

**4th Asia Pacific Conference on
Reproductive and Sexual Health and Rights**

October 29-31, 2007
Hyderabad, India

Sex Selection:
Pervasiveness and preparedness
in Nepal

Executive Summary

NEPAL



United Nations Population Fund



One of the most alarming changes in Asia's population dynamics in recent decades has been a dramatic increase in the proportion of males within its local populations. Unfortunately, these changes were not identified immediately, due to lack of data. A new phenomenon was underway: sex ratio at birth was – and is – tilting towards boys, in a way that had never before been recorded. Indeed, if the continent's overall sex ratio was the same as elsewhere in the world, in 2005 Asia's population would have included almost 163 million more women and girls.

The ramifications of such an imbalance will not only continue for decades, but will affect an enormous proportion of the Asian population. While men of marriageable age will suddenly find a dramatic shortage of potential brides, it is girls and women of all ages who will truly feel the brunt of this dynamic. In addition to forecasted increases in gender-based violence, trafficking, discrimination and general vulnerability of women and girls, it is crucial to understand what has led to this imbalance in the first place: a deeply rooted preference for sons, which leads parents across cultures and geographic locations to decide against allowing a girl to live, even before her birth, and the increasing availability of technology that enables them to do so with ease.

The issue of sex selection drives directly at the core of UNFPA's central priorities of addressing sexual and reproductive health and rights of all women, men, children and young people; using population data to inform policies and programmes; and ensuring that gender equality is a core part of all interventions. UNFPA has taken a central role in facilitating the awareness-building process on the issue of sex selection, within countries struggling with the growing impact of 'missing girls' and others who are experiencing spill over effects as well as at the regional level. On the understanding that effective strategies cannot be formulated in the absence of solid data, UNFPA has commissioned a series of studies in four Asian countries, some for the first time, looking at sex-selection practices as well as a regional analysis to provide insight into the causes, manifestations and future scenarios that will confront Asian societies unless concerted action is taken.



UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, is an international development agency that promotes the right of every woman, man and child to enjoy a life of health and equal opportunity. UNFPA supports countries in using population data for policies and programmes to reduce poverty and to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, every young person is free of HIV/AIDS, and every girl and woman is treated with dignity and respect.

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This study is aimed at identifying the incidences, causes and determinants of pre-natal sex selection in four of the eight districts of Nepal (as well as Kathmandu) that had high sex ratios for the population below 1 year of age in the 2001 census. In addition, the study examined the situation in three border routes connecting Nepal with major towns in India.

Analysis indicates that the practice of pre-natal sex determination and sex-selective abortion is low in the study population. Only 3 per cent (74 women) of the ever-pregnant women had sought pre-natal sex-determination tests. The study also found that more than half of the married women in the survey (54 per cent) had no preference for any sex during the first pregnancy, though son preference in the first pregnancy was found to be higher among women in the Tarai than in the hill districts.

At the same time, however, among those who had a daughter as their first child, the vast majority (81 per cent) reported preferring to bear a son during the next pregnancy. Indeed, daughters are still widely perceived to be of less economic value, because tradition continues to demand that women's families give dowry at the time of marriage; in addition, women almost always live in their husband's home after marriage, thus disallowing them from helping their birth parents on any sustained basis. Sons, on the other hand, are perceived to be future sources of economic support (including in bringing home dowry) and old-age security, while religion allows only sons to perform last rites.

Women from the Tarai have relatively easy access to sex-determination clinics in Indian border towns. The study showed that 57 per cent of married women are aware of pre-natal sex-determination technologies, and know where to obtain such services. One-fifth of the women who ever had pre-natal sex-determination tests had visited India to do so. The study identified 72 clinics located in 10 border towns and cities along the three studied border routes in India that provide sex-selection services to Nepalese women.

Key conclusions

- Sex selection is not a major concern now; however, it is likely that demand could increase in future due to son preference and availability of technology;
- Proximity to India has impacted knowledge of and access to sex-selection services

Way forward

- Train all medical practitioners on gender issues and long-term consequences of sex selection;
- Stringent measures need to be instituted to prevent the misuse of ultrasound;
- Educate public against practice of dowry, especially in the Tarai.
- Ensure equitable care of women particularly after giving birth to girls, to reduce risk of uterine prolapse ;
- Initiate programmes to benefit girl child such as scholarships and incentives;
- In future censuses, collect data related to sex ratio at birth.