

## The Imbalanced Sex Ratio at Birth in Viet Nam: Connecting Research and Policy for Change

### Introduction

This policy brief presents recommendations for addressing the skewed sex ratio at birth (SRB) in Viet Nam.

The brief emphasizes that son preference and the practice of sex selection in Viet Nam lie behind the skewed sex ratio at birth, and that both are deeply rooted in the male-oriented kinship system in Viet Nam.

To address the issues that are at the root of the skewed sex ratio at birth, critical reflection on the country's cultural traditions in the domain of family and childbearing is needed. Furthermore, health providers' illegal provision of fetal sex determination and sex selection must also be addressed.

### Sex ratio at birth in Viet Nam

The sex ratio at birth is defined as the number of boys being born per 100 girls. A normal SRB lies between 104-106 boys for 100 girls.

Since the 1980s, a surplus of boys has been born in a number of Asian countries. In Viet Nam, the SRB imbalance occurred later than in most other countries. Since there is no tradition of female infanticide in Viet Nam, the SRB did not begin to rise until ultrasonography became widely available in the country, rendering prenatal sex determination possible. Within a short period of time, the SRB rose from an estimated 106 male births per 100 female births in the year 2000 to 110.5 in 2009 and 112.6 in 2013.<sup>1-3</sup>

The SRB has increased in both rural and urban areas, but the rise has been most dramatic in urban areas. Among better-off households and higher educated women, the SRB tends to be higher than among poor households and less educated women.<sup>1-3</sup> The Red River Delta has recorded the highest SRB in the country (122.4 in 2011).<sup>2</sup>

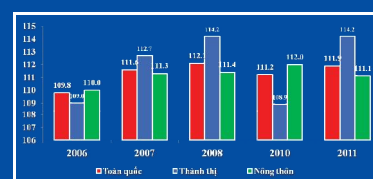
In Viet Nam, unlike in most other countries, the SRB is skewed already in the first child born to couples: in 2009, the SRB was 110.2 for the first birth, 109 for the second birth, and 115.5 for the third birth (132 if the first two children were daughters). Sex selection in first-order births is almost exclusively an urban phenomenon.<sup>2,3</sup>

### Facts and Figures

SRB trends in Viet Nam:



SRB is on the rise in both urban and rural areas



10 provinces with the highest SRB

Province/City	2009	2011	2013
Hung Yen	130.7	113.8	119.3
Hải Dương	120.2	121.3	119.0
Bắc Ninh	119.4	125.5	118.6
Bắc Giang	116.8	119.7	120.1
Nam Định	116.4	120.1	114.7
Hoà Bình	116.3	119.9	107.7
Hải Phòng	115.3	113.0	114.1
Quảng Ngãi	115.1	117.3	113.3
Quảng Ninh	115.0	114.5	114.6
Vĩnh Phúc	114.9	116.2	114.6

It is estimated that by 2050 there will be a surplus of 2.3m to 4.3m men.

Source: GOPFP 2013

When fertility is below replacement level, first births account for more than half of all births. For a country like Viet Nam, therefore, sex selection in first-order births can have serious demographic consequences.

According to demographic estimates, if the SRB continues to increase at the same pace, by 2050 Viet Nam's population will include a surplus of 12 percent of men under the age of 50.<sup>1</sup> This can have grave consequences for the country's socio-economic development and for the well-being of women, men, families and communities. The scarcity of young women will make it difficult for a large group of men to find a marriage partner. This "marriage squeeze" is likely to have a range of problematic demographic and social consequences, including forced marriages, trafficking and all forms of violence against women and girls, and social unrest fuelled by male social and sexual frustrations. In this competitive marriage market, underprivileged men – those with less education and resources – will be particularly vulnerable. National and international migration for marriage purposes may also increase and, as a result, lead to social instability.

### Why has SRB become imbalanced recently?

The frequency of the presence of prenatal sex selection among first births suggests that some couples may resort to sex selection for first births. The challenge will be to balance between law enforcement for banning of prenatal sex determination and women's reproductive rights. The demand for prenatal diagnosis to identify the sex of the child has led to a booming private healthcare business in Viet Nam in defiance of existing laws, encouraging clients and practitioners to ignore the legal system at large.

**Male-oriented kinship systems:** In many regions of Viet Nam, prescribed kinship is patrilineal and patrilocal.<sup>12-13</sup> Most parents expect that their daughters will join their husbands' families upon marriage, while sons will stay with their own parents, caring for them in their old age. Since sons are expected to provide for elderly parents, they usually

inherit the main part of their property, while daughters' share is limited. As many families are wealthier now than ever before, wishes to keep wealth within the family may contribute to fueling son preference.

Son preference is also closely connected to the practices of ancestor worship. After death, many people believe, their soul will live on in "the other world." Deceased souls too need love and care, and in most families the responsibility for conducting funerals and caring for ancestors' souls is held by sons.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, son preference is linked to the need to continue the patriline (*dòng họ*). Existing research shows that many people in Viet Nam believe that in case of sonlessness, daughters too can take responsibility for ancestor worship and old-age care of elderly parents. Yet daughters cannot, most people claim, carry on the patriline. Without sons, therefore, family lines will perish.<sup>12</sup>

The anxieties that son preference expresses – regarding old age, life after death, and kinship obligations – seem to be exacerbated by the moral assessments that are carried out in local communities in today's Viet Nam. Couples without sons are often blamed, humiliated, and mocked, being exposed to strong moral pressure from relatives and community members to produce at least one son. This pressure is, many people report, the most painful aspect of sonlessness.<sup>12</sup>



**Normative expectations regarding family size:** By now, most families in Viet Nam have adopted the one-or-two child family norm. Many couples therefore find it important that at least one of their two children is a boy and strive actively to attain this family ideal.<sup>12-13</sup>

**Availability of technology for sex detection and selection:** Since the turn of the millennium, obstetrical ultrasonography has been an integral component of routine antenatal care in Viet Nam, and most women know the sex of their future child from an early stage of pregnancy<sup>14</sup>. If the fetus turns out to be female, the woman may resort to an induced abortion, trying again for a son in her next pregnancy. Sex selective abortions have, research has shown, become a part of many women's reproductive lives.<sup>15-16</sup>

However, it is important to note that ultrasound technology and induced abortions are merely tools used to attain family-building goals.

The root cause of Viet Nam's skewed SRB is gender inequality as it manifests in kinship systems. This is affirmed by the fact that ultrasound and abortion services are available throughout the country, but the SRB is more skewed in some regions than others, being particularly high in regions such as the Red River Delta where patrilineal and patrilocal kinship practices are culturally ingrained.<sup>13</sup>

### **Legislative and policy framework**

As regards to gender inequality and sex selection, Viet Nam has a strong legislative and policy framework. Research findings and lessons learnt from pilot projects aiming to address the skewed SRB in Viet Nam indicate, however, that law and policy enforcement is often weak.<sup>12,17</sup> Gender inequality is socially entrenched, and changing centuries-old patterns of power and inequality demands concerted action and commitment from the entire political and social system.

### **Laws and policies on gender equality and sex-selection in Viet Nam**

- Article 63 of Viet Nam's 1992 Constitution emphasizes that "Any discrimination against women and violation of women's dignity are strictly prohibited." In Article 64 the Constitution emphasizes: "The State, and society do not accept any discrimination among children of the same family."
- Detailed provisions on gender equality, prevention of discrimination against women, and equal rights and responsibilities of sons and daughters are included in the revised Law on Marriage and Family (2014), the Population Ordinance (2003), the Law on Gender Equality (2006), and the Law on Prevention and Control of Domestic Violence (2007). The national strategies for population and development, gender equality, women's advancement, and other policy documents reaffirm these principles.
- The Vietnamese Civil Code (article 27) allows parents to choose the family name of either father or mother for their children.
- According to the Law on Marriage and Family (article 20), couples have the right to decide for themselves where to reside.
- Regarding inheritance, Viet Nam's Civil Code states that all individuals have the right to make a will for the purpose of passing their property to others after their deaths. If there is no will, property shall be equally distributed among the next of kin.
- The 2003 Population Ordinance (Article 7) bans sex selection in any form.
- The Law on Gender Equality (Article 40) emphasizes that sex-selection violates the law on gender equality.
- The Government Decision 114/2006/NĐ-CP on Regulation of Administrative Sanctions on Population and Children lists detailed penalties for acts of sex selection. The Government Decision 55/2009/NĐ-CP on Gender Equality defines fines from three to five million đồng for the act of inciting another person to abort a fetus because of its sex.
- The National Strategy on Population and Reproductive Health aims to substantially reduce the SRB increase, returning the ratio to the normal level of 105-106 male births per 100 female births by the year 2025.

## Challenges and Opportunities

### Challenges

#### *Reconsidering Viet Nam's cultural traditions*

Continuing the family line, worshipping ancestors, and taking care of parents in their old age tend to be considered by many people in Viet Nam to be good cultural traditions that help to maintain cultural coherence and continuity. In practice, however, these traditions often place premium on sons while downplaying the roles of daughters. Underlying idealized concepts of traditional Vietnamese culture, in other words, is a persistently male-oriented kinship system.

Therefore, preserving cultural ideals of mutual assistance and care, yet placing these ideals within a more gender-balanced kinship system, is a key challenge in efforts to address Viet Nam's skewed SRB.

#### *Implementing policies that address illegal provision of sex-selection services*

Despite the official ban on sex-selection, ultrasonography and abortion services continue to be misused for purposes of sex selection. Serious monitoring of health care clinics and hospitals has not been undertaken and existing sanctions are apparently not strong enough for behavior change. This confronts Viet Nam's policy-makers and health care professionals with the challenge of upholding the country's strong traditions of securing women's health and rights through access to prenatal screening technologies and safe abortion services while also avoiding misuse of new reproductive technologies.

### Opportunities

Besides its strong legislative and policy framework, Viet Nam has several other opportunities to implement interventions that can help to bring the SRB back to normal:

#### *A nationwide system of well-organized population collaborators*

Over the past decades, fertility levels in Viet Nam have fallen rapidly. The country's nationwide network of "population collaborators"

(*cộng tác viên*) has played a core role in this development. If capacity was built with regard to SRB-related issues, this human resource holds the potential to play a key role in the implementation of interventions aiming to return the SRB to normal.

#### *Female-oriented kinship*

In Viet Nam, the male-oriented kinship system co-exists with more bilateral and female-oriented forms of kinship in which gender roles are more flexible. Throughout their lives, daughters often maintain strong relations to their families of birth, sometimes taking responsibility for ancestor worship and providing support for elderly parents.<sup>13,18-22</sup>

Research on son preference has shown that although sons are considered to play key roles within the family, daughters too are appreciated. Many parents value the financial and emotional contributions of daughters, considering them more affectionate and reliable than sons. There is a general awareness that after joining their husbands' households, daughters often continue to offer their own parents substantial assistance and care, particularly in times of crisis.<sup>12</sup>



## Recommendations

### 1. Redefining “good cultural traditions” to strengthen women’s position

Policy documents and the mass media often refer in general terms to “good cultural traditions” but do not specify what those traditions are. Since the male-oriented kinship system is the underlying, but unspoken, premise on which ideas about Vietnamese cultural tradition are based, there is a risk that vague reference to tradition will be taken as encouragement to uphold kinship practices that define women as inferior to men. There is therefore a need to reframe “Vietnamese cultural traditions” in ways that strengthen the status of women and girls within families and kin groups. Good cultural traditions should be defined as traditions that value daughters as much as sons.

Activities addressing Vietnamese cultural traditions should include a focus on the roles of women in public ritual activities. In public activities such as King Hung’s anniversary, National Day celebrations, or other political, cultural, and social events at national and community levels, women should play central roles, together with men, in performing rites. In order for this to become routine, specific protocols should be developed. Communication activities addressing cultural traditions should focus also on local moral environments. Since moral pressures exercised by family and community members play a key role in sex selection practices, communication efforts should address these pressures, emphasizing that ridiculing, deriding, and offending remarks aimed at people who have no sons are socially unacceptable and damaging to the country.

### 2. Strengthening bilateral - oriented kinship models

To enhance the status of daughters, bilateral kinship models, systems in which kinship ties are calculated equally through both sexes, need to be strengthened. In such efforts, communication activities are important. Communication efforts should address the linkages between male-oriented kinship systems and

discrimination against women, and ensure that the legal regulations that support bilateral kinship models are widely known by citizens and cadres. This includes particularly daughters’ equal rights to inheritance, the right of the individual to carry family name of either father or mother, and couples’ right to choose where to reside.

The Law on Gender Equality states that it may be necessary to “*apply appropriate measures to eliminate backward habits and customs which hinder the gender equality goals.*” Information, education, and communication (IEC) efforts made to address the dominance of male-oriented kinship models can be seen as an implementation of this clause.

Communication campaigns addressing kinship models should emphasize that living with the wife’s parents is as valuable as living with the husband’s and should demand the inclusion of daughters’ names in the family annals (*gia phả*).

IEC messages should emphasize that both sons and daughters are their parents’ genetic offspring. Daughters too can continue the family line, just as they can care for elderly parents and perform ancestor worship. Communication messages aimed at girls should strengthen their knowledge of family/kinship history, self-confidence, and skills to perform traditional rites.

Communication messages could reframe longstanding cultural ideals of harmony between family and society under slogans such as “*My family does not have a son, other families do not have daughters, but overall, society will have a balanced sex ratio.*” “*My family has only daughters, other families have only sons. But overall, the country’s sex ratio will be balanced.*”

In order to strengthen the capacities of daughters to take care of their own parents after marriage, a new article on equal property division between daughters and sons should be added to the existing Law on Gender Equality. If this new article is added, a communication campaign should be launched to disseminate the amendment widely to the public.

### *3. Addressing misuse of biomedical technologies*

Despite the fact that health care providers in Viet Nam are not allowed to disclose the sex of the fetus or provide sex-selective abortions, these practices still occur. Therefore, interventions in both public and private health care sectors are needed, with a particular view to improving the communication skills of health care providers who face pressures from clients to reveal the sex of the fetus or to provide sex-selective abortions. Health care providers need skills to communicate with clients who are contemplating sex-selective abortions and to refuse to provide such services in an ethically appropriate and socially supportive manner.

Furthermore, the Viet Nam Medical Association should be encouraged to formulate a Code of Conduct that includes a commitment to prevent sex selection.

### *4. Strengthening law and policy enforcement*

In parallel with activities to improve existing laws and policies, efforts to enhance enforcement of current laws and policies are

needed. This concerns particularly the Law on Gender Equality, the Law on Marriage and Family, and the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control. In order to improve enforcement, Government agencies should coordinate closely with social organizations, NGOs, and Community-based Organizations (CBOs). In this context, it would be useful to undertake a review of methodologies used and actions taken in other countries that have invested in improved implementation of legal provisions.

### *5. Further research*

Viet Nam is in a process of rapid social change, and people's family-building strategies change too. Therefore, updated and research-based evidence is needed in order to inform SRB-related laws and policies, to strengthen efforts to enhance compliance with existing laws and policies, and to ensure proper implementation of interventions. There are particular needs for further research on bilateral kinship models; geographical differences in SRB imbalance; the medicalization and commercialization of childbearing; and results of intervention activities (see UNFPA 2011).

## **AREAS FOR ACTION**

- 1. Redefining “good cultural traditions” to strengthen women’s position**
- 2. Strengthening bilateral-oriented kinship models**
- 3. Addressing misuse of biomedical technologies**
- 4. Strengthening law and policy enforcement**
- 5. Further research**

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