

Asia's female populations fall amid sex-selection abortions

Technology used to reject daughters

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In research for the East-West Center in Honolulu, Dr. Park looks at increasing sex-selective abortion in several Asian countries. The following is from his report.

In Asian societies with a strong preference for sons, there is growing evidence that couples are using ultrasound and other modern methods to identify the sex of unborn fetuses, and selectively aborting females.

Population statistics in South Korea, China, Taiwan and parts of India show a record preponderance of male births, leading to predictions of gender imbalance in future generations.

In "normal" human populations, women give birth to slightly more boys than girls — 104 to 107 males for every 100 females born. Infant and child mortality rates are generally higher for boys than for girls, so as children grow up the number of girls and boys gradually becomes more balanced.

But several practices lead to an abnormal preponderance of boys. Neglect or mistreatment can increase female mortality rates.

In Bangladesh's Matlab region, the highest death rates among children aged 1 to 4 years are for girls with older sisters.

Alternatively, the birth of baby girls may simply not be reported. In China during the 1980s, couples

Policy watch

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who wanted sons but faced harsh penalties if they had too many children sometimes gave baby girls away for adoption without registering their births.

Abnormally high sex ratios at birth are a new phenomenon.

The figures began to skyrocket in the 1980s, shortly after fetal screening became widely available. By 1992, 119 boys were born for every 100 girls in China, 114 in South Korea, 110 in Taiwan, and an estimated 112 in India. These numbers provide convincing evidence that couples are aborting female fetuses.

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poses a dilemma for policy-makers.

In East Asia, abortion has traditionally been common. Today it is one of the most widely used methods of fertility control. Efforts to stop sex-selective abortion have focused on the use of fetal screening for sex identification.

The practice was outlawed in South Korea in 1987, and penalties were sharply increased in 1994. Physicians who perform such tests may now be imprisoned for up to one year, may be fined up to \$12,000, and may lose their medical licenses.

In May 1989, China's Ministry of Health issued "An urgent notice on strictly forbidding use of medical technology to perform prenatal sex determination."

The Indian Parliament recently passed a bill banning all fetal screening except for the detection of genetic abnormalities.

Although the legal framework is important, some observers believe harsh regulations have only made prenatal sex screening more clandestine and more expensive.

Government officials stress the need to address the underlying problem of son preference. Recommended policies include the promotion of gender equality through the schools and the mass media; an attack on discrimination in children's access to nutrition, health care, education, and economic opportunities; and a stronger focus on ethics curricula in medical schools.

For a copy of the full report, telephone the East-West Center at (808) 944-7145.