

A photograph of two children, a girl and a boy, in school uniforms. The girl is on the left, wearing a white shirt with a red tie and a blue skirt. The boy is on the right, wearing a white shirt with a red tie and a blue skirt. They are both smiling and looking at a small yellow object they are holding together. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a tree trunk and a stone wall.

# The Imbalanced Sex Ratio at Birth in Viet Nam

**New Insights  
and  
Policy Recommendations**

Photo: UNFPA 2016/ Quinn Ryan Mattingly



# Introduction

The sex ratio at birth (SRB) is defined as the number of male children being born per 100 females. The biologically normal SRB lies between 102 and 106. In Viet Nam, the SRB was still at the biologically normal level in the year 2000, but rose to 110.5 by 2009 and to 112.2 by 2016. In some provinces, this figure was as high as 117 male children per 100 female children.

There is strong evidence that Viet Nam’s SRB imbalance is caused by gender-biased sex selection (GBSS) in favour of male children. GBSS is a practice of gender discrimination in itself and also a powerful manifestation of underlying forms of discrimination against women and girls. The rising SRB indicates that more sustained action needs to be taken in order to enhance gender equality and ensure Vietnamese women’s equal participation in the development process.

This policy brief presents new information on the skewed SRB in Viet Nam and its socio-cultural context, offering an analysis of recent demographic developments and research-based recommendations for ways forward.

## The context: Three driving factors behind gender biased sex selection in Viet Nam

In Viet Nam, patrilineal/patrilocal kinship systems tend to entail systematic *gender-based discrimination within the family*, including a *preference for sons*. The term “patrilineal” refers to a kinship system where descent is reckoned through males; people believe that only sons can continue family lines. “Patrilocal” refers to a system where married couples reside with or close to the man’s relatives, while the woman must leave her family of birth when getting married. In patrilineal/patrilocal kinship systems, adult sons usually hold responsibility for old-age care for their parents, often sharing a household with them, and sons tend to inherit substantially more from their parents than daughters do. In bilateral kinship systems, in contrast, sons and daughters are treated more equally.

The importance of kinship systems can be illustrated through comparisons between Viet Nam and neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. In Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, bilateral kinship systems prevail: people hold that family lines can be continued through daughters as well as sons, and residence and inheritance can follow both male and female lines.<sup>6,7</sup> Notably, in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, the SRB is close to 105, the biologically normal level.

While son preference has a long history in Viet Nam, people’s access to *sex selection technology* has increased dramatically over the past decade, with ultrasonography and selective abortion being available and affordable to most citizens. Although, the Government of Vietnam has strengthened the legal frame work to address the rising SRB (sex identification of fetuses and all forms of sex selection have been banned, and the Government aims to return the SRB to the biologically normal level by 2025), information about fetal sex remains easily accessible.

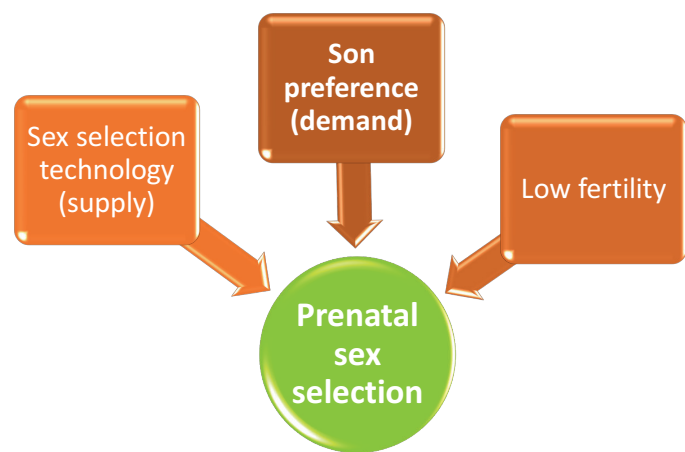


Figure 1: Driving factors of GBSS

Key policies and legislation addressing Viet Nam's skewed sex ratio at birth

- The 2003 Population Ordinance and the Decree no. 104/2003/ND-CP ban sex identification of fetuses and sex selection in any form.
- Decree no. 114/2006/ND-CP lists detailed penalties for acts of 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 SRB to the biologically normal level by 2025.

Gender-biased sex selection – performed through ultrasound scans in combination with induced abortion – therefore continues in today's Viet Nam.

Finally, both Government policies and local fertility preferences in many parts of Viet Nam favour a *small-size family* with no more than two children. Together, these three factors create the socio-cultural conditions for sex selection in favour of sons.

The sex ratio at birth in Viet Nam: Trends and statistics

Until 2004, the SRB in Viet Nam remained close to the biologically normal level of 105. After 2004, SRB levels began to rise rapidly, at a faster pace than observed in many other countries. During 2004-2010, sex selection became a reproductive possibility considered by many couples in Viet Nam. Since 2010, the SRB has continued to rise, but at a slower pace (see Figure 2).<sup>1,2</sup>

A closer look at SRB levels in Viet Nam reveals large differences among population groups: not all citizens of Viet Nam are equally disposed towards prenatal sex selection. Who, then, selects for sons?

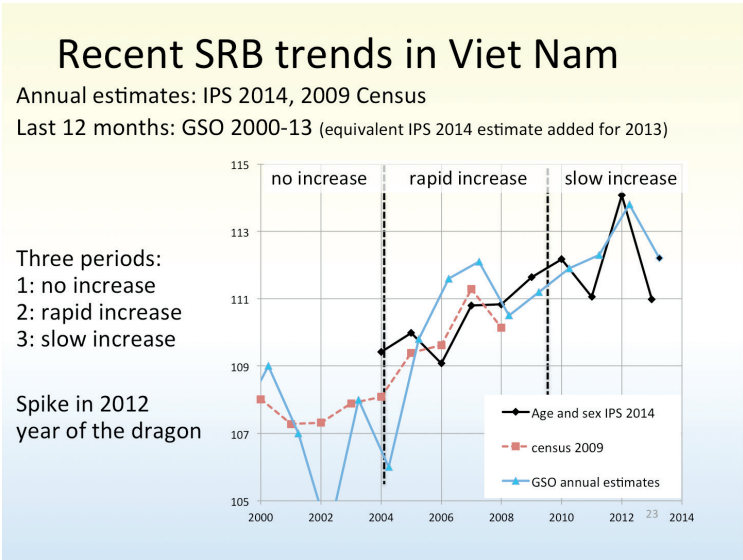


Figure 2: Recent SRB trends in Vietnam

Who selects for sons in Viet Nam: Regional variations

Research shows large differences in SRB levels between the six socio-economic regions of the country: the Northern Midlands/Mountains, the Red River Delta, the Southeast, the Central Coast, the Central Highlands, and the Mekong Delta (see Figure 3).

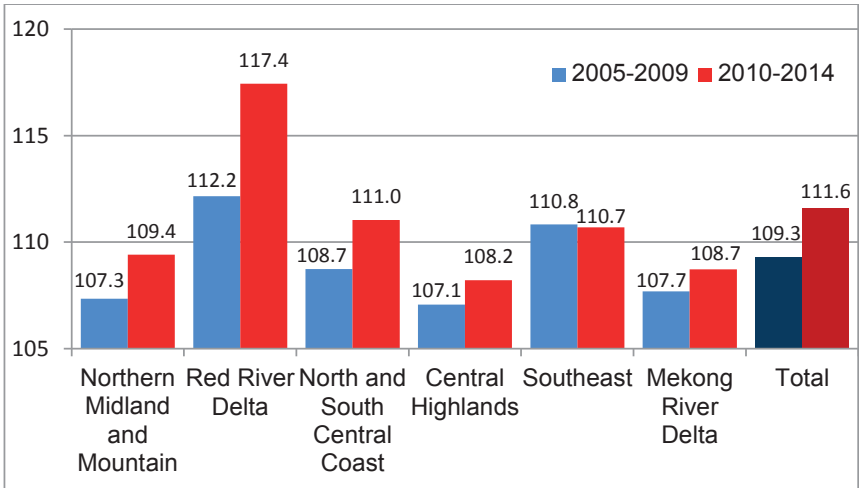


Figure 3: Estimates of the sex ratio at birth in 2005-2009 and 2010-2014, Viet Nam regions.

In 2010-2014, the SRB was close to normal in three regions (the Northern Midlands/Mountains, the Central Highlands, and the Mekong Delta), while the SRB in the Red River Delta was 117.4. All regions have seen an increase in SRB, but there has been a particularly marked rise in the Red River Delta. In three provinces of this region – Bac Ninh, Hai Duong, and Hung Yen – SRB levels are estimated to be above 125.<sup>1,2</sup>

It is also in the Red River Delta that the rise in SRB since 2010 has been most dramatic: while this region is home to less than a quarter of all children in Viet Nam, it accounts for 45% of the total number of surplus boys (see Figure 4).

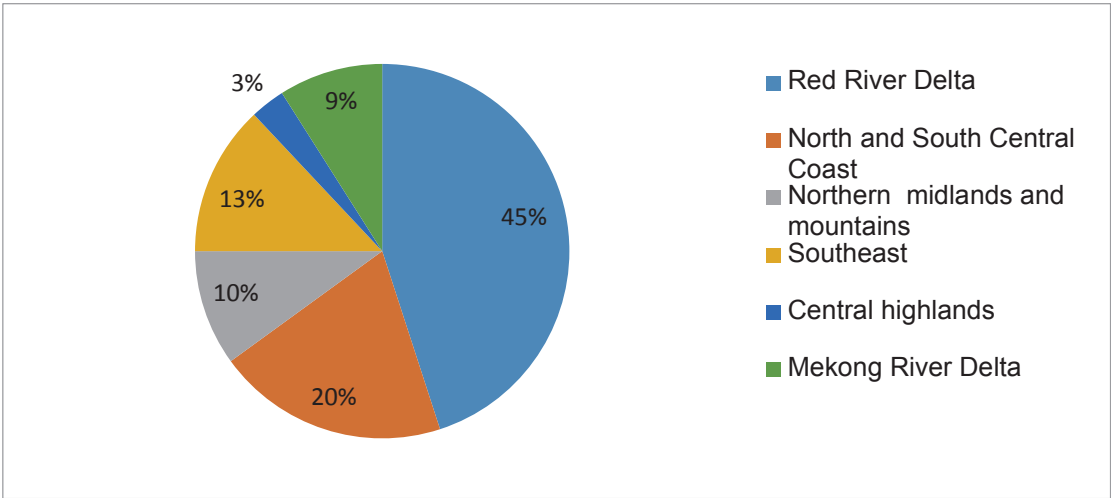


Figure 4: Contribution of regions to excess boys in Viet Nam, 2010-2014

Notably, the regions of Viet Nam with elevated SRB levels are regions where patrilineal and patrilocal kinship practices prevail, while areas with bilateral kinship patterns have lower levels of son preference.<sup>6,9</sup> The regional variations in SRB levels in Viet Nam therefore indicate that in order to enhance gender equality and bring SRB levels back to normal, kinship systems must be addressed.

## Who selects for sons in Viet Nam: Socio-economic variations

There are significant social and economic differences in SRB levels among different groups in Viet Nam: sex-selection in favour of sons is more widely practiced by privileged than by underprivileged groups in Vietnamese society.<sup>1,2</sup>

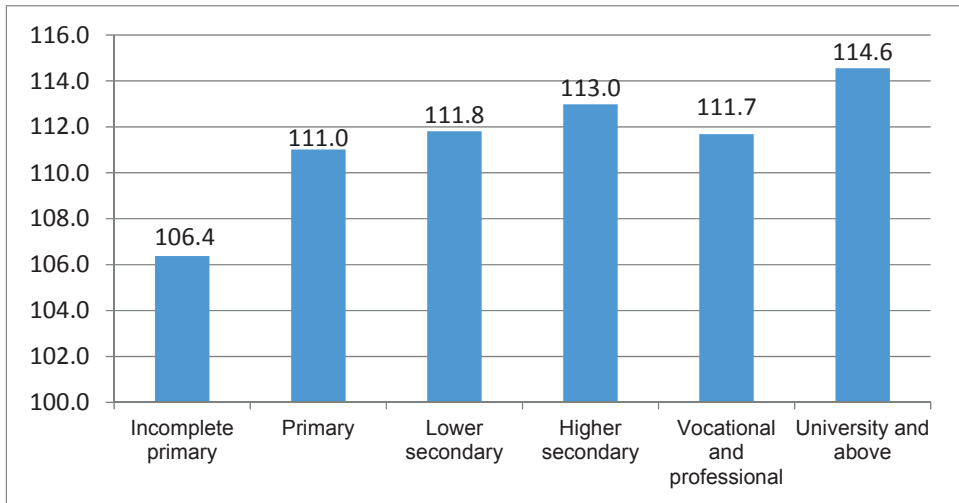


Figure 5: SRB by educational level of the mothers in Viet Nam, 2010-2014

First, there are associations between women’s educational level and the SRB. Among Vietnamese women with incomplete primary schooling, the SRB is nearly normal (106.4) and rises to nearly 115 among women with university level education (see Figure 5).<sup>1,2</sup>

Second, SRB levels in Viet Nam rise with socio-economic status: couples living in wealthy households are more likely to select for sons than those who live in poor households. The SRB of the richest households is 113, the households with medium socio-economic status is 111.5, while the SRB among the country’s poorest people is 107 (see Figure 6).

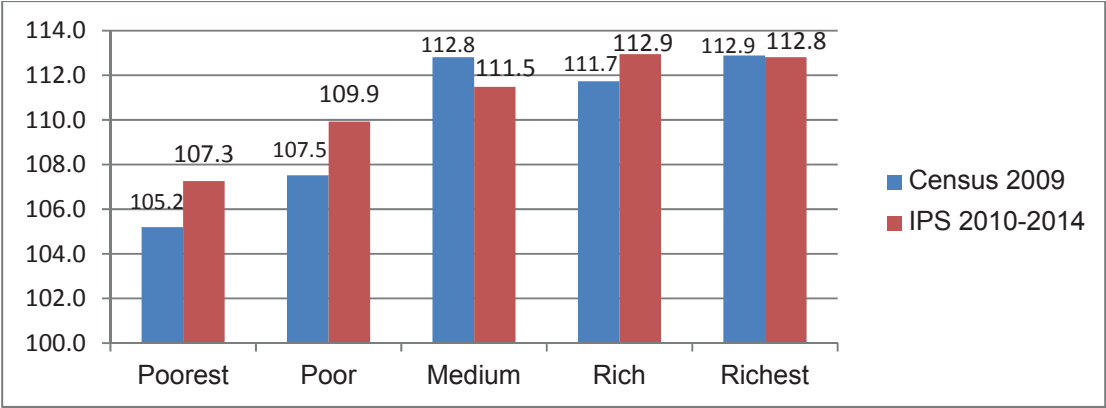


Figure 6: SRB by socio-economic quintile in Viet Nam, 2009 and 2010-2014

However, at present, there is a trend towards elevated SRB across all socio-economic groups in Viet Nam: since 2009, the SRB has risen in the poorest socio-economic groups, while it has remained stable in more affluent populations (see Figure 6).<sup>1,2</sup> This trend may suggest that sex-selection in favour of sons is currently undergoing a process of normalization in Viet Nam.<sup>9</sup>

What then can explain the fact that Viet Nam’s privileged people are more likely than others to select for sons? All three factors behind prenatal sex selection (Figure 1) must be considered:

First, socio-economically privileged couples are more likely to have access to medical technology and they have lower fertility rates.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, they are likely to be members of households that possess certain economic assets. In order to avoid losing these assets to another kin group – the one that their female children will marry into – family members will often prefer to transfer their property to male rather than female offspring.<sup>10</sup>

This indicates that in patrilineal and patrilocal kinship systems, sons of prosperous households tend to attain particular significance as *financial channels for kin group property*. Qualitative research conducted in the Red River Delta has shown that community members often ridicule sonless couples for letting other kin groups take over their property and that fears of such moral judgment tend to compel people to strive for sons.<sup>10</sup>

*In our neighbouring village, families that have only daughters suffer seriously from other people’s rumoring and mocking. They say, “For what reason do you struggle hard to build a house which will be owned by your son in-law anyway?” They call the house a house of compassion. (Ward leader, Ha Noi, 2011)*

According to Viet Nam’s 2013 Constitution and 2005 Civil Code, women have the same right to inherit property as men. Banning laws, customs, and traditions that deny women the same opportunities as men, the Constitution emphasizes that women and men must be treated equally.<sup>11</sup> In practice, however, women’s rights to inheritance are often violated, as their access to land is compromised by the high concentration of inheritance to men.<sup>5, 11,12</sup>

This inheritance bias in favour of males indicates that in order to return Viet Nam's SRB to normal, traditional gender norms and persistent forms of gender bias must be addressed. In this context, an increased focus on *gender-based discrimination within the family* is needed, along with continued efforts to promote gender equality in realms such as education, employment and politics.

A stronger focus on discrimination against women and girls within the family arena may also help to address other prominent manifestations of gender inequality in Viet Nam such as gender-based violence.<sup>5</sup> Research has found that women's mental wellbeing is significantly associated with both intimate partner violence and son preference. A recent study conducted among pregnant women in Hanoi, for instance, found that women who lived with a husband who was abusive while also expressing a wish for a son were four times more likely than other women to develop signs of depression during their pregnancies.<sup>13</sup>

## Recommendations

For decades, the Government of Viet Nam has placed gender equality high on political agendas, focusing particularly on women's education and employment. The research evidence presented in this policy brief shows that in order to return Viet Nam's SRB levels to normal, there is an urgent need to expand the current focus on education and employment, including a stronger focus on gender-based discrimination within the family.

Based on research in Viet Nam, and on lessons from other countries, the following recommendations can be made (see Figure 7):

### **Addressing gender inequality with a special focus on gender-based discrimination within the family:**

1. *New family practices:* In order to combat gender-based discrimination within the family, changes in residence and inheritance practices are needed. Ways forward may include working with communities and kin groups to promote acceptance of matrilocal as well as patrilocal residence and to ensure equal inheritance between daughters and sons. Existing research shows that bilateral forms of kinship are likely to enhance women's empowerment and to increase the value of girls in the eyes of parents and others.
2. *Engaging men:* In order to establish new family practices, men's commitment and collaboration is essential. It is therefore important to continue advocating for men's engagement in ending discrimination against women and girls, for instance through behaviour change communication urging males to share housework equally with female household members; encouraging husbands to support their daughters' and wives' careers and education; and alerting fathers to the importance for families, communities and nation of sharing inheritance equally between sons and daughters.
3. *Provision of free legal assistance to women:* 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. Free and sufficient legal support should be provided in order to support women in demanding an equal share of parental assets such as land or property.
4. *Awareness-raising and advocacy regarding women's contributions to family and society:* Family ideologies often place a premium on men's contributions to family and society, whereas the tasks that girls and women undertake, in the formal economy as well as in informal domestic arenas, tend to be less visible and taken for granted. There is a need, therefore, for increased public attention to the contributions made by girls and women to family, community and society.

### **Enhancing social protection for the elderly:**

Stronger social protection systems for the elderly are often considered an important means to reduce son preference. In Viet Nam, however, sex selection in favour of sons is more prevalent among the wealthier segments of the population – that is, among people who are likely to have accumulated assets that can sustain them in their old age. This indicates that concerns about



old-age financial security may not be the key driver of sex selection in Viet Nam. Still, enhancing social protection for the elderly is likely to contribute to reducing people’s dependency on offspring for old-age care while also changing cultural views of the absolute necessity of sons.

**Addressing misuse of medical technology:**

Sex-selective practices rely on prenatal sex determination through ultrasound scans. Viet Nam could implement more measures to prevent early fetal sex detection, but needs to ensure women’s access to services for safe abortion. Closer inspection of public and private health care clinics, accompanied by sizeable fines or other penalties for violating the ban on prenatal sex determination, will render it more difficult to access information about fetal sex and hence to practice prenatal sex selection.

Stronger implementation of existing laws and regulations would have the added benefit of demonstrating to the country’s citizens that there is serious Government intention behind current legislation in this area.

**Research and monitoring:**

- 1. *Comparative research on family practices in different regions of Viet Nam:* SRB levels vary widely between Vietnam’s socio-economic regions. In some regions of the country, the SRB remains close to the biologically normal level. This calls for in-depth research on the factors that compel prospective parents in these areas to *not* sex-select, with a particular focus on issues such as inheritance and residence patterns within families. For instance, research comparing family practices in the Mekong Delta and in the Red River Delta – both developed agricultural regions with easy access to major cities – may provide important insights and ideas for how to diminish gender-based discrimination within the family.
- 2. *Research on other countries’ efforts to address SRB imbalances* such as China, India and Korea and to consider what lessons learnt and good practices could be adapted into the Vietnamese situation.
- 3. *Research on intergenerational value transfers:* Since SRB levels in Viet Nam are highest among the most prosperous groups, there is a need for research on inter-generational value transfers in families residing in different regions of Viet Nam and on the implications of such transfers for women’s socio-economic status and life chances.
- 4. *Research on the social and cultural processes through which sex selection is transmitted* and routinized as a social practice, spreading from more affluent groups to the less privileged.
- 5. *Continue closely monitoring SRB trends of the country.* It is important to this monitoring, for instance through an annual birth registration series as used in Japan, South Korea and Malaysia.

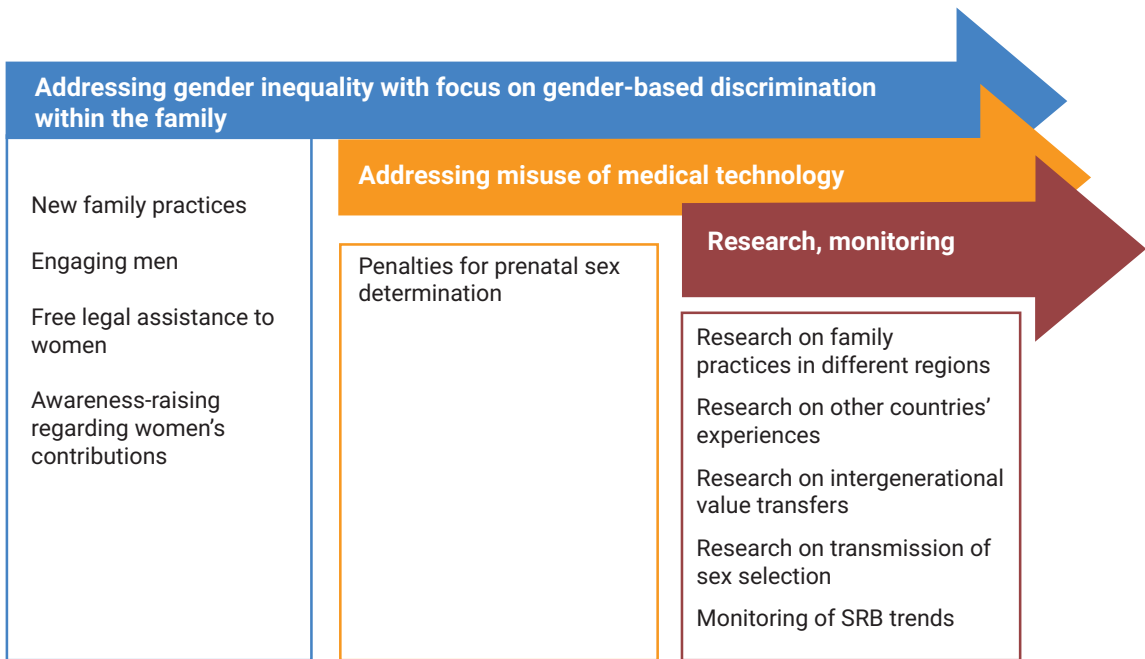


Figure 7: A comprehensive approach to addressing the SRB imbalance in Viet Nam

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