

VIET NAM

COUNTRY PROFILE

Global Programme to Prevent Son Preference and the Undervaluing of Girls: Improving the sex ratio at birth in select countries in Asia and the Caucasus

Hanoi 2019



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ABBREVIATIONS

DHS	Demographic Health Survey
GSO	General Statistics Office
HDI	Human Development Index
IPS	Inter-censal Population and Housing Survey
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
PCSA	Parliamentary Committee for Social Affairs
GBSS	Gender-biased sex selection
SRB	Sex ratio at birth
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VFF	Vietnamese Fatherland Front

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Viet Nam has made good progress on its gender equality targets under Millennium Development Goal 3 and has integrated the Sustainable Development Goals in national policy by approving in May 2017 the National Action Plan for their implementation as a guidance framework for Viet Nam by 2030. The legal framework for gender equality and women's empowerment has become stronger. However, the manifestations of gender inequality such as violence against women and girls, child marriage and gender-biased sex selection remain.

The sex ratio at birth in Viet Nam has increased rapidly since 2004 to a high level of 112.1 boys for every 100 girls born in 2017. Gender-biased sex selection has been identified as the major cause of the sex ratio at birth imbalance in Viet Nam. The primary factor driving such behavior among many couples is son preference deeply rooted in the traditional culture of Confucianism and patriarchal family systems, and the social norms of valuing boys more than girls in general.¹⁰

While son preference has a long history in Viet Nam, the recent availability and accessibility of technology for selecting the sex of the fetus, gender-biased sex identification and induced abortion explain the fast rise in the sex ratio at birth imbalance in Viet Nam since 2005.

The third factor relating to gender-biased sex selection is the country's low fertility rate, declining from 2.6 children per woman in 1999 to 2.04 in 2017. As the number of children declines, and many couples want to have at least one son, they may practice sex selection in favor of boys from the first birth. The sex ratio at birth is thus already high at the first birth in Viet Nam (110.2).⁸

Sex ratio at birth levels vary among the geographical regions. The sex ratio at birth is very high in the provinces in the Red River Delta, exceeding 125 boys per 100 girls in three provinces in this region. At the same time, the ratio is close to the biologically normal level of 102 to 106 males per 100 females in three other regions (Northern Midlands/Mountains, Central Highland and Mekong Delta).

If Viet Nam's imbalanced sex ratio at birth continues in the coming years, gender inequality will be further increased due to more pressure for women to marry at a younger age, rising demand for sex work, and the expansion of trafficking networks that will increase the risks of gender-based violence.

The Government of Viet Nam has recognized the issue of the imbalance in the sex ratio at birth and, with support from the UNFPA country office, has taken efforts to address the issue through policies and legislation, aiming to return the sex ratio at birth to the biologically normal level by 2025. To achieve this ambitious target, several areas of intervention need to be taken into account, including better-targeted and more effective communication that can change social norms and practices that discriminate against women and girls, better law enforcement without limiting women's ability to exercise their reproductive rights, reliable and timely monitoring, and data for tracking the dynamics of change in sex ratio at birth and the impacts of interventions.

BACKGROUND

VIET NAM AT A GLANCE

Population: 93.70 million (2017)¹

GDP: \$US2,389 per capita (2017). GDP growth is 6.2 per cent for 2016 and 6.81 per cent for 2017.²

Life expectancy: 73.5 years; for women 76.2 and for men 70.9 (2017)

Fertility rate: 2.04 children per woman (2017)³

Human Development Index: 116 out of 189 countries – medium human development category

Gender index ranking for Viet Nam⁴

- Gender Inequality Index: 67 out of 160 countries

- Gender Gap Index: 69 out of 144 countries

Women's representation in the National Assembly (2016-2021 term): 26.7 per cent

Labour participation rate (aged 15 and older): Women = 73.2 per cent; Men = 83.5 per cent

Labour market: Male wage worker = 40 per cent of male workforce ; Female wage worker = 29.1 per cent of female workforce⁵.

Viet Nam is a low middle-income country with a population of more than 90 million, and has a market-based economy with a socialist orientation. According to the recent joint assessment of the World Bank and the Vietnamese Government, over the past 30 years, Viet Nam has achieved impressive social and economic development, advancing its regional and global integration process through various trade agreements. Economic growth has been stable and the poverty rate has dropped dramatically, from 50 per cent in the 1990s to 3 per cent in 2015. There have been considerable improvements in the health and education sectors. The country has achieved a number of the Millennium Development Goals and is active in localizing the Sustainable Development Goals in national policies.

Despite these social and economic achievements, Viet Nam is facing new challenges in the development process: relatively lower-than-expected average income; low productivity; macroeconomic instability; new forms of poverty and vulnerabilities; increased inequality, especially the inequality in access to opportunities for development; and weak governance in key sectors. Viet Nam needs to adapt and embrace opportunities and challenges to avoid the “middle income trap” of having achieved a certain income and getting stuck at that level, and also not to lag behind other economies in the region.⁶

Study methodology and limitations

Viet Nam has no published birth registration data; therefore, the sex ratio at birth can only be monitored by use of decennial censuses and sample surveys.

Census data on sex ratio at birth is from 2009, which is when the last round of the national Population and Housing census was conducted, implemented by the General Statistics Office of the Ministry of Planning and Investment. The Census has a sample size of 15 per cent of the population and provides the most comprehensive information on the sex ratio at birth situation in Viet Nam. The Census is conducted once every 10 years; the next one will be conducted in 2019.

For the first time, in 2014, an Inter-Censal Population and Housing Survey (IPS) was implemented in between the Population and Housing Census by the General Statistics Office. The 2014 survey provided more updated demographic information including that of sex ratio at birth.

In addition, the General Statistics Office conducts an Annual Survey on Population Change and Family Planning. Along with a lack of regular monitoring, there is a lack of qualitative data for better understanding son preference among different population groups, and data on the relationship between son preference intensity and gender-biased sex selection practice. Demographic and Health Surveys record people's preferences for ideal number of sons and daughters, but this only reflects opinions and attitudes instead of actual behaviors regarding son preference and gender-biased sex selection. Information on the magnitude of the impact of sex ratio at birth imbalance is also missing, such as information about the linkages between skewed sex ratio at birth and cross-border marriage, or between sex ratio at birth imbalance and gender-based violence.

CHAPTER

1

SON PREFERENCE AND GENDER-BIASED SEX SELECTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Gender equality in Viet Nam has improved over time but a number of issues remain. The country has been successful in meeting Millennium Development Goal 3 on gender equality and has achieved the target of eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education. The representation of women in the National Assembly in the 2016–2021 term stands at 26.7 per cent, above the average rate of 19 per cent for Asian countries and the global average of 21 per cent. Nevertheless, the overall proportion of women represented in decision-making positions in Viet Nam is still very low. Violence against women and girls remains prevalent due to unequal power relations between men and women within the private and public spheres.

- Preference for sons combined
- with the declined fertility and
- the availability of sex selection
- technology are contributing to
- a highly imbalanced sex ratio
- at birth.

Barriers exist in women's access to resources, services, productive assets, technical and vocational education, and training opportunities. These obstacles create unfavourable patterns in women's occupations and in the quality of working conditions and earnings. The wage gap between men and women has been increasing, contrary to the trend in other countries. Women remain predominantly employed in informal occupations, where they earn on average 50 per cent less than men and face higher job insecurity. The earlier retirement age for women limits their job, promotion and training opportunities and results in lower monthly pensions compared with men.

Son preference and gender-biased sex selection is a practice of gender discrimination in itself and also a powerful manifestation of underlying forms of discrimination against women. In 2017, a total of 112.1 boys were born per 100 girls in Viet Nam. There is strong evidence that this demographic imbalance is caused by gender-biased sex selection, which is in turn caused by son preference, available and affordable technology for gender-biased sex selection, and low fertility.

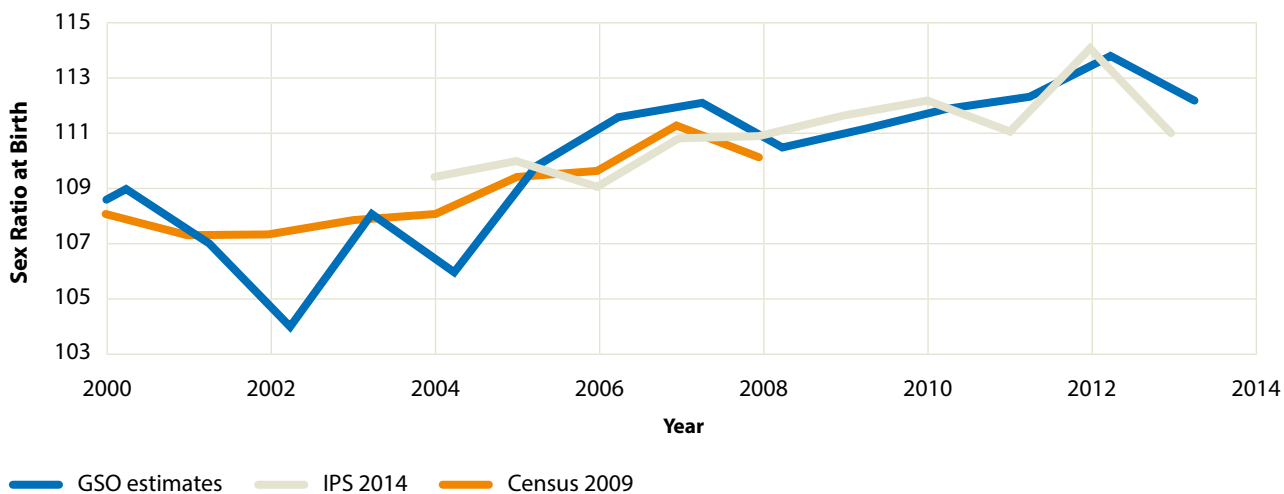
This country profile gives an overview of the picture of the sex ratio at birth in Viet Nam, including variations by regions and population groups with different social and economic features. Following the overview picture, contributing factors to son preference and gender-biased sex selection and imbalanced sex ratio at birth as the results of current studies and reports are presented. The profile ends with the description of the national policy framework and efforts to address the imbalanced sex ratio at birth of the country, as well as recommendations for future interventions.

1.2 SEX IMBALANCES AT BIRTH IN VIET NAM

The sex ratio at birth imbalance was first identified in Viet Nam in 2004, and since 2005 the skew towards more boys has rapidly increased. While in 2000 the sex ratio at birth was still at normal level of 106.2 boys per 100 girls, according to the Population and Housing Census, it increased to 110.6 in 2009, and reached 112.1 in 2017.⁷

The increase appears to have slowed down over the last five years, despite the temporary spike observed in 2012. The sex ratio at birth of 2017 is 112.1; however, it has not reached 115 as was forecast earlier and is unlikely to reach this level in the next few years (figure 1). It is too early to say whether this relative deceleration will persist and lead to an actual stabilization of the sex ratio at birth in the country.

Figure 1. Estimated trends of the sex ratio at birth according to various sources, 2000–2014



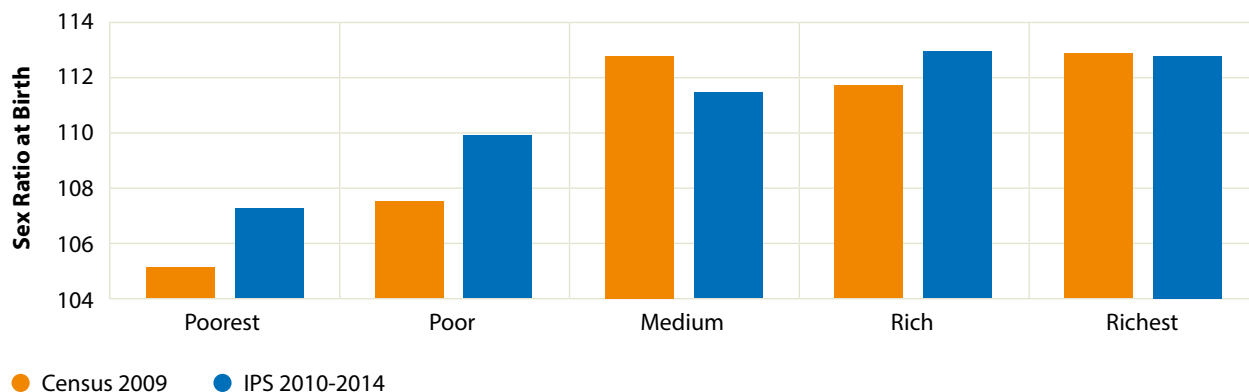
Source: GSO (2015). Sex imbalances at birth in Viet Nam 2014: Recent trends, factors and variations.

The mechanism of birth selection appears quite complex. While the sex ratio at birth varies by region, social and economic differentials also affect gender-biased sex selection. Lower sex ratio at birth levels are observed among the poorest quintiles and other underprivileged groups, such as ethnic minority groups and the less educated.

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between the socio-economic status and sex ratio at birth. The SRB among the poorest quintile is similar to the natural biological level. The groups that have higher sex ratio at births are the better-off groups. Comparing the data of 2009 and 2014, the main difference is the significant increase in the sex ratio at birth of the two poorest socio-economic quintiles.

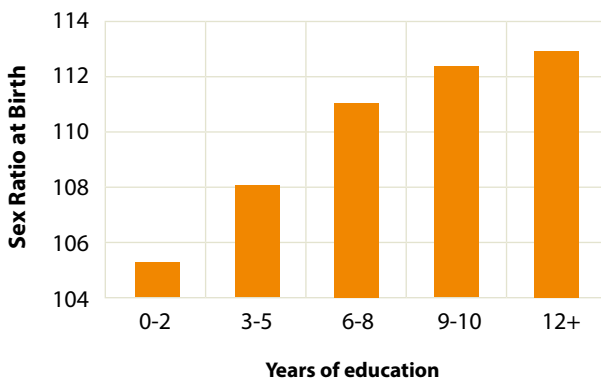
The sex ratio at birth level rises with increased years of schooling among mothers to 108 for 3–5 years of education, 111 for women with 6–8 years and 112 for women with 9–10 years, and peaks at 113 for mothers having more than 12 years of education (figure 3). While higher education may help women to withstand patriarchal values, and related social pressures, women with higher education levels may also have more access to modern technology for gender-biased diagnosis and induced abortion and have preference for smaller families – two of the predictors of gender-biased sex selection. However, this remains a hypothesis that need to be tested in a more systematic way.

Figure 2. Sex ratio at birth by socio-economic quintile in Viet Nam, 2009 and 2010–2014



Source: GSO (2015). Sex imbalances at birth in Viet Nam 2014: Recent trends, factors and variations.

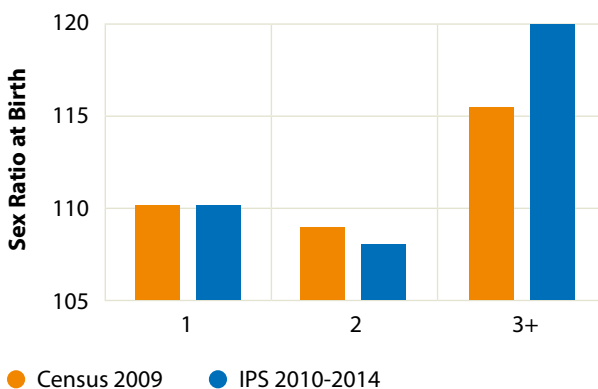
Figure 3. Sex ratio at birth by number of years of education of mothers in Viet Nam, 2010–2014



Source: GSO (2015). Sex imbalances at birth in Viet Nam 2014: Recent trends, factors and variations.

Different from many other countries with an elevated sex ratio at birth, in Viet Nam, data on births that took place during 2010-2014 show that a skewed sex ratio at birth is already observed at the first birth, and reaches 120 with the third birth (figure 4). However, the overall imbalanced sex ratio at birth in Viet Nam is mainly contributed to by the sex ratio at birth of the first and second births, as the proportion of third and higher-order births is not high.⁸

Figure 4. Sex ratio at birth by birth order in Viet Nam, 2009 and 2010–2014



Source: GSO (2015). Sex imbalances at birth in Viet Nam 2014: Recent trends, factors and variations.

It is projected that if the sex ratio imbalance continues to increase, Viet Nam may face serious demographic, socio-economic and political problems, including severe disruption in the marriage system due to surplus of men, increased pressure for women to

marry at a younger age, rising demand for sex work and an expansion of trafficking networks that will increase the risk of gender-based violence. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that a large number of Vietnamese women are marrying abroad, leaving the actual sex ratio of male and female adult in the country even more imbalanced.⁸

1.3 CAUSES OF SEX SELECTION

Reasons for sex selection in favor of boys are embedded in the demographic, social, economic and cultural context of Viet Nam. These reasons are intertwined and reinforce each other in driving sex ratio at birth above the biologically normal level. The factors come from the demand side, supply side and the fertility decline.

Son Preference

Gender-biased sex selection has been identified as the major cause of sex ratio at birth imbalance in Viet Nam. The primary factor driving gender-biased sex selection behavior among many couples is son preference, which is rooted in the traditional culture of Confucianism and patriarchal family systems. Adult sons usually hold responsibility for old-age care for their parents, often sharing a household with them. Religious and social norms require sons to perform ancestor worship and other important life events. Sons enhance the parents’ status in society and are usually favored in land and property inheritance.⁸ Despite the ongoing promotion of gender equality by the socialist state, preference for sons is still widely shared by women, couples, families and communities, at least in the north, where the sex ratio at birth is higher than other areas of Viet Nam.

The diversification of social practices that follows Vietnam’s transition to a market economy appears to have resulted in households reverting to earlier customs and traditions. Examples of this are the increase of the use of horoscopes and fortune tellers to determine an appropriate partner or wedding date, and a substantial increase in the percentage of recently married couples receiving a “dowry”. While the Government of Viet Nam can be credited with considerable success in terms of promoting gender equality at the workplace and educational institutions, and thus at the societal level, limited success is visible at the household level at present.⁹

Modern Sex Selection Technology

In combination with son preference, a second set of factors is at work. The supply dimension refers to accessibility to technology for sex determination and to induced abortion. The emergence of modern ultrasound technology in Viet Nam after 2000, combined with abortion facilities, better healthcare infrastructure and lower cost of technology have contributed to the rise in sex ratio at birth in the last decade. The development of the private health care sector, complemented by better living standards, economic growth and urbanization makes the technology for early fetal sex detection and abortion widely accessible.⁹

Fertility decline

The fertility rate in Viet Nam has been at replacement level for almost a decade, down slightly from 2.25 children per woman in 2001 to 2.04 in 2017.¹⁰ With a replacement fertility level and biological sex ratio at birth of 105, there is high probability of about 20 per cent of couples having no sons. Parents increasingly access services for gender-biased sex selection as the pressure for having fewer children rises. Parents are more anxious to have male offspring, and tend to take action early by seeking technological measures to ensure that they have at least one son. The high sex ratio at birth level at the first birth suggests that some couples may resort to sex selection for first births, as shown in figure 4.

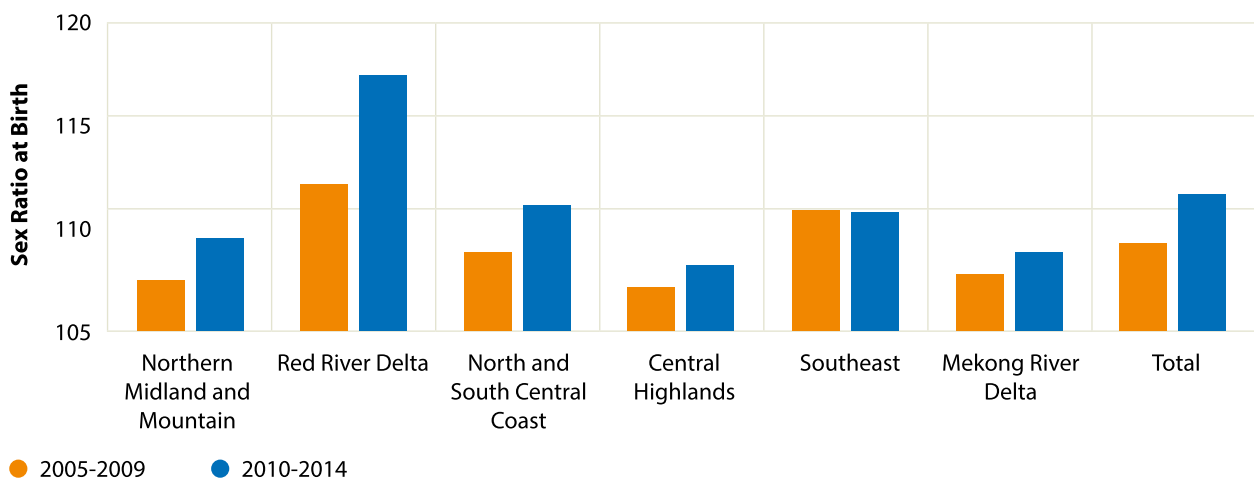
1.4 VARIATIONS IN SON PREFERENCE

Son preference is rooted in the traditional culture of Confucianism and patriarchal family systems. Sons are valued for sustaining the family line, and for taking care of parents in old age. Child bearing usually ends with a boy because of son preference. Research also shows that if son preference did not exist, fewer Vietnamese couples would be likely to have more than two children. The sex ratio of the final birth among older women tends to be heavily biased towards boys.

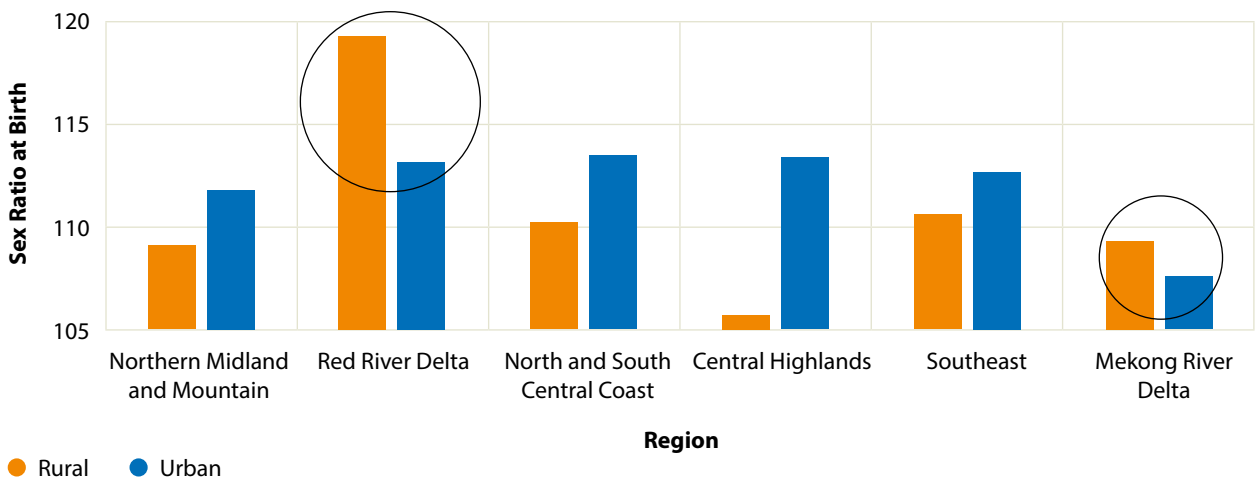
A study on son preference among men showed a strong relationship between the level of education of men and intensity of son preference. Men with higher education have less son preference, and men with lower education have stronger son preference. Similarly, men engaging in manual and agricultural work are in the majority in the group having a high level of son preference. Men who tend to control their partner, which is a manifestation of gender inequitable attitudes, appear also to have high levels of son preference.¹¹

While knowledge about the existence of son preference and the factors associated with son preference is available from several qualitative studies in Viet Nam, quantitative data on son preferences remains limited. There is a lack of data on the intensity of son preference according to social class, ethnic groups, or regions. There is also a lack of information on the relationship between intensity of son preference and actual fertility behavior and sex selection among population groups with differential social, economic and geographic features.

Figure 5. Estimates of the sex ratio at birth in 2005–2009 and 2010–2014, Viet Nam regions



Source: GSO (2015). Sex imbalances at birth in Viet Nam 2014: Recent trends, factors and variations.

Figure 6. Sex ratio at birth by region and rural/urban areas in Viet Nam, 2010–2014

Source: GSO (2015). Sex imbalances at birth in Viet Nam 2014: Recent trends, factors and variations.

1.5 REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

The single fastest increase in sex ratio at birth has been documented in the Red River Delta region. Seven provinces of north of Viet Nam display sex ratio at birth values of more than 115 boys per 100 girls. They include three provinces with sex ratio at birth of more than 125 (Hung Yen, Hai Duong, Bac Ninh), which is above some of the most distorted sex ratio at birth levels in the world.

- The sex ratio at birth in three
- regions including the Northern
- Midlands and Mountains, the
- Central Highlands and the
- Mekong Delta was close to the
- normal level of 105 in
- 2010–2014.

There is no significant difference in the sex ratio at birth between rural and urban areas in general. However, when taking into account urban and rural zones by region, significant differences can be observed. Specifically, in four regions, the sex ratio at birth in urban areas is significantly higher than in rural areas. In contrast, in the two richest agricultural regions, the Red River Delta and the Mekong River Delta, the sex ratio at birth is higher in the rural areas than that in the urban areas.

The differences in sex ratio at birth levels by region, coupled with other socio-economic and cultural determinants show the complexity of the situation of sex ratio at birth in Viet Nam. That requires targeted intervention strategies that are suitable to different contexts.

CHAPTER



PUBLIC AWARENESS

The Government of Viet Nam has been aware of the skewed sex ratio at birth since early 2000. UNFPA has been a leading agency in supporting the Government in identifying the phenomenon and warning about the potential consequences of the increasing sex ratio at birth imbalance since 2004. The UNFPA Country Office has produced several key publications on gender-biased sex selection based on the annual population change and family planning surveys, recorded births at health facilities, 2009 Population and Housing Census and the 2014 Inter-censal Population and Housing Survey.

- In support of the Government,
- UNFPA has taken a wide range
- of approaches to address the
- sex ratio at birth imbalance in
- order to raise the awareness
- of the issue. At community
- level, UNFPA supported the
- Government in piloting an
- intervention model from 2013–
- 2016 in Hai Duong Province,
- which have the highest sex ratio
- at birth imbalance.

For national-level advocacy, UNFPA supported the Government to conduct national communication campaigns to stop gender-biased sex selection in 2014 and 2015.

No survey has been conducted at national level on the awareness of the general population about the sex ratio at birth imbalance. However, baseline and end-line surveys on sex ratio at birth were implemented as part of the intervention model piloting at community level in Hai Duong and Ha Nam Provinces. The results showed that before and after the piloting, the general awareness of the population in these two provinces was quite high: about 85 per cent or more were aware of the skewed sex ratio at birth in Viet Nam, its negative consequences for society, and that abortion for the purpose of sex selection was illegal.¹² Results showed that a high level of awareness of the issue does not necessarily correlate with a low prevalence of gender-biased sex selection in practice. Son preference is deeply rooted in social norms, and expectations of the family and society and significantly affect the actual practice of sex selection. While it is necessary to enhance public awareness about gender-biased sex selection and sex ratio at birth in order to leverage change, it remains a challenge to address son preference, discrimination against women and girls within the family, and the related traditional mindset and gender stereotypes.

CHAPTER



THE RULE OF LAW AND HUMAN RIGHTS

3.1 INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS

Viet Nam is a signatory to several international human rights treaties which guarantee women's rights to equality and non-discrimination. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women requires states parties to "condemn discrimination against women in all of its forms" and "to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of inferiority, or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women" (CEDAW, *Supra* note 38, articles 2, 5a).

The Beijing Platform for Action 1995 and the International Conference on Population and Development provide further impetus to address gender inequality. Likewise, the Sustainable Development Goals, to which Viet Nam is a signatory, call on the nations to achieve gender equality and to empower women and girls in Goal 5 (United National General Assembly, 2015). Viet Nam also has officially ratified the Convention on the Rights of Child; the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Sustainable Development Goals.

3.2 NATIONAL LEGISLATION AND FRAMEWORKS

Viet Nam's 2013 Constitution emphasizes that women and men must be treated equally, banning laws, customs, and traditions that deny women the same opportunities as men. According to the Constitution and the 2015 Civil Code, women have the same right to inherit property as men. In practice, however, women's rights to inheritance are often violated, as their access to land is compromised by the high concentration of inheritance among men.

In November 2006, the Viet Nam National Assembly passed the Gender Equality Law and one year later passed the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control. Pursuant to the Gender Equality

Law, the Government of Viet Nam approved the National Strategy on Gender Equality for 2011–2020 and the National Action Programme on Gender Equality for 2016–2020. These documents codify the Government's commitments to eliminate gender inequalities and reinforce the recognition of women's significant contributions to Viet Nam's socio-economic development and poverty eradication.

The Government of Viet Nam has recognized the imbalanced sex ratio at birth and taken efforts to address the issue through policies and legislation, aiming to return the sex ratio at birth to the biologically normal level by 2025.

The Government of Viet Nam has issued a number of policies that directly address the country's skewed sex ratio at birth. These include:

- The 2003 Population Ordinance, which prohibits and fines gender-biased sex selection;
- Decree 104/2003/ND-CP, which bans sex identification of fetuses and sex selection in any form;
- Decree 176/2013/ND-CP issued on 14 November 2013 details penalties for actors undertaking sex selection;
- The Law on Gender Equality (Article 40) states that sex selection, including inciting other people to select for sex, is illegal;
- The 2011–2020 National Strategy on Population and Reproductive Health aims to return the sex ratio at birth to the biologically normal level by 2025. The Ministry of Health has issued the national strategy on controlling sex ratio at birth imbalance for the period of 2016–2025.

Viet Nam also bans media and publishing houses from issuing or disseminating materials and information on sex selection methods and techniques and services. This is carried out in collaboration with relevant institutions such as the Press authority, Ministry of Information–Communications as well as the Press Administration and Central Communication and Education Committee.

CONCLUSION: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Challenges

A key challenge in relation to addressing son preference and gender-biased sex selection in Viet Nam is to ensure a balance between effective law enforcement that bans the practice and also protects women's reproductive rights. The draft Population Law, for example, included provisions that were intended to reduce the sex ratio at birth imbalance by restricting women's right to abortion. These provisions are unlikely to be effective, and run counter to women's reproductive rights. Moreover, as UNFPA has highlighted, enforcement of these provisions are likely to force more women into having illegal and unsafe abortions.

Rapid social transformations and growing employment opportunities for women in Viet Nam have not produced substantive changes to traditional gender arrangements – and as a result, son preference persists. Experience from the intervention pilots in two provinces also showed that even when people's knowledge about the sex ratio at birth imbalance, and their awareness of the illegality of sex selection increased, the root causes of sex selective practices are resistant to change.

At the same time, there is lack of data about the intensity of son preference across social groups. This limits the possibility of refining communication strategies that target social norms and practices around sex selection, as well as to monitor the dynamics of sex ratio at birth for further effective interventions.

Opportunities and recommendations

Areas of action include measures to address both supply and demand factors as well as research required to inform the design and implementation of these measures.

Advocacy and social norm change interventions:

- Continue public awareness activities in society to reduce practices of son preference and undervaluing of girls, as well as consequences of sex imbalances at birth.
- Address gender inequality with a special focus on gender-based discrimination within the family. Changes in residence and inheritance practices can enhance women's empowerment and the value of girls in the eyes of parents and others in the community.
- Improve access of women to legal assistance. At present, Vietnamese women's rights to inheritance is often violated. It is important to enhance people's knowledge of women's rights to inheritance and to encourage daughters to claim their rights to family assets. Legal assistance to women can help to ensure women's rights to inheritance.
- Engage men to establish new family practices. It is important to continue advocating for men's engagement in ending discrimination against women and girls. Men's engagement is necessary to promote changing perceptions in the society about alternative masculinity that supports gender equality and men's active role in ending gender-biased sex selection.
- Strengthen social protection systems for older people to reduce the demand for having sons;

Reduce and prevent misuse of technology:

- Continue enforcement of the regulation on penalties for gender-biased sex determination and gender-biased sex selection without limiting women's access to reproductive health care and their reproductive rights.

Conduct research and monitoring to inform the design and implementation of intervention measures:

- Implement qualitative research to understand how the practice of son preference is passed on, sustained and how it can be intervened in effectively.
- Conduct impact assessment of interventions, documenting good and failed practices to address the sex ratio at birth imbalance in order to adjust or replicate initiatives already implemented in parts of the country.
- Implement continuous monitoring of sex ratio at birth trends in the country through all statistical instruments available.



Photo: ©UNFPA Vietnam, Nguyen Thi Hong Thanh

ENDNOTES

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<https://vietnam.unfpa.org>

UNFPA Viet Nam

Green One UN House (GOUNH)

304 Kim Ma Street, Ba Dinh District, Hanoi

Cover photo: UNFPA Viet Nam

Nguyen Minh Duc

