A small girl who was found on a roadside shares a cot at an orphanage in India. Every year, thousands of girls are abandoned, killed or aborted as parents make harsh choices reflecting son preference.

Image: Zana Briski

Chapter 1

son preference

According to the wisdom of various Asian proverbs, to have a son is "good economics and good politics" and "as essential as taking food at least once a day." A boy's birth is attended by a variety of celebrations and likened to "a sunrise in the abode of gods." For girls, however, the axioms are very different. Being labelled an *abu-banat* in Arabic is to be insulted as the "father of daughters", and one adage in India likens raising a daughter to "watering the neighbour's garden."[1] In certain parts of Pakistan, an "endearment" for daughters roughly translates as "May you die."[2]

The expendable girl child

Around the world, many girls die because of the lesser value accorded to them. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that more than one million female babies succumb each year as a result of inequitable access to healthcare, differential feeding and other forms of neglect.[3] Some researchers put the global number of "missing" females — those who should currently be living but are not because of discriminatory practices — to between 50 million and 100 million, telling "a terrible story of inequality and neglect."[4]

Existing in various forms and across many cultures, son preference includes a broad spectrum of customs and rituals, the foundations of which are favouritism towards male children with concomitant disregard for daughters. In almost all cultures, it is the sons who carry the family name, making male progeny essential to the propagation of the family lineage. In many societies, a daughter is destined in marriage to live with her husband's family. The responsibility for the care of aging parents often falls to sons, who not only support their parents in their dotage, but also perform their parents' burial rights, especially in communities throughout Asia and Africa. At the very least, not having a son is a source of vulnerability for parents in this life; at its worst, it may prevent mothers and fathers from "securing peace in the next world."[5]

While scientific data on the prevalence and effects of discriminatory practices against females is very difficult to obtain, population sex ratios, birth sex ratios and infant- and child-mortality rates often are used as indicators to assess son preference. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), regions where son preference is most apparent include Asia (China, Bangladesh, India, Korea, Nepal, Pakistan, Taiwan), the Middle East (Iran, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey) and parts of

Africa (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Cameroon, Liberia, Madagascar, Senegal), as well as Latin America (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay).

Although the most typical demonstration of son preference is the neglect of daughters, its most extreme form is female infanticide, or the intentional killing of baby girls.[6] Infanticide of either sex, whether for economic, social or other reasons, has been prevalent across cultures throughout history. Even today, infants under one year of age in the United Kingdom are "four times as likely to be victims of homicide as any other age group — almost all killed by their parents."[7]

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Infanticide specifically targeting females, however, has largely been supplanted — at least for those who have access to modern technology — by preventing the birth of girls through sex-identification testing and sex-selective abortion, representing "a substitution of prenatal discrimination for postnatal discrimination."[8] Most pronounced in India, China, Korea and Taiwan, much of the contemporary research on prebirth sex selection, as well as its historical cousin, female infanticide, focuses on the world's two most populous countries: India and China.

Prebirth sex selection and female infanticide in India

Based on extrapolations from the 1991 census, approximately 35 million to 45 million females were concluded "missing" in India, a finding which repeated itself in the 2001 tally. In that year, 933 women were enumerated for every 1,000 men. Ratios in specific states in the north of India were even more dramatic and as low as 861 women per 1,000 men.[9] Some of those among the missing are never even born: An estimated 106,000 female foetuses are aborted in India every year following sex-identification testing.[10] A significantly lower number may be killed as newborns — poisoned, suffocated, burned or buried alive. According to one father, "If we kill female babies immediately after their birth, the chance of having a male son is very high."[11]

Outlawed by the British in 1870, female infanticide still retains a foothold in some areas of northwest India, where the practice has a long history. In a human rights survey in 2000, the State Department of the United States estimated that there are 10,000 cases of female infanticide annually in India.[12] One traditional practice was to feed unwanted girls milk laced with poison or shredded paddy husk, the latter slitting a baby's tender throat as it was swallowed.[13] In the face of modern post-mortem examination technology, however, today's methods have become more strategic. A woman from Tamil Nadu dispassionately explained how things have changed: "We no longer kill the girl baby with the poisonous sap of the oleander plant, as traces of the poison can be detected. We make the death appear natural. For instance, we starve the baby to death or asphyxiate it."[14]

Female infanticide, however, has not been perpetrated with complete indifference. Elaborate traditional ceremonies were designed to absolve parents of wrongdoing. According to one Indian custom, after an infant girl is killed, the parents bury her in the room in which she was born and replaster the floor with cow dung to purify the site. Thirteen days after the death, a village priest — a Brahman — must cook a meal using *ghee* (clarified butter) and eat it in the room. By doing so, he "takes the sin of killing the baby upon himself."[15]

Given this moral ambivalence towards killing girl infants, it is not surprising that modern methods of foetal sex identification and pregnancy termination have replaced infanticide as the preferred way for some families in India to control the number of daughters they have. Abortion under certain circumstances was legalised in India in 1971.[16] Since then, it has become a burgeoning business, especially for the purposes of sex selection. From 1982 to 1987, the number of sex-determination clinics in Bombay grew from fewer than 10 to 248.[17] One study from that period revealed that of 8,000 abortions performed in Bombay in a single year, 7,999 were female foetuses.[18] In a study of one Bombay hospital, 430 out of 450 female foetuses were aborted, while none of 250 male foetuses were — even when there was evidence of a genetic problem.[19]

Birth order also plays its part in sex-selective abortions. The higher the birth order, the greater likelihood a female foetus will be aborted.[20] While it is generally accepted that one girl is needed "to light the lamp" in each home, a second or third daughter might be viewed as a liability.[21]

Although national legislation criminalising sex-determination testing was introduced in the mid-1990s, recent research suggests that sex-

Social workers in India counsel a pregnant woman who they believe is at high risk of commiting female infanticide. Her seven-year-old daughter waits by her side.

Image: Zana Briski

Another abandoned girl sleeps in rudimentary conditions at an orphanage in India. She faces an uncertain future in a culture where many baby girls start life with comparatively fewer opportunities than baby boys.

Image: Zana Briski

Plastic baby-boy dolls for sale to pilgrims praying for fertility at the tomb of Fuxi, who according to Chinese legend is the creator of the human race. In a 1997 report, more than 50 million females were concluded "missing" from China's current population.

Image: Mark Henley/Panos

selective abortion continues to flourish in India as a method for controlling family composition.[22] Some experts argue that disproportionate sex ratios where men increasingly outnumber women will eventually elevate the status of women by creating a greater demand for wives, leading to positive reforms in the dowry system in India.[23] Others contend, however, that sustained sex-ratio imbalances do "not improve the status of women, [but rather] … reflect it."[24] In the last century, such imbalances increased steadily from 972 women per 1,000 men in 1901 to 930 women per 1,000 men in 1971. For the following 30 years, they remained virtually unchanged, fluctuating between 927 and 933.[25] In the meantime, dowry payments have increased significantly, and dowry crimes and many other forms of violence against women do not appear to be abating.

Beyond perpetuating gender-based discrimination, sex-selective abortion triggers a host of other negative repercussions for women and girls. Because the primary modes of sex determination among the lower classes are amniocentesis and ultrasound — the first unavailable and the second unreliable until the second trimester — sex selection often leads to late-term abortions, which in turn can cause an array of reproductive-health problems for pregnant women. In addition, more girls may be wed at a younger age due to a scarcity of marriageable women, further contributing to the poor status of women as these young brides are less likely to complete their education and are likely to suffer increased morbidity and mortality associated with early child-bearing.[26]

The declining sex ratio could also stimulate an increase in prostitution, as well as other forms of exploitation and violence against women.[27] In India, women reportedly have been "imported", internally and from Bangladesh, to areas where sex ratios are dramatically low. According to one account, these women are "treated as slaves, and subjected to physical and sexual abuse."[28] Whether or not trafficking and other forms of violence against women can be attributed directly to sex-ratio imbalances remains an area for further investigation.

Prebirth sex selection and female infanticide in China

While female infanticide existed in China before 1949, the installation of the People's Republic of China heralded a significant decline in excessive female mortality — at least until the 1980s. At the end of 1979, the government implemented its "one-child policy", penalising couples for bearing children "outside the plan". Pressured to limit their number of children, many couples took whatever measures were necessary to ensure that they had a son. By the mid-1980s, the use of sex-selective technology was widespread, and from 1985 onwards, China's sex-ratio imbalance conspicuously reasserted itself. The ratio of boys relative to girls increased from 111.3 boys per 100 girls in 1990 to 116.9 boys per 100 girls in 2000.[29]

In a 1997 report, the WHO estimated that more than 50 million Chinese women were "missing" from the current female population. An analysis from 1999 noted, "The imbalance between the sexes is so distorted that there are 111 million men in China — more than three times the population of Canada — who will not be able to find a wife."[30] According to the 2000 census, as many as seven provinces had sex ratios at birth exceeding 120 boys for every 100 girls, and these imbalances rose proportionately for higher-birth-order children.[31]

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International adoption of girl babies may account for some of the sex-ratio disparities in China. So, too, might the estimated million or so "orphaned" girls who are consigned to state institutions so abysmal that one documentary film referred to them as "dying rooms".[32] Another explanation for sex-ratio imbalances in China has been the underreporting of female births, where girls might not be counted because they were never officially registered by their parents. However, recent data from China's Family Planning Commission revealed, surprisingly, that in almost all of China's provinces, more male than female births were underreported from 1990 to 1999.[33] This evidence suggests that the high numbers of "missing" females in many provinces can be attributed primarily to sex-selective abortions.[34] In certain parts of China, according to one reporter, "Gynaecology clinics offering ultrasound tests do a flourishing business, and are more common in many neighbourhoods than convenience stores."[35]

China has instituted a number of policies to prevent sex-selective abortions, most recently in January 2005, when it banned abortions beyond the 14th week of gestation. As a result, there has been an apparent increase in the number of underground abortion services in "back-alley" settings where, according to one Chinese doctor, "safety is very poor, because the ability of these little clinics to respond to

emergencies is very poor."[36] The health hazards associated with late-term abortions are among the many risks to which women and girls are exposed. As in India, sex imbalances in China may be exacerbating the trade of women, both internally and across borders.[37] According to official Chinese statistics from 1990 to 1999, on average 8,000 women per year were rescued from forced marriages by authorities. It is impossible to know what proportion has yet to be rescued.[38]

Root causes: the lesser value of women and girls

An undeniable psychological effect of son preference on women and girls is the internalisation of the meagre value accorded them by society. It could be argued that women carry out sex-selective abortion or female infanticide because of low self-esteem. It is probably more accurate, however, to say that these practices are for many women a sober acknowledgement of the miseries they suffer in oppressive patriarchal societies. Acting on the belief that, in the words of one woman, "It is better they die than live like me," mothers who abort female foetuses or kill their girl babies may think they are actually doing them a favour.[39] One Bombay gynaecologist echoed such wrenching pragmatism: "You can't wish away centuries of thinking by saying boys and girls are equals. … It is better to get rid of an unwanted child than to make it suffer all its life."[40]

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Beyond female psychology, various other theories have been proffered to explain the popularity of sex-selective abortion. First among them is the availability of the sex-identification technology itself. This explanation, however, does not clarify why these practices are not prevalent in more developed areas in China, such as Shanghai and Beijing, as well as in many developed countries where sex-detection technology is widely available.[41] Moreover, legislation already exists to control the use of the technology. In the late 1980s China outlawed sex-determination tests, followed by India in 1994. These measures have not had a significant impact on sex ratios and, as is illustrated in China's "back-alley" clinics, they may make sex-selective abortion more clandestine and expensive, thereby increasing its danger to women. Sex-detection technology does not cause son preference — instead it intensifies "the manifestation of gender bias where this bias is already strong."[42]

Rapid fertility decline is also cited as an explanation for sex-ratio imbalances, particularly in Asian countries. But in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand, where son preference appears to be nearly nonexistent, a rapid decline in fertility has not led to abnormal sex ratios at birth.[43] Nor can sex selection be solely or even primarily attributed to poverty. Taiwan and Korea are "some of the most developed places in Asia, yet sex-selective abortion is very widespread … greater economic development, affluence, education, and knowledge do not necessarily ameliorate son preference or reduce the use of sex-selective abortion."[44]

The burden of dowry also has been used as justification for sex-selective abortions. In India, sex-determination clinics solicit clients with slogans like "Better 500 now than 5,000 later", where the number 500 indicates the price of a sex-determination test and the number 5,000 indicates the cost of a bride's dowry payment.[45] This does not explain, however, why sex-ratio imbalances are high in China and South Korea, where bride price, rather than dowry, is the norm, and where the expenses of a son's wedding may exceed that of a daughter's several times over.[46]

Research suggests that poverty actually may protect some Indian girls, especially in settings where they participate in subsistence agriculture and therefore are valued as producers.[47] Wealth, on the other hand, poses a significant risk, and imbalances in sex ratios are most acute among the higher classes in India.[48] In the Punjab region, one of India's more economically advanced states, approximately one in five female foetuses is thought to be aborted following sex-identification testing.[49]

In a study of the middle class in Punjab, the top two reasons cited for aborting a female foetus were "male-dominated society" and "social stigma attached to having a daughter."[50] In China, research indicates that the most seriously perceived gender inequality for many women is that they anticipate they will be deeply discriminated against if they fail to have a son.[51] Regardless of levels of development, patriarchal systems sustain these attitudes. Clearly, any lasting efforts to address sex-selective abortion and female infanticide will require fundamental changes in cultural norms that promote son preference. ■

An abandoned newborn baby girl lies alone at a hospital in India.

Image: Zana Briski