



SOCIETY

## *How sex selection of babies has led to a huge surplus of men and why that's bad for all of us*

**MARA HVISTENDAHL IN CONVERSATION WITH BRIAN BETHUNE**

FLUENT IN CHINESE and Spanish, Mara Hvistendahl is a Beijing-based correspondent for *Science* magazine and a former journalism professor at Fudan University in Shanghai. She is the author of *Unnatural Selection*, about how and why rampant sex-selective abortion in Asia is skewing the entire world's gender balance.

**Q:** *The natural sex ratio at birth, resulting in equal numbers of men and women, is 105 males to 100 females. But in Asia, that ratio has been skewed for a generation, and demographers calculate there are now over 163 million women "missing" from the continent's population. Which countries have been most affected?*

**A:** The areas most affected are eastern China and northwest India—the most developed parts of those nations—as well as South Korea, Taiwan and northern Vietnam. The important thing is that it's beginning to appear in other parts of India and China.

**Q:** *Lately it's come to Asian immigrant communities in North America, and nations where it was not expected, like in Eastern Europe.*

**A:** That's right. Very few people anticipated that you'd see sex selection in Albania and Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia.

**Q:** *Is the ratio in the Chinese port city of Lianyungang, 163 boys to 100 girls among children under five, the highest on record?*

**A:** Yes, although I think there were periods in the '90s where some South Korean cities had a ratio at birth of over 200. On record, the worst areas are somewhere above 150.

**Q:** *It's clear what has to come together for this to occur: rapid modernization, access to ultrasound machines to determine fetal sex and access to abortion, and an overall drop in fertility.*

**A:** A drop in fertility, yes, absolutely necessary. Across Asia it's gone from 5.7 children per woman to 2.3 in 40 years, but that figure is for all of Asia: in the sex-selection hot spots, the number of children a woman has is between one and 1.5. The same for the new areas. Armenians are at 1.3, Georgians at 1.4, Azerbaijanis have fewer children than Americans. Then you need access to ultrasound, and that abortion be available. As the birth rate falls in a country where a high

premium is placed on sons, there's more pressure on women to ensure that one of those children is a son.

**Q:** *Abortion as the normal birth control method seems key, making it easier to consider ending a pregnancy over gender. Do you agree?*

**A:** It's crucial that abortion is legal and available. A Korean sociologist told me, "Look, if Korea didn't have the history it does of not only abortion but other population control methods being heavily encouraged and sometimes forced on people, I don't think that we would have the same degree of sex-selective abortion today." But I would stop short of saying that this is entirely about abortion. My book is really a technological history, and it's a book about bioethics. We're developing new sex-selection technologies now and those have nothing to do with abortion. Sex selection during the *in vitro* fertilization is a Western variation. I don't think campaigns against sex selection should turn into campaigns against all abortion.

**Q:** *Is that why you don't use the emotionally loaded terms that other people use about what's*

*happening: gendercide, feticide?*

**A:** As I was preparing this book I was struck by how U.S. abortion politics had come to bear on the issue, and it's a loaded issue for both the right and the left. I do believe in a woman's right to terminate a pregnancy. And while anti-abortion groups in the U.S. are pushing through bans on sex-selective abortions, their goal is not to increase the number of women in the world, per se, but rather to establish a precedent for the fetus being a life. So it's a difficult thing to talk about. The right wing uses words like gendercide and feticide, and the other extreme is people on the left who don't use the word abortion at all, when what's happening is abortion.

**Q:** *I understand it is a difficult issue, especially for pro-choice women.*

**A:** Yeah, but what's important to remember is that the context surrounding abortion in Asia is completely different from in the West. In the U.S., a woman often has to brave picket lines if she wants to get an abortion. Sometimes there aren't clinics in her town. In Asia, in the countries where sex-selection occurs, abortion is pervasive. In China, abortion clinics advertise on prime-time television, and it's just very different.

**Q:** *That's the familiarity aspect of abortion. But I want to ask about the cascading effect of sex selection. How does that occur?*

**A:** The marriage squeeze? There are two dynamics at play. The Asian generations born in the '80s are much larger than those that will come after, even while there are fewer women in them, meaning fewer potential mothers. One demographer I spoke with called it a double whammy. That's one challenge. At the same time you have this marriage squeeze—the first generation of surplus men may marry women who are a few years younger, because they have trouble finding women their age. But the shortage trickles down, so for later generations the situation is much more dire, with single men competing not just against their own generation but against an existing surplus of older males.

**Q:** *One possible end result is the South Korean situation. There the natural ratio has been restored because now couples' number preference—one child—overwhelms their gender preference. Korea is like Japan, with equal numbers of boys and girls but, really, no children.*

**A:** The average Korean woman only has about 1.1 or 1.2 children. The preference for male children remains after a first child, but for the most part people are just having one.

**Q:** *In terms of global social implications, you note, scathingly, that some economists think the value of women will rise with their relative*

*rarity. You're not impressed?*

**A:** That's an idea that's been put forth since the '80s. It seems like a way to wash your hands of the issue: it will balance itself out, we don't have to do anything. Yes, a commodity like oil, as it becomes scarce, the price goes up and people fight over it, and that's what's happening, in a crude way, with women. But women don't control that value.

**Q:** *Implications for women are often dire?*

**A:** From Taiwan and Korea, where we had sex

**Gender imbalance:** *In one city, the ratio is 163 boys to 100 girls among children under five*



selection early and men now can't find wives, bachelors go on marriage tours to Vietnam. They pay \$10,000 and that covers the flight to Ho Chi Minh City and room and board. Once they arrive they go to a hotel and the women are basically village women who are sold by their parents and they're lined up for the men to pick from.

**Q:** *In the couple you focus on, I was struck that the Vietnamese bride was the ninth of 10 children, a family number now unheard of in Taiwan, as it is here. Among the many unexpected consequences of the gender imbalance is that this process may turn out to be so profitable in areas like the Mekong Delta that there will be a selective pressure to have girls—just another, more lucrative, agricultural crop.*

**A:** There is a globalization of marriage going on. In the very poor parts of the world, people now see an advantage in having daughters. One island in the Mekong Delta has sent so

many women to Taiwan that it's called Taiwan Island. The families that send women there are better off, and they have more appliances, they have bigger homes, and the island on the whole is doing very well. It's, yeah, a bit of a business.

**Q:** *And if that is a business, about which we could shrug our shoulders, we are also witnessing increases in sex trafficking, in forced marriages and even honour killings. That would be examples of the new value of scarce women going to men, not to the women themselves?*

**A:** Right. One story I featured in the book is of a 15-year-old girl in Vietnam who was chatting with a boy on the Internet. When she showed up to meet him in Hanoi she was kidnapped, shoved across the border to China and put to work in a brothel. I included that because an increase in prostitution is one of the effects of the gender imbalance. As for forced marriages, there are stories of women being forced to marry multiple brothers, of girls being bought very young and families who raise them until they're old enough to marry their sons.

**Q:** *Then there's the male response?*

**A:** There will be millions of men, most of them at the bottom of the social ladder, who can't find wives and most won't be happy about it. Compare high sex-ratio areas where the men are now grown to low ratio areas, and there's higher crime and more violence. If you look back at history, it was never great to have a huge surplus of men. Look at the

Wild West in the U.S., or the settlement of Australia—areas racked by violence. The modern world has never seen an imbalance on this level.

**Q:** *And violence not just between the men themselves but to women, too.*

**A:** Violence toward women, that's an important thing

**There will be millions of men who can't find wives. The modern world has never seen an imbalance like this.**

to remember. A lot of sex crime. In India there have been reports from the northwest, where the sex-ratio imbalance is worse, of rape and sex crime on the rise. The case has been made in the past that this situation—say 20 million single, angry and usually nationalistic young men in China—is a security threat for the West. A U.S. defence contractor told me the Pentagon is keeping a close watch on China's surplus men. Time will tell, but we shouldn't focus on the supposed threat of China or India attacking us, or people overwhelming our shores. We should really care about the gender imbalance because it's a huge human rights issue. ♣