

The Geography of Gender

For this assignment, you will have two tasks: watch a documentary film trailer entitled “It’s a Girl” and read an article from *The Economist* [modified] entitled “The Worldwide War on Baby Girls.” Both deal with the same topic, sometimes called gendercide or femicide, referring to the abandonment, aborting, selling, mistreating, or outright killing of girls based solely on their gender.

The case studies for such behavior are from India, China, and many parts of sub-Saharan Africa. The topic of gender touches on cultural values, population issues, religious beliefs, and differences in development between countries. It is true that you can tell much about a country based on the role and status of women.

As you view and read, think about the different life experiences between different women in different parts of the world, based only on being female.



It's a Girl:

***Please watch the trailer for the film “It’s a Girl” as an introduction before reading the article. You can also search YouTube “It’s a Girl trailer.”*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISme5-9orR0>

The Worldwide War on Baby Girls:

The Economist, March 4, 2010

(Adapted for the use of students by Marilyn Carmody, NOVA Academy, CA)

Note that the questions do not necessarily follow the chronological order of the article, but are answered throughout the entire article. Meaning, the answer to #1 may be answered in many ways throughout the whole article, not just from information on page 1.



XINRAN XUE, a Chinese writer, describes visiting a peasant family in the Yimeng area of Shandong province. The wife was giving birth. “We had scarcely sat down in the kitchen,” she writes, “when we heard a moan of pain from the bedroom . . . The cries from the inner room grew louder and abruptly stopped. There was a low sob, and then a man’s gruff voice said accusingly: ‘Useless thing!’ Suddenly, I thought I heard a slight movement in the slops pail behind me. To my absolute horror, I saw a tiny foot poking out of the pail. The midwife must have dropped that tiny baby alive into the slops pail! I nearly threw myself at it, but the two policemen [who had accompanied me] held my shoulders in a firm grip. ‘Don’t move, you can’t save it, it’s too late.’ But that’s . . . murder. . . and you’re the police!” The little foot was still now. The policemen held on to me for a few more minutes. “Doing a baby girl is not a big thing around here,” [an] older woman said comfortingly. “That’s a living child,” I said in a shaking voice, pointing at the slops pail. “It’s not a child,” she corrected me. “It’s a girl baby, and we can’t keep it. Around these parts, you can’t get by without a son. Girl babies don’t count.”

In January 2010 the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) showed what can happen to a country when girl babies don’t count. Within ten years, one in five young men would be unable to find a bride because of the death of young women, a figure unprecedented in a country at peace. The number is based on the sexual discrepancy among people aged 19 and below. According to CASS, by 2020 China will have 30m-40m more men of this age than young women. For comparison, there are 23m boys below the age of 20 in Germany, France, and Britain combined and around 40m American boys and young men. So within ten years, China faces the prospect of having the equivalent of the whole young male population of America, or almost twice that of Europe’s three largest countries, with little prospect of marriage, untethered to a home of their own and without the stake in society that marriage and children provide.

Genocide is often seen as an unintended consequence of China’s one-child policy (1979 – 2015), or as a product of poverty or ignorance. But that cannot be the whole story. The surplus of bachelors – called in China *guanggun*, or “bare branches” – seems to have accelerated between 1990 and 2005, in ways not obviously linked to the one-child policy, introduced in 1979. The war against baby girls is not confined to China. Parts of India Eastern Asian countries (South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan) also have peculiarly high numbers of male births. Even subsets of American populations are following suit, though not the population as a whole.

The real cause (argues Nick Eberstadt, a demographer at the American Enterprise Institute, a think-tank in Washington, D.C.) is not any country’s policy but “the fateful collision between overweening son preference, the use of rapidly spreading prenatal sex-determination technology and declining fertility.” These are global trends.

Naturally, boys are slightly more likely to die in infancy than girls. To compensate, more boys are born than girls so there will be equal numbers of young men and women at puberty. In all societies that record births, between 103 and 106 boys are normally born for every 100 girls. The ratio has been so stable over time that it appears to be the natural order of things.

That order has changed fundamentally in the past 25 years. In China the sex ratio for those born between 1985 and 1989 was 108, just outside the natural range. Born in 2000-04, was 124 (i.e., 124

boys for every 100 girls). These rates are biologically impossible without human intervention. CASS finds, “the gender imbalance has been growing wider year after year.”

South Korea is experiencing some surprising consequences. The surplus of bachelors in a rich country has sucked in brides from abroad. In 2008, 11% of marriages were “mixed,” mostly



between a Korean man and a foreign woman. This is causing tensions, which is often hostile to the children of mixed marriages. The trend is especially marked in rural areas, where the government thinks half the children of farm households will be mixed by 2020. The children are common enough to have produced a new word: “Kosians,” or Korean-Asians.

After the Soviet Union imploded in 1991, there was an upsurge in the ratio of boys to girls in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Their sex ratios rose from normal levels in 1991 to 115-120 by 2000. There are even signs of distorted sex ratios in America, among various groups of Asian-Americans. In 1975, the sex ratio for Chinese-, Japanese-, and Filipino-Americans was between 100 and 106. In 2002, it was 107 to 109.

But the country with the most remarkable record is that other supergiant, India. India does not produce figures for sex ratios at birth, so its numbers are not strictly comparable. But there is no doubt that the number of

boys has been rising relative to girls with regional disparities.

Conventional wisdom about such disparities is that they are the result of “backward thinking” in old-fashioned societies or – in China – of the one-child policy. By implication, reforming policy or modernizing society (for example, enhancing the status of women) should bring the sex ratio back to normal. But this is not always true. For example, culture and tradition play a part, especially those in which the family line passes through the son and where he is supposed to look after his aging parents. Therefore, a son is worth more than a daughter. A girl is deemed to have joined her husband’s family in marriage, and is lost to her parents. As a Hindu saying puts it, “Raising a daughter is like watering your neighbours’ garden.”

In 1999 the government of India asked women what sex they wanted their child to be. One third of those without children said a son, two-thirds had no preference and only a residual said a daughter. Polls carried out in Pakistan and Yemen show similar results. In China midwives charge more for delivering a son than a daughter.

Until the 1980s people in poor countries could do little about this preference. But in that decade, ultrasound scanning and other methods of detecting the sex of a child before birth began to make their appearance. These technologies changed everything. Doctors in India started advertising ultrasound scans with the slogan “Pay 5,000 rupees (\$110) today and save 50,000 rupees tomorrow”

(the saving was on the cost of a daughter's dowry). Parents who wanted a son, but balked at killing baby daughters, chose abortion by the millions.

The use of sex-selective abortion was banned in India in 1994 and in China in 1995. It is illegal in most countries (though Sweden legalized the practice in 2009). But since it is almost impossible to prove that an abortion has been carried out for reasons of sex selection, the practice remains widespread. An ultrasound scan costs about \$12, which is within the scope of many Chinese and Indian families. In one hospital in northern India, the only girls born after a round of ultrasound scans had been mistakenly identified as boys, or else had a male twin.

The spread of fetal-imaging technology has not only skewed the sex ratio but also explains that these sexual disparities tend to rise with income and education. In India, some of the most prosperous states have the worst sex ratios. In China, the higher a province's literacy rate, the more skewed its sex ratio. The ratio also rises with income per head.

In China, the one-child policy increases that pressure further which explains the unnatural upsurge in the number of boys. In most Chinese cities [during China's one-child policy] couples are usually allowed to have only one child – the policy in its pure form. But, there were exceptions. For example, in the countryside, where 55% of China's population lives, there are three variants of the one-child policy. In the coastal provinces some 40% of couples are permitted a second child if their first is a girl or if the parents suffer "hardship," a criterion determined by local officials. In the far west and Inner Mongolia, the provinces do not really operate a one-child policy at all. Minorities are permitted second, sometimes even third, children, whatever the sex of the first-born (see map).



The provinces in this last group are the only ones with close to normal sex ratios. They are sparsely populated and inhabited by ethnic groups that do not like abortion and whose family systems do not disparage the value of daughters. As for India, first-born daughters were treated the same as their brothers; younger sisters were more likely to die in infancy. The rule seems to be that parents will joyfully embrace a daughter as their first child. But they will go to extraordinary lengths to ensure subsequent children are sons.

The hazards of bare branches:

Throughout human history, young men have been responsible for the vast preponderance of crime and violence – especially single men in countries where status and social acceptance depend on being married and having children, as it does in China and India. A rising population of frustrated single men spells trouble. The crime rate has almost doubled in China during the past 20 years of rising sex ratios, with stories of bride abduction and trafficking of women, rape, and prostitution. A study into whether these things were connected concluded that they were, and that higher sex ratios accounted for about one-seventh of the rise in crime. In India, too, there is a correlation between crime rates and sex ratios.

Violence is not the only consequence. For example, in parts of India, the cost of dowries is said to have fallen. Where people pay a bride price (i.e., the groom's family gives money to the bride's), that price has risen. Also, during the 1990s, China saw the appearance of tens of thousands of "extra-birth guerrilla troops" – couples from one-child areas who live in a legal limbo, moving from city to city in order to shield their two or three children from authorities. Additionally, female suicide rates in China are among the highest in the world (as are South Korea's). Suicide is the commonest form of death among Chinese rural women aged 15-34; young mothers kill themselves by drinking agricultural fertilizers. It is believed that they cannot live with the knowledge that they have aborted or killed their baby daughters.

Other consequences of the skewed sex ratio have been unexpected. It has probably increased China's savings rate. This is because parents with a single son save to increase his chances of attracting a wife in China's ultra-competitive marriage market. Researchers calculate that about half the increase in China's savings in the past 25 years can be attributed to the rise in the sex ratio. Over the next generation, many of the problems associated with sex selection will get worse. The social consequences will become more evident because the boys born in large numbers over the past decade will reach maturity then. Meanwhile, the practice of sex selection itself may spread because fertility rates are continuing to fall as ultrasound scanners reach throughout the developing world.

Yet the story of the destruction of baby girls does not end in deepest gloom. At least one country – South Korea – has reversed its cultural preference for sons and cut the distorted sex ratio. There are reasons for thinking China and India might follow suit.

South Korea was the first country to report exceptionally high sex ratios and has been the first to cut them. After a lag of a decade, the sex ratio began to fall in the mid-1990s and is now 110 to 100. It has been argued that though it takes a long time for social norms favoring sons to alter, and though the transition can be delayed by the introduction of ultrasound scans, eventually change will come. Modernization not only makes it easier for parents to control the sex of their children, it also changes people's values and undermines those norms which set a higher store on sons. At some point, one trend becomes more important than the other. It is possible that China and India may be reaching that point now. The census of 2000 and the CASS study both show the sex ratio stable at around 120. At the very least, it seems to have stopped rising

Though the two giants [India and China] are much poorer than South Korea, their governments are doing more to persuade people to treat girls equally (anti-discrimination laws and media campaigns). The unintended consequences of sex selection have been vast and may get worse. But there does seem to be a turnaround in the phenomenon of 'missing girls' in Asia.

SEE NEXT PAGE FOR QUESTION

Questions:

1. Describe some of the cultural and social causes of “gendercide.” (Why is there such a preference for boys in some cultures?)
2. Describe some of the negative effects this skewed sex ratio has on countries.
3. What are some of the specific countries/areas in which gender preferences are the highest?
4. About halfway through the article the author cites a Hindu saying that “Raising a daughter is like watering your neighbours’ garden.” Based on what you read, what do you interpret this to mean?