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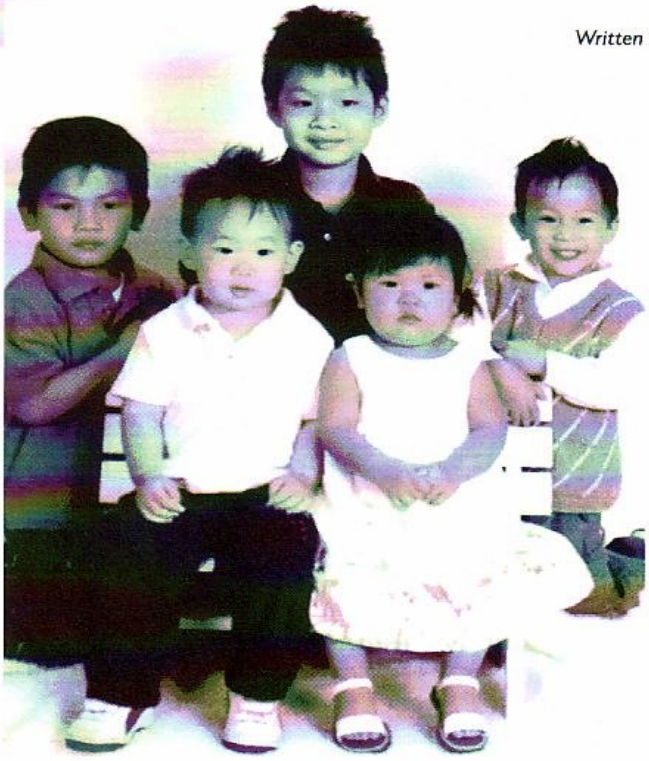


Asian masculisation: *when sons are a blessing and daughters a curse*

Since the dawning of humanity, Asian populations have grown faster than anywhere else in the world. This pattern is likely to remain the same in the 21st century. However, this growth is worryingly out of balance - hundreds of thousands of female foetuses are being aborted every year in Asia.

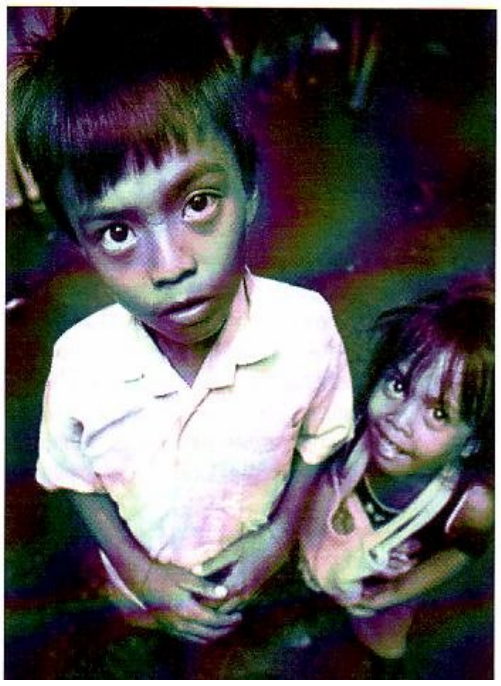
Technologies, developed in the 1980s to detect malformations and serious diseases in human foetuses, are now being used to determine their sex. The use of the technology in this manner, combined with the widespread accessibility of abortion, has led to the practice of sex-selective abortions whereby many Asian parents, particularly in India and China, choose to abort unwanted female foetuses. This has raised the proportion of boys in the continent's population, producing a gender imbalance of varying degrees in most Asian countries with the notable exception of Japan.

Reasons and impacts of sex-selective abortion

The reasons behind this practice lie in deep-rooted beliefs as well as economic and cultural constraints. Male children inherit the family name and property and play a core role in family traditions. For example, in countries with a heavy Confucian influence, family ceremonies are led by the eldest son of the most recent male ancestor. Economic and social factors also favour sons. In many Asian societies married sons are expected to live with their parents and ensure their financial well-being. By contrast, when a daughter marries she will be "asked" to join her husband's household, preventing her from providing support to her own parents. In fact her marriage itself is likely to cause a financial burden, as opulent celebrations or expensive dowry payments mainly in India and Bangladesh - are presupposed.

Today, India and China suffer the most dramatic imbalance between the birth-rates of boys and girls. The natural sex ratio at birth (SRB) is around 105 males per 100 females. The Indian SRB is 114 males for every 100 females born, with a peak of 124 in the north-western state of Punjab. The Chinese figure of 120 SBR is even more alarming. According to a study carried out by the United Nations Population Fund, Vietnam "is in almost the same situation now as China was ten years ago."

The first impact of gender imbalance is primarily felt in the increasing trafficking of "conform women". In the long run, the fact that a growing number of men will be unable to find wives coupled with the fact that the poorest will be disproportionately affected means the scarcity of marriageable women may be a destabilising factor triggering class-based tensions.



How to cope?

Though most Asian governments have already implemented tight regulations banning the practice of medical technologies for prenatal determination of sex, such measures have only proved relatively effective in public medical centres. Meanwhile, private clinics have enjoyed a sharp increase in their profits as sex-determination methods become clandestine and thus, rather expensive. Governments cannot continue to ignore the role of the private health sector in spreading new sex-determination technology any longer.

It may sound disproportionate but changes in cultural patterns are required. As a starting point, Asian regimens should urgently embark on productive debates aimed at diminishing (gender) discriminatory laws and inequitable inheritance systems. A welcome example has been set by South Korea, one of the first countries to report the missing-girls phenomenon. In the 1980s Seoul passed a series of gender-parity regulations, launched an important mass-media campaign and used the school curricula to promote gender equity. As a result South Korea has been able to restore its gender balance to near-natural ratios.

Asian governments must realize that a progressive reduction of the continent's educational and economic gender inequalities is the only long-term strategy capable of coming to terms with the destructive preference for male children. One approach could be to provide direct subsidies to families at the time of girls' birth. Raising the number of scholarship schemes and gender-based quotas could also help to strengthen female voices in those societies where they are less welcomed.

Sex-selective abortions in Asia are a distressing manifestation of gender-based violence, yet current forecasts do not project a decline in this phenomenon. There are more regions where sex selection is likely to intensify such as Nepal, Bangladesh or Pakistan - than regions where the process is being reversed. Societies experiencing a gradual scarcity of women must appreciate that if sex-selective abortions continue to be tolerated, even if legally outlawed, they may tear down the structures and dynamics on which these societies are based. While accelerating social change is always a slow and difficult endeavour, it is the only approach capable of securing a stable future for Asia.