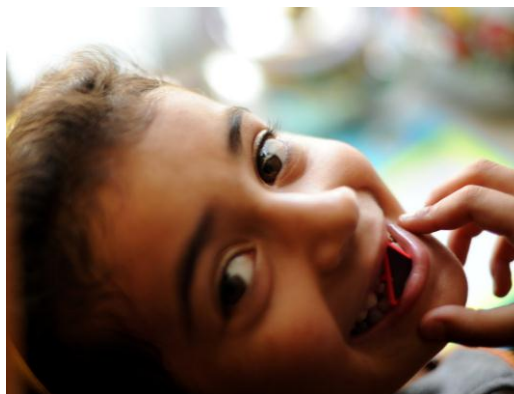


GLOBAL PRACTICES PROFILE

Knowledge Brief

Exploring the Phenomenon of “Missing Girls” in the South Caucasus

Sex ratio at birth – the number of boys born for every 100 girls – has increased in the South Caucasus in the past decades. A World Bank studyⁱ sought to produce rigorous and supporting evidence on the issue of “missing girls” in the South Caucasus countries—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—to inform and propose policy options. The findings highlight the causes and consequences of skewed birth ratios and sex selection.



Introduction

The term “missing girls” refers to girls who would have been born or survived infancy if their birth or survival had not been deliberately interrupted. The selection of sons over daughters by some parents is seen in birth ratios more strongly skewed in favor of baby boys than what would naturally occur, and is exacerbated by declining fertility and availability of scanning technologies to determine the child’s sex *in utero*.

Unborn girls account for about 40 percent of the 3.9 million missing women under 60 years of age globally each year. Amartya Sen brought attention to this issue when he estimated that 100 million more women would have been alive in South Asia, West Asia and North Africa in the absence of gender bias and its consequent detrimental impact on female survival and life expectancy.

Skewed gender demographics are thus symptomatic of deeper gender inequalities. Such imbalances may also have important social and economic consequences in the long term. The adverse consequences of this phenomenon can be seen in countries where sex selection has a long

history – notably China, India, the Republic of Korea, and Vietnam. In China and India, persistent skewed sex ratios (at birth and across age groups) appear to be accompanied by increased gender-based violence. The shortage of brides created by the lower number of women surviving to adulthood also encourages trafficking in girls and women. In China, concerns about social stability have also emerged as high proportions of young men face life without a girlfriend or wife.

How high are sex ratios in the South Caucasus?

Skewed sex ratios at birth have only recently emerged in the South Caucasus countries. Sex ratios at birth in the South Caucasus have increased dramatically since the early to mid-1990s, reaching levels that are comparable to those in China and India (Figures 1 and 2). Although recent data suggest an improving trend, the higher-than-expected ratio of male to female births reveals underlying gender inequality in the region- overshadowing progress in other areas, such as educational attainment.

While some of the social consequences seen in China

or India may not yet be visible in the South Caucasus countries, skewed sex ratios should concern citizens and their governments. First, skewed sex ratios symptomize and reinforce gender inequities in the form of parents opting to ensure the birth of sons. Second, the very practice of sex selection limits women's reproductive rights.

The World Bank recently completed a study aimed at producing rigorous and supporting evidence on the issue of "missing girls" in the South Caucasus countries. In order to inform policy options, the study used survey/births registration data as well as informative feedback from focus groups.

What underlies these trends?

The World Bank study found that the trend in increasing sex ratios at birth in the South Caucasus countries is not explained by a deterioration in statistics during the transition to market economy, as some have argued. So what factors are behind it? Parental preference for sons, magnified by increasingly smaller families, availability of technology that facilitates prenatal sex detection, and economic upheaval are all important reasons.

Son preference

Son preference is visible in data from all three countries. Results from the Caucasus Barometer Survey 2010 reveal that a high share of people prefer having a son to having a daughter. When asked the question "If a family has one child, what would be the preferred gender of the child?" 54 percent of respondents in Armenia said they would prefer a boy, compared to 10 percent for a girl (Figure 3). Also, in Azerbaijan and Georgia, less than 9 percent of respondents declared they would want a girl if they were to have only one child. A woman in Georgia reports that "At least for the men,

having at least one son is 'a must': Those who say that they do not care about not having sons -- deep in their hearts they wish to have one. Just -- they pretend to be cool about it and don't say it". Son preference seems stronger in rural areas, with the answer reaching 71 percent in rural Armenia, as family systems might remain more intact in these settings compared to urban areas.

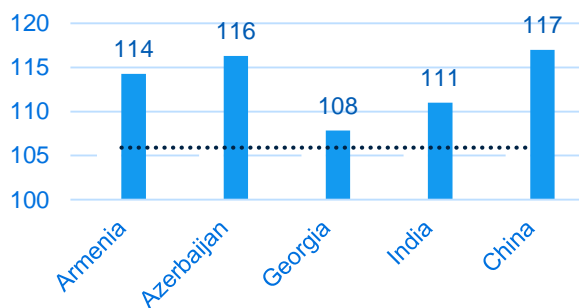
Son preference seems to be associated with parents' expectations that their sons will provide support and care in old age and help them deal with difficulties that may arise. Girls, instead, are perceived to belong to their husbands' family after they marry. Given this, inheritance traditionally favors sons as passing the family's property on to daughters would mean giving it to another family. Focus group participants revealed that "Only one from a thousand decides to leave something to the daughter" and "The parent who gives their property to the daughter might be unwise".

The continuation of patrilineage and the protection of the family's social position are also underlying reasons for son preference. Carrying on the family name is sometimes revealed as being more important than the material support from sons. "Having a son is an issue of pride rather than economic well-being". Indeed, pressures to have sons come as much from societal pressures as from personal preferences. Focus group narratives revealed that men are often not considered "true men" until they have a son, and women face the risk of not being considered good wives by husbands, in-laws and neighbors alike if they fail to give birth to a son.

Decline in fertility

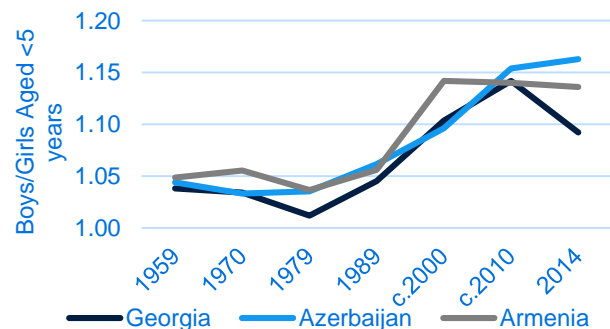
Fertility rates have declined across the South Caucasus countries. In Azerbaijan, for instance, fertility declined from 5.5 in the 1950s, to 2.0 in the second half of the 2000s. Fertility levels are even

Figure 1: Sex ratios at birth in South Caucasus and selected Asian countries, 2009-2013 average



Source: Birth registration, UN Statistics; Das Gupta (2014) from census data. Note: Sex ratio at birth (SRB) = number of boys born/number of girls born.

Figure 2: Sex ratios boy/girls aged <5, 1959-2014



Source: Das Gupta (2014). Note: Sex ratios for children less than one year show a similar increasing trend, with actually higher levels of sex ratios.

lower in Georgia and Armenia; in the latter, population growth has been negative for several years in the 2000s. This means that parents now have fewer opportunities to have a son than in the past which, given the strong son preference, can alter families' fertility decisions.

Prenatal sex detection technology

With fewer chances for a child and the rising availability of sex-detection technologies over the past two decades, families have increasingly adopted sex-selection to ensure the birth of a son while maintaining a small family size. Sex ratios thus appear significantly higher among childless parents and those with daughters only, who want to ensure, respectively, that their only or last child is a boy. There is strong evidence in support of this in both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Pressures on women to act on son preference through sex-selective abortion seem to come particularly from husbands. In many cases, the husband seems to have the last word as to whether to try for another child or terminate a pregnancy. A man in Azerbaijan said that *"The opinion of man is more important... If there are two daughters in the family, husbands want to have a son as well. And a woman should not go against his wish."* Mothers-in-law are also a source of pressure: *"My friend is praying -- she gave birth to 3 daughters, as she considers abortion to be a sin. Her husband did not interfere, but every day her mother-in-law used to say you should divorce this woman"* reported a woman, echoing many others across all countries.

Women are often not empowered to resist these pressures for sex-selective abortions. The evidence suggests that they are threatened with divorce and the vulnerability that it brings, and with physical abuse. In Armenia, a woman reported that

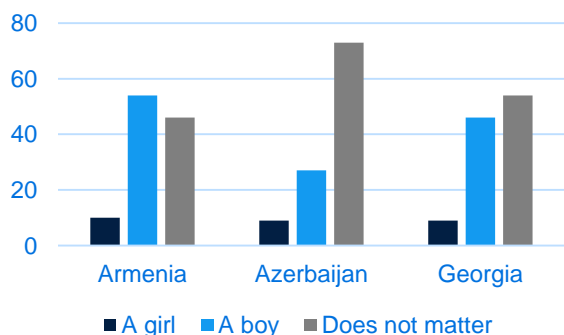
"Generally, women listen to them [the husband] because in most cases she has no other viable option". Inheritance practice (where it is customary for parents to leave property to their sons) and habitation arrangements (whereby wives often move into their husband or in-law's house they have no title to) perpetuate the dependency and vulnerability of many women in the region. This, in addition to their broader lack of economic empowerment, as women are less likely than men to work and more likely to receive lower wages when they do, makes women even more vulnerable and less able to resist pressures by their husbands and in-laws on fertility decisions.

Shocks

Shocks that affect markets and formal institutions might exacerbate son preference, while also affecting fertility. Evidence from China, for instance, suggests that son preference in that country rose in times of conflict and famine as a coping mechanism, as sons are viewed as better able to deal with daily economic difficulties. These contexts are also typically accompanied by sharp declines in fertility, supporting the argument of stronger son preference and sex-selective behavior under those circumstances.

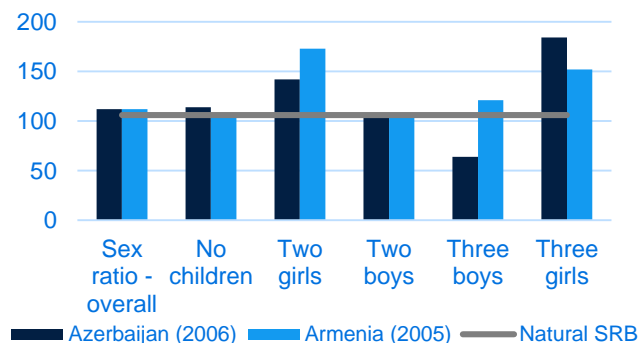
In the South Caucasus, the collapse of the USSR severely disrupted people's lives and increased household vulnerability, leading to a harsher socio-economic reality for families having and raising children. The South Caucasus countries suffered increases in poverty, collapse of formal institutions (such as the health sector), and the disappearance of many jobs and social protection systems. Around two-thirds of people in the South Caucasus reported that they were worse off (even before the 2009 global economic crisis) than during the pre-transition period. This is higher than all other countries in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region. These issues are reflected in people's perceptions of the circumstances

Figure 3: Responses to "If a family has one child, what would be the preferred gender of the child?"



Source: Das Gupta (2014) with data from Caucasus Barometer 2010 survey.

Figure 4: Armenia and Azerbaijan, Sex ratio (of next birth), circa 2005

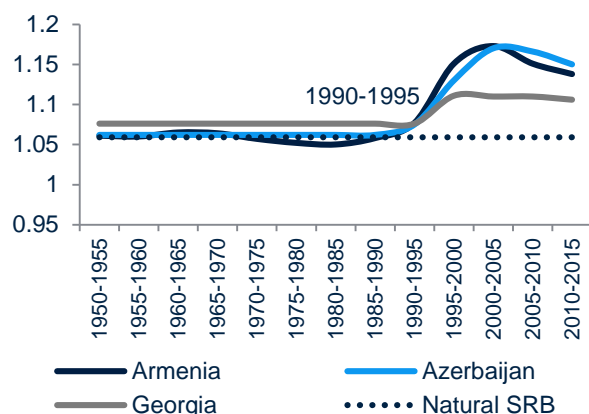


Source: Ebenstein (2013).

for son preference and sex selection.

An elderly man states that “After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the number of people giving preference to male babies increased, because parents are afraid of problems as the result of unemployment and poverty. They need sons to support them and protect them from these negative things.”

Figure 5: In the South Caucasus, sex ratios rose with the collapse of the USSR



Source: Das Gupta (2014), with UN data.

What policies could be put in place?

It is crucial to extract lessons from other countries that have faced this issue. One policy often considered for short-term impact includes bans on pre-natal sex detection or sex selection. Evidence from South Korea, India and China however suggests that these bans have little or no impact. In fact, this kind of policy could actually result in poorer health services for women by driving abortion underground, facilitating bribery, and leading to higher costs for health services. Focus group discussions carried out in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia highlight these risks. A large number of respondents across countries, generations, and genders, when asked to comment on the potential impact of these policies in their communities, expressed the fear that they would be counterproductive. “Women would find ways”, and once they made up their minds “they would do it [abort] either in a hospital or in a cellar.” Policies offering financial incentives to have and bring up girls have not been effective either.

Tackling the roots of the problem, which are embedded within deeper social and economic gender inequalities, is necessary to alter son preference and limit sex-selective behavior. The World Bank 2012 World Development Report on *Gender and Development* states that “Changes in informal institutions and, through them, household behavior, are key to resolving this problem. And it can be done”. Media outreach, for example, can help influence people’s aspirations, norms and behaviors. Evidence from several countries finds that media exposure has proven effective in changing households’ and individuals’ behavior in areas such as contraceptive use, fertility, smoking and use of bed nets. Education among all population groups and ages can accompany these media campaign efforts for maximum impact in promoting the value of girls and women, beyond their role as wives and mothers.

Policy options which are particularly relevant for the South Caucasus include:

- (i) **Promote gender equality and increase women’s resilience to pressure**, by increasing women’s economic empowerment, access to assets and agency, as well as protection in cases of divorce or violence, and the provision of reproductive education to all.
- (ii) **Promote changes in son preference**, by fighting adverse gender stereotypes through media campaigns targeted at various population groups. Campaigns should make sure to also target husbands and mothers-in-law.
- (iii) **Provide sex education in schools and to men and women** to eliminate discriminatory or inaccurate beliefs regarding reproductive choices and contraception, mechanisms determining the sex of the fetus, and reproductive health.

About the Team

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