

Mara Hvistendahl: Missing – 163 Million Women⁷⁸

Midway through his career, Christophe Guilmoto stopped counting babies and started counting boys. A French demographer with a mathematician's love of numbers and an anthropologist's obsession with detail did his dissertation research in Tamil Nadu, a state in southwestern India where the fertility rate had fallen to European levels even as personal income remained low. But over the course of working in India, he realized that people were not simply having fewer children. They were having fewer girls.

Outside of the pocket of rural Tamil Nadu where Guilmoto happened to do his field research, Indians rarely killed infants. "Everybody talked about infanticide because it carried more emotional weight", he recalls, "[B]ut actually it was hardly in existence." As it turned out, Tamil Nadu was in fact one of the states where girls had a better prospect of survival, while in 2001 the northwest, a wealthy region considered India's breadbasket, reported a regional sex ratio at birth of 126 – that is, 126 boys for every 100 girls. (The natural human sex ratio at birth is 105 boys for every 100 girls.) The cause for this gap, Guilmoto quickly learned, was that pregnant women were taking advantage of a cheap and pervasive sex determination tool – ultrasound – and aborting if the fetus turned out to be female.

The link to technology was alarming, for it meant that India's skewed ratio of male to female newborns was an outgrowth of economic progress, not backward traditions. And it wasn't just happening in India. Guilmoto found that several other Asian countries exceeded the biological upper limit of 106 boys born per 100 girls. In the 1980s, South Korea, Taiwan, and parts of Singapore registered sex ratios at birth exceeding 109. By 2000, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia would show sex ratios at birth of over 115, and significantly skewed birth ratios would later appear in Vietnam and Albania as well. In preliminary census results released this spring, China reported a sex ratio at birth of 118 boys per 100 girls, while India, which uses an alternative statistic, reported 914 girls for every 1,000 boys, ages 0-6. People, Guilmoto realized, were engineering what he calls "rampant demographic masculinization"— a change with potentially grave effects for future generations. "It was very difficult," he told me, "not to see it as a revolution."

In 2005, Guilmoto calculated that, had Asia's ratio remained at its natural equilibrium of 105 over the past few decades, the continent would have had an additional 163 million women and girls.

[...] As the first generation touched by sex-ratio imbalance grows up, the silent biological discrimination that is sex selection has been exacerbated by more visible threats to women, including sex trafficking, bride buying, and forced marriages.

⁷⁸ excerpt from Mara Hvistendahl: *Unnatural Selection; Choosing Boys Over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men*.

In South Korea and Taiwan, increasing numbers of men obtain wives on one-week “marriage tours” of Vietnam — a trade similar to America’s mail-order-bride industry but so pervasive that in South Korea more than 1,000 international marriage agencies have registered with the government. In wealthy parts of China and India, men buy women from poorer regions, working through shady brokers who may or may not bother to secure the women’s consent. In poorer parts of China and India, they visit brothels staffed by prostitutes who have often been forced into sex work.

As Generation XY matures in other parts of the gender-imbalanced world, moreover, even these crude tactics will not be an option. Men in western China, eastern India, Vietnam, Georgia, Albania, and other countries with recent or looming sex-ratio imbalances won’t be able to import women, because at some point in the near future the supply of women will dry up. “The idea of importing brides to solve the shortage in women may work in countries with lower populations, but in a huge country like China they are just a drop in the ocean”, Tian Xueyuan, deputy director of the China Population Association, recently told the China Daily – “It’s not a realistic solution.”

It won’t just be forlorn single men who will suffer in 2020s Asia and 2030s Eastern Europe. Other scholars have begun to calculate the impact that hundreds of millions of surplus men will have on everything from health care to crime. Historically, societies in which men substantially outnumber women are not nice places to live. Sometimes they are violent: Leaders in both China and India now see the imbalance as a threat to social stability.

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

What are some figures which testify to the phenomenon of missing women?

What was the reason for the gap in the ratio of women to men in India?

Which violations of human dignity and rights happened as a result of missing women?

What are the consequences of the missing women for the “surplus men” and people around them?