throughout China, and it will get worse over time. During the next two decades, according to Li Shuzhuo, a professor of population studies at Xi’an Jiaotong University in Xian, 30-50 million men will be unable to find wives.⁷⁶

India is also suffering from a shortage of women. In the remote farming village of Siyani in Gujarat, Girish Rathod has been looking for a wife for 15 years — since he was 20. “I am not alone in my search for a wife,” he said. “Seventy percent of men in this village are unmarried because we have very few women to choose from.”⁷⁷

The shortage of women has begun changing Indian society in alarming ways. Brides’ families often ask for exorbitant “bride prices” — or money from a prospective groom — a reversal of the traditional dowry system. (See sidebar, p. 478.)

There are also reports of instances in which brides abscond with bride prices worth several years’ of income. “This women shortage is destabilizing our community,” said Mohabbat Singh Chauhan, a community leader in Siyani.⁷⁸

If the present birth ratio continues, by 2021 India will have 20 percent more men than women.⁷⁹

Trafficking, Kidnapping and Crime

The scarcity of women in Asia means girls are now seen as valuable commodities on the black market, fueling a burgeoning sex trade in the region.

“The lack of women contributes to greater demand for prostituted women and girls . . . fueling the demand for

victims of trafficking,” said Mark Lagon, who oversaw human rights issues at the U.S. State Department during the George W. Bush administration.⁸⁰ “The impact is obvious. It’s creating a ‘Wild West’ sex industry in China.”⁸¹

The situation in China is leading to “a new tsunami of demand” for sex traffickers, according to Laura J. Lederer, a former U.S. Department of State senior adviser on trafficking and founder of The Protection Project, an anti-trafficking legal research institute at Johns Hopkins University. The State Department’s 2009 “Trafficking in Persons” report describes China as a “source, transit and destination country for men, women and children trafficked for the purposes of forced labor and sexual exploitation.”⁸²

Many young girls are “bought” by farmers to guarantee wives for their young sons when they come of age. Others who desire a bride but don’t want to pay a high bride price resort to kidnapping. In July, police rescued 179 babies, most of them girls, from kidnapers. According to China’s state media, 39,194 cases of human trafficking have been reported since April 2009.⁸³

While spikes in trafficking, kidnapping and prostitution can easily be traced to shortages of women, some experts also say the rising population of frustrated single men accounts for rising crime rates. Indeed, a study in China found that a 1 percent increase in the sex ratio (at birth) resulted in a 5- to 6-point increase in the crime rate.

“The increasing maleness of the young adult population in China may account for as much as a third of the overall rise in crime,” said the report’s author.⁸⁴ China’s crime rate has nearly doubled over the last two decades.⁸⁵ And between 2003 and 2007, rape cases in India jumped by more than 30 percent and abductions by 50 percent.⁸⁶

Officials fear that the country’s “bare branches” are becoming even more aggressive. “Cross-cultural evidence shows that the overwhelming majority of violent crime is perpetrated

ed by young, unmarried, low-status males,” said a recent study. “Because they may lack a stake in the existing social order, it is feared that they will become bound together in an outcast culture, turning to antisocial behaviour and organized crime, thereby threatening societal stability and security.”

G. D. Bakshi, a senior fellow at the New Delhi-based security think tank Vivekananda International Foundation, warns that the large numbers of unmarried men could lead to “the criminalisation of society.” Shortages of females “will aggravate aggressive tendencies — whether they manifest in internal conflict, armed rebellions or you try and externalize conflict,” he said.

Although China, India, Vietnam and other nations have outlawed sex-selective abortion and prenatal gender-testing, the laws have generally not been strictly enforced. However, stung by increasingly skewed birth ratios and international criticism, officials have recently pledged to renew efforts to crack down on such abuses:

- In April, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described the killing of girls as a “national shame” and ordered policy planners to increase efforts to stop sex-selective abortion. “The falling child sex ratio is an indictment of our social values,” he said.⁸⁷ In a one-month campaign the government seized 32 illegal ultrasound machines.⁸⁸
- In May the Taiwanese Health Ministry said it would impose fines on doctors who perform sex-selective abortions and revoke their licenses under the new Physicians Act, which forbids sex-selective abortions. Officials also are considering revising the law to allow offenders to face criminal charges.⁸⁹
- In an effort to achieve “a significant rebalancing” of the sex ratio at birth by 2015, China recently announced an eight-month, multi-ministry crackdown on anyone using ultrasound to determine

the sex of a fetus or performing sex-selective abortions. Penalties range from loss of medical licenses to criminal charges.⁹⁰

Given the difficulty of proving that an abortion was performed for sex-selection purposes, most activists do not hold out much hope for major success. “China, for example, has shown little interest in prosecuting offenders,” says activist Littlejohn, of Women’s Rights Without Frontiers. “If it was really interested in saving lives, it would drop its one-child policy.”

Others applaud the countries for at least acknowledging the problem, publicizing it and raising penalties. However, many experts believe that awareness and education are better “carrots” than the “stick” of prosecution.

Valuing Girls

The best way to solve the “missing girls” problem, says UNFPA’s Toure, is for communities to be educated as to “how necessary and valuable females are to society.” It’s a long process, she admits, calling for “patience, planning and creativity.” Simply put, all countries need to raise the value of girls and women.

French demographer Guilmoto says that once daughters are offered better educational opportunities, they will be seen as less of an economic burden to families and will be more valued. One way to do that, among other things, is to change “laws and customs that prevent women from inheriting property,” he adds.

Programs are being established to encourage parents to value their daughters and eschew sex-selective abortions. For instance, India offers a stipend of about \$3,000 to parents who raise and educate a girl until she is 18. Under the Care for Girls program in parts of rural China, parents who have two girls get about a \$150 annual lifetime pension, plus educational bene-

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Are sex-selective abortions really “elective”?



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Up to 12 million females were aborted selectively before birth in India between 1980 and 2010 — about half just in the last decade. But four factors indicate that selective abortion is mostly an elective choice used by Indian parents to control their family composition.

First, over the past 20 years Indian girl-to-boy ratios fell for second births if the first child was a girl — but not if it was a boy. Thus, Indian families appear to be allowing nature to decide the gender of their first child. But to ensure that they have at least one boy, more parents are aborting their second child if ultrasound shows it to be a girl.

Second, unlike China, India does not enforce a one-child policy, so selective abortion of first births is not occurring, according to the data. Third, declines in girl-to-boy ratios for second or later births were larger in better-educated and wealthier households than in illiterate and poorer households, and declines did not differ between Hindus and Muslims. Coercion of female fertility choices would not be expected to show such patterns.

Finally, while large in absolute numbers, selective abortion accounts for only a small minority (about 2-4 percent in 2010) of all pregnancies carrying a girl.

While fertility has fallen substantially, Indians' preference for sons has not changed. (Sons traditionally care for their elderly parents in India, so they are the equivalent of an Indian 401K retirement plan.) As income and education levels rise, more Indian households can act on their son preference, and sex-selective abortion has spread widely. Today most Indians live in communities where selective abortion of girls is common.

The road back to gender balance in India will be long and difficult, but correct decisions can help make it possible. Restricting ultrasound or abortions may do more harm than good. Routine ultrasound improves prenatal health, and restricting abortions could increase maternal deaths from unsafe abortions. India already loses more mothers in childbirth than any other country.

And unlike China, India can take advantage of its rich tradition of public debate. The 2011 census can provide local data to enable community debates. In response to publicity, selective abortions appear already to have slowed somewhat in North India since 2006. Finally, India's government must do a better job of shutting down the small number of physicians who profit from unlawful testing and abortion.



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Some say sex-selective abortion is protected by a woman's right to choose to terminate a pregnancy for any reason. This view ignores the crushing social, economic, political and personal pressures that trample pregnant women carrying girls in cultures with a strong son preference. All too often, women in these cultures do not “select” their daughters for abortion. They are forced.

In China, for example, the birth ratio of girls to boys is the most skewed in the world: only 100 girls are born for every 120 boys in some places. Sons traditionally carry on the family name, work the fields and take care of their parents in old age. A daughter joins her husband's family at marriage. There is an Asian proverb: “Raising a girl is like watering someone else's garden.” China's one-child policy exacerbates the underlying son preference. When couples are restricted to one child, women often become the focus of intense pressure to ensure a boy.

A woman need not be dragged out of her home and strapped down to a table to be a victim of forced abortion. Persistent emotional pressure, estrangement from the extended family, threat of abandonment or divorce, verbal abuse and domestic violence often overpower women who otherwise would choose to keep their daughters.

Systematic, sex-selective abortion constitutes genocide, which has resulted in an estimated 37 million more men than women in China today. The presence of these “excess males” is the driving force behind human trafficking and sexual slavery, not only within China but from surrounding nations as well. Finally, China has the highest female suicide rate in the world. According to the World Health Organization, 500 women a day end their lives in China — further depleting the numbers of women.

A U.N. expert has estimated that the world is missing up to 200 million women — more than the total casualties of all the wars of the 20th century. And like war casualties, these women are not “missing.” They are dead.

It is a woman's right to choose to give birth to her daughters. Together, China and India comprise one third of the world's population. The fact that one-third of the world's women are being deprived of their right to bear girls is the biggest women's rights abuse on Earth. It deserves a passionate response from groups that stand for women's rights. Forced abortion is not a choice.

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fits.⁹¹ Posters that once warned couples it was illegal to have more than one child have been replaced by signs extolling the virtues of having a daughter. Signs such as “You can abort it. But you cannot give birth to it!” have been replaced in some areas by signs say-

Women,” depicts a village in the future that is populated by men only.

Changing long-held beliefs and traditions will be a challenge, but a noble one, notes Mosher, of the Population Research Institute: “Human beings are the ultimate resource — the one resource you cannot do without.”

an optimist, and I believe that in time the status of women around the world, especially in nations where sex selection is skewing the birth ratios, will rise enough so there will no longer be a preference for boys over girls. But we have a long way to go to help make that happen.”

She and others hope raising women’s status via educational and awareness programs will offset the long-held cultural and traditional customs of son preference.

“There is hope,” says Paris-based demographer Guilmoto. “We are already seeing some small signs of improvement in parts of India. As more people become aware of the problem, more are taking action to combat it.” Many point to South Korea where skewed birth ratios have returned to more normal rates as a model to follow. (See sidebar, p. 486.)

But some experts, like Toronto University’s Jha, believe the problem will get worse before it gets better. “We need to see real changes on the supply side, such as governments cracking down on illegal services, and societal shifts, such as governments instituting social security programs, before we will see numbers drop,” says Jha. Already, he says, there is evidence of some slight cultural shifts, such as married women taking care of both their aging parents and their in-laws. “But until all these changes take hold, which will take decades,” he admits, “the problem will get worse before getting better.”

Guilmoto and other demographers admit that it is too late to help most of the millions of “bare branches” — the men in India, China and elsewhere who will not be able to find wives. “We need to ask: How will society change to accommodate these guys?” he says. “Will they be forced to migrate? Will they be husbands of the same wife? Will societies need to have new marriage rules? There are so many things we can’t imagine now.” In

“Where are the feminists on the issue of sex-selective abortion? . . . Their continued silence only facilitates the killing.”

**— Steven W. Mosher,
President, Population Research Institute**

ing, “It is forbidden to discriminate against, mistreat or abandon baby girls,” and, “Our current family planning policy is this, ‘Pay attention to the issue of gender imbalance,’ ” and “Boy or Girl? Let Nature decide.”⁹²

In India, doctors known as “girl child champions” are working to convince their colleagues not to abort female fetuses.⁹³ Nongovernmental organizations support publicity campaigns promoting the value of women and organize sting operations to help document clinics that offer illegal sex-selective abortions.⁹⁴

Plan India in New Delhi launched an awareness program this year, Let Girls Be Born. “I think we really need to reach out to young people [to] create an awareness, to change attitudes and dispel the notion that having a boy is better than a girl,” said executive director Dengle. “Girls aren’t a sect; they are as good as boys.”⁹⁵ Even Indian soap operas are dramatizing the harm India’s skewed birth ratio is causing. The Indian movie, “Matrubhoomi: A Nation Without

In Karachi, the Edhi Foundation’s Kazmi says change will come slowly. In the meantime, his organization keeps more than 300 cradles in front of its offices throughout Pakistan so families can drop off unwanted newborns (mostly girls).

“It’s for awareness — please don’t kill your innocent babies,” he said.⁹⁶ ■

OUTLOOK

Cultural Shifts?

“Which scenario do you want, the good one or the bad one?” says the UNFPA’s Toure when asked what the gender-imbalance problem will look like in the future.

“Some people see this crisis widening, but I don’t agree. I think we are making progress,” she explains. “I am

20 years, he explains, governments won't be as worried about sex-selective abortions continuing to occur, but they'll still be dealing with the effects of today's skewed birth rates.

By 2020 China will have more than 20 million excess men of marriageable age. India, Pakistan and Taiwan will also have men who won't be able to find wives. Author Hvistendahl says, "In both China and India, nationalism is taking hold among these restless young men, and the governments are uneasy about them." A surplus of males in China in the 19th century contributed to a series of rebellions that ultimately toppled the emperor, she points out.

"Leaders in Beijing and New Delhi will be hard-pressed to address the potentially grave social instability that their countries' ever-increasing numbers of bare branches may produce in the next few decades," noted one study. To counter that threat, governments "may be inclined to move in a more authoritarian direction."⁹⁷

For at least the next 20 years, observers believe trafficking, prostitution, kidnapping and rising crime rates — all problems linked to the sex ratio imbalance — are likely to soar in affected countries.

And some experts say the problem could be exacerbated by new advances in fetal DNA testing, which allow the fetal sex to be determined only seven weeks after conception, eliminating the need for ultrasound.⁹⁸ And other new technologies, such as preimplantation genetic diagnosis and sperm sorting, allow parents to choose the sex of their offspring. Both have spread throughout the world, including China and India, and will make sex selection easier but harder to police, especially as the new technologies become cheaper and more accessible.

Until a society values females as much as males, girls' lives will continue to be threatened by cultural and societal prejudices. And millions of girls will continue to be murdered each

year, 40 years after Mao declared: "Times have changed, and today men and women are equal. . . . Women hold up half the sky."⁹⁹ ■

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Center for Reproductive Rights, 120 Wall St., 14th Floor, New York, NY 10005; (917) 637-3600; www.reproductiverights.org. Legal organization dedicated to advancing women's rights to reproductive health, self-determination and dignity around the world.

Edhi Foundation, Sarafa Bazar, Boulton Market, Mithadar, Karachi, Pakistan; 92 (21) 2413232; www.edhifoundation.com. Nonprofit that provides medical and welfare services across Pakistan and offers free burials to unclaimed bodies.

Human Rights Watch, 350 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10118; (212) 290-4700; www.hrw.org. The largest U.S. human rights organization investigates abuses around the world, including those against children.

Population Research Institute, 1190 Progress Dr., Suite 2D, P.O. Box 1559, Front Royal, VA 22630; (540) 622-5240; www.pop.org. International nonprofit that aims to publicize and end coercive population control.

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 605 Third Ave., New York, NY 10158; (212) 297-5000; www.unfpa.org/public/home/news/pid/6727. www.unfpa.org. International development agency that promotes reproductive health, gender equality and development strategies.

Women's Rights Without Frontiers, P.O. Box 54401, San Jose, CA; (310) 592-5722; www.womensrightswithoutfrontiers.org. International coalition opposed to forced abortion and sterilization in China; seeks to raise awareness on the coercive nature of China's one-child policy.

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Studies show that sex-selective abortions are to blame for the high number of missing girls worldwide.

CITING CQ GLOBAL RESEARCHER

Sample formats for citing these reports in a bibliography include the ones listed below. Preferred styles and formats vary, so please check with your instructor or professor.

MLA STYLE

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Voices From Abroad:

PRABHAT JHA

Epidemiologist and
demographer
University of Toronto
Canada

Nature vs. technology

"It appears that families are saying, 'Nature will decide the first child, but we are going to let technology decide the second child if the first is a girl.'"

The Washington Post, May 2011

LI BIN

Minister, Family Planning
Commission, China

Problems in favoritism

"Illegal fetal sex testing and sex-selective abortions are the direct causes of the long-term problem of a serious skewing in the sex ratio in the mainland, which arises from a deeply rooted tradition that favors boys."

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MARA HVISTENDAHL

Asia Correspondent
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U.S. is complicit

"It took millions of dollars in funding from U.S. organizations, along with thousands of fieldworkers and a good number of mobile clinics, for sex determination and abortion to catch on in the developing world."

*Unnatural Selection (book)
June 2011*

K. S. JACOB

Professor
Christian Medical College
India

There's more to it

"Female foeticide and infanticide are just the tip of the iceberg; there is a whole set of subtle and blatant discriminatory practices against girls and women under various pretexts. It is this large base of discrimination against women that supports the declining sex ratio."

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LIU QIAN

Vice Health Minister
China

Explaining the imbalance

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*Xinhua news agency (China)
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BHAGYASHRI DENGLE

Executive Director
Plan India

'Seen as a burden'

"Girls are seen as a burden [in India], seen as a property which belongs to somebody else, so people see that as a waste of money and the wasting of an education of a girl."

CNN, July 2011

JAMIR ARALIKAR

Son of infanticide
survivor
India

Paying it forward

"I am proud of my mother. After surviving the attempted infanticide, she now helps others fight social injustices like dowry, eve-teasing [sexual harassment] and casteism."

Times of India, March 2011

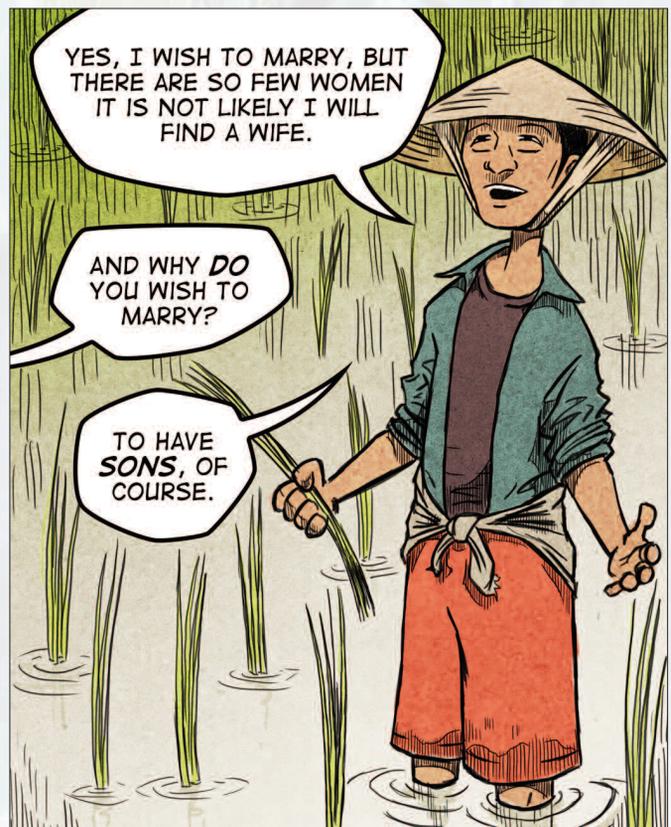
SANJAY GUPTA

President
Federation of Obstetrics
and Gynaecological
Society of India

Identifying the perpetrators

"Although the Preconception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act is in place, which deters doctors and patients from sex determination tests, there is no action plan to bring about coordination and cooperation among doctors and the government. Doctors should voluntarily disclose information about medical practitioners who resort to sex determination tests and the heinous practice of sex selective abortions. . . . There are very few cases where doctors are actually punished for carrying out sex determination tests. The action plan that we are demanding should focus on such errant doctors. . . ."

Times of India, December 2010



CJ Grebb