

Asia's Missing Girls

A traditional preference for boys, combined with technology that allows pregnant women to know the sex of their babies, has led to a huge gender imbalance in China and India

BY PATRICIA SMITH

Yang Xiaowei, a 35-year-old chicken farmer from a village in eastern China, has three children: two older daughters and a long-awaited baby boy.

Having a son is so important, Yang explains, that he and his wife were willing to risk the large fine that could result from violating the government's one-child policy.

"If you don't have a son, people will condescend to you," he says. "It's always been this way. If you have a son, your family will be given a certain social status. You can ask 10 people in the village, and they'll all tell you the same thing."

This kind of thinking is at the heart of a massive demographic problem facing China. Until recently, there wasn't much that anyone could do about having sons or daughters. But in the 1980s, ultrasound scanners—which were intended for checking the health of developing fetuses but also can show their sex—became widely available across Asia.

Suddenly it became easy for women to find out if they were going to have a boy or a girl. And in countries like China

With reporting by Jim Yardley and Ross Douthat of The New York Times; and by Jonathan Kaiman.

WHERE ARE THE GIRLS?

Countries with the highest number of boys born for every 100 girls. (The natural ratio is 105 boys for every 100 girls.)

1. CHINA.....	119
2. AZERBAIJAN.....	117
3. ARMENIA.....	114
4. INDIA.....	111
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6. SOLOMON ISLANDS.....	109
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UNITED STATES.....	105

SOURCE: CARL HAUB, POPULATION REFERENCE BUREAU. NUMBERS ARE MOST RECENT AVAILABLE FOR EACH COUNTRY.

and India, women began deciding not to have their baby if it was going to be a girl. The result is a serious gender imbalance in both countries.

China now has the world's highest gender disparity among newborns: 119 boys are born for every 100 girls. That's well above the natural ratio of 105 boys for every 100 girls (which is also the ratio

in the United States). In some parts of China and India, the imbalance is close to three boys for every two girls. Across Asia, the gender imbalance translates into millions of "missing" girls.

Within a decade, that will mean millions of young men unable to find wives. And experts fear that could lead to an increase in the trafficking of women and an overall spike in crime.

"It's a humongous problem," says Valerie Hudson, a professor at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, and co-author of a book on the topic. "Without a balanced sex ratio in a society, you're courting disaster."

Beyond Asia

Worldwide, demographers say, the number of missing girls has risen to more than 160 million. The problem is most severe in China, India, and the Caucasus region, which includes Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia (*see chart*). But sex ratios are also out of balance in other places, including parts of Europe and Asian-American communities in the United States.

"We've seen sex selection spread from South and East Asia to new countries, and that's alarming," says Mara Hvistendahl, author of *Unnatural Selection: Choosing*



A supermarket in Shanghai: In China, 119 boys are born to every 100 girls.

Boys Over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men.

“The preference for sons is very widespread,” she adds.

In China, the problem is partially a result of the country’s tough one-child policy. It was introduced in 1979 as an attempt to stem the growth of China’s population, which is now 1.3 billion. But limiting couples to one child, which has helped to slow population growth, has had unintended consequences: In addition to the gender imbalance, it’s contributed to a surge in the number of girls given up for adoption. (*See Voices in the Jan. 2, 2012, issue of Upfront.*)

Underlying the gender imbalance are centuries-old Asian attitudes about women. Until well into the 20th century many Asian women weren’t allowed to work outside their homes, go to school, or decide who they would marry. While

Women in China and India are being kidnapped and sold to men desperate for wives.

sons were cherished, girls were often neglected, poorly cared for when they got sick, and sometimes abandoned. (Some of these same attitudes are at work in the non-Asian countries with gender imbalances.)

The Need for a Son

Asian women have made great strides in the last half-century. In China, for example, men and women are now equal

under the law, arranged marriages have been banned, and women are getting good jobs.

So why, especially in rural areas, do many Asians still favor boys? It’s largely about economics—particularly economics rooted in cultural traditions about women.

“Mostly, Chinese worry that if they don’t have a son, no one will take care of them when they are too old to work,” says Wu Shaoming, director of a women’s studies institute in Chengdu, China. The Chinese government does not provide welfare or free medical care to peasants. What’s more, Wu says it’s common for a woman in the countryside to move to her husband’s village after marriage, providing no support to her own family.

That’s how Yang, the chicken farmer, sees it: “If you only have a daughter, after



New Delhi, India: Schoolboys walk by a government billboard encouraging people to value their daughters.

she gets older and gets married, she'll become somebody else's," he explains. "And then when you get old, you'll have nobody to take care of you. So every family needs to have a little boy."

These same attitudes are common in India, which is also struggling with a huge gender imbalance.

In a traditional Indian family, a son is expected to live with his parents, earn an income, inherit property, care for his parents in their old age, and—if they're Hindu—light their funeral pyre. When a daughter marries, the bride's family pays the groom's family a dowry—a gift of money and presents—and she moves in with her husband's family, often leaving her parents with nothing or even in debt from her dowry.

India's gender imbalance is actually getting worse as the country's booming economy pulls millions out of poverty and into a growing middle class that can afford ultrasound tests.

Indian census data confirm that the problem has accelerated since 2001. The 2011 census found 7.1 million fewer girls than boys under the age of 6, compared with a gap of roughly 6 million girls a decade earlier.

For countries like India and China,

this is a demographics problem with very real consequences.

"By the 2020s, 15 percent of men in China and 15 percent of men in northwest India won't have a female counterpart," says Hvistendahl. "There will be decades where a large chunk of men won't be able to marry."

And that could lead to an increase in instability in both places. Women in China and India are already being kidnapped and sold to men desperate for spouses. Crime rates could also spike, since single men are responsible for most crime.

South Korea's Response

The governments of China and India have both banned the use of ultrasound to determine gender. But the laws are hard to enforce.

One country that has had success tackling this problem is South Korea. The ratio is currently 107 boys born for every 100 girls, still above normal, but way down from a peak of more than 116 boys born for every 100 girls in 1990.

The most important factor in changing attitudes toward girls was a radical shift in South Korea's economy that opened the doors to women in the workforce

as never before. This has dismantled long-held traditions, which so devalued daughters that mothers would often apologize for giving birth to a girl.

The government also played a small role. Starting in the 1970s, South Korean officials launched campaigns to change people's attitudes. A typical slogan was, "One daughter raised well is worth 10 sons!"

The Chinese government is also addressing the problem. In the southern village of Hoayang, there are signs forbidding the use of ultrasound machines to determine a baby's sex. Fines for violations can be as high as \$315—a vast sum for a farmer in rural China. A slogan painted by the government on the side of a building reads, "Having a boy and having a girl are the same."

But it takes more than slogans to change long-held attitudes. The traditions that underlie the preference for sons go way back. A generation ago, Yang's parents had 10 daughters before he was finally born.

"There's a saying in Chinese: 'Raise a son to safeguard your old age,'" Yang says. "From thousands of years ago to the present, this hasn't changed at all." ●

INTERNATIONAL



Imbalance: A classroom in northern India, with 20 boys and 8 girls