



## Sex Selection Abortion: Worldwide Son-Bias Fueled by Population Policy Abuse

A growing number of legislative bodies worldwide and an increasing number of American states are adopting laws against abortions performed solely on the basis of the sex of the unborn child. This global phenomenon, nearly always carried out against female children developing in the womb, has resulted in an estimated deficit of 163,000,000 girls (Hvistendahl, 2011). Evidence suggests that this problem is not abating on its own, and that significant and concerted cultural, communications, ethical, and legal pressure is needed to ensure that no child is aborted simply because he or she is of the “wrong” sex.

### The Problem: “Ruthlessly Routine”

Sex selection abortion is a tragic phenomenon of relatively recent vintage. The ability to identify the sex of a child in the womb at the genetic level was first developed in the 1950s. It was not until the 1970s, with the development of ultrasound technology and the dissemination of less expensive machines in the decades after, that prenatal determination of the sex of the unborn became widespread practice. The invention of *in vitro* fertilization techniques in the late 1970s also encouraged the development of techniques for determining sex prior to conception.

The availability of sex identification technologies has combined with legal regimes that essentially permit abortion on request and that strongly disincentivize or forcibly limit the number of children couples may have. China’s “one-child” policy imposes a particularly strict limit on family size. The final factor encouraging sex selection abortion is the enduring preference in many societies for male offspring.

These factors are individually potent but particularly powerful operating in tandem, and any strategy designed to reduce sex-selection abortions must address them all. As demographer Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute wrote recently, the confluence of these forces has become “so ruthlessly routine in many contemporary societies that it has impacted their very population structures, warping the balance between male and female births and consequently skewing the sex ratios for the rising generation toward a biologically unnatural excess of males.”<sup>[1]</sup> This reality prompted delegates to the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995 to list (Paragraphs 115 and 116 of the Platform of Action) prenatal sex selection and female infanticide as forms of violence against women.

### Sex Ratio Imbalances Worldwide

A sample of the numbers underscores the warping of the natural balance of the sexes. The table below shows the Sex Ratios at Birth for children born in selected nations. A natural rate is in the range of 103 to 106 newborn boys per 100 newborn girls. As the table makes clear, the skewing of sex ratios is more severe for higher order (2<sup>nd</sup> and subsequent) births in these nations as couples’ son preference mixes in a lethal way with government-imposed child limitation policies.

<u>Country</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Sex ratio at birth (boys/100 girls)</u>
China (nationally)	2005	118.9
China (Anhui Province)	2005	131

China (Shaanxi Province)	2005	134
China (third births)	2005	160
Taiwan	2005	110
Hong Kong	2005	110
India	2004-06	112
Albania	2004	113
El Salvador	2007	110
Phillippines	2007	109

Making progress against a problem with such profound interpersonal as well as society-wide implications is difficult and requires a multi-faced strategy. Nonetheless, even as the phenomenon of massive skewing of sex ratios has appeared in new countries and worsened in others, experience has shown that gendercide effects can be countered and reversed. The United States is not immune to the challenge of sex selection, and it can draw upon the lessons of other nations to adopt policies as well as cultural messages that prevent the problem from worsening here and that ultimately lead to the global cessation of this deadly form of sex-based human rights violation.

## Occurring in the U.S.

Naturally impossible sex ratios at birth are also occurring in the United States, as documented in survey data from 2000 and after. Skewed sex ratios (108), favoring boys over girls, have appeared in U.S. subpopulations mirroring the international data (Chinese-Americans, Korean-Americans, and Filipino-Americans). Douglas Almond and Lena Edlund of Columbia University identified these trends, including a male bias of 50% among third-order births, in U.S. populations of Chinese, Korean, and Asian-American heritage. “We interpret the found deviation in favor of sons to be evidence of sex selection, most likely at the prenatal stage,” they write.<sup>[2]</sup> This fact has prompted several U.S. states to ban sex selection abortion in their jurisdictions. These states include Illinois (2008), Pennsylvania (2008), Oklahoma (2010), and Arizona (2011).

## Worldwide Condemnation

Cultural policies to deter sex selection abortion have been pursued by countries around the world for many years, and legislative bans have been adopted in many countries. Abortions for sex selection are illegal in China, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, India, the United Kingdom (which has banned sex selection abortion for “social reasons”), and Vietnam. While legislative action is not enough to undo centuries-long cultural biases, it has often proven to be the threshold step for galvanizing cultural reform.

## Public Support for Action

Besides the legislation that has been enacted in diverse regions of the world, evidence exists that legislative bans on sex selection abortions have broad support. A March 2006 Zogby poll found that 86 percent of Americans believe that an abortion performed because of the sex of the developing child should be illegal. A LifeCanada poll conducted by Environics Research and released in October 2011 showed that an astonishing 92 percent of Canadians thought that sex selection abortions should not be legal in Canada.<sup>[3]</sup> To this can be added the new poll released on May 16, 2012 by the Charlotte Lozier Institute, which found that 77 percent of American adults (80 percent of women) would support making sex-selection abortion illegal when that is the sole reason for seeking an abortion.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Eberstadt, Nicholas, “The Global War on Baby Girls,” *The New Atlantis; A Journal of Technology and Society* (Fall 2011); viewed January 25, 2012 at <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-global-war-against-baby-girls>.

<sup>[2]</sup> (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (2008), at <http://www.pnas.org/content/105/15/5681.full> (May 3, 2012)).

<sup>[3]</sup> “Canadians’ Attitudes Towards Abortion,” Commissioned Research Conducted for Life Canada, October 2011, p. 3 at <http://www.lifenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/lifecanada2.pdf> (January 26, 2012).