

Statement of Mara Hvistendahl

Gendercide: China's Missing Girls
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on China
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Thank you, Chairmans Rubio and Smith, for providing me with the opportunity to share my thoughts on China's imbalanced population.

We are all here because we care about the world's women. I appear before you as a journalist who lived in China for nearly a decade and spent three years investigating sex selection and its effects. As I detailed in my book *Unnatural Selection*, sex selection—mainly through ultrasound examinations followed by abortion—has led to the disappearance of over 100 million females from the global population. This problem has spread beyond China and India, to countries as varied as Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam, and even to some groups in the United States and Canada.

After continuing unabated for over three decades, sex-ratio distortion is now a massive international issue. In terms of lives affected, it surpasses the HIV epidemic. And yet, despite the scope of this problem, there has been little international response. That is in part because responsibility is often assumed to lie solely with countries like China and India. As I will explain, that assumption is wrong.

The 2010 census, the last year it was taken, found a sex ratio at birth of 118 boys per 100 girls in China. The skewed sex ratio is painfully obvious if you visit an elementary school in a second- or third-tier city in China. Look at any classroom and you will see many more boys than girls.

China's population control policies have undoubtedly contributed to this gap. But even as the government's population targets have become more lenient and less relevant, sex selection has increased. China's sex ratio at birth, in fact, has steadily risen since 1990. It will no doubt persist under a two-child policy.

When I began researching this issue in 2008, I traveled to a county called Suining in northern Jiangsu province, once an agricultural area that is now industrializing. At the time I visited, Suining's sex ratio at birth was estimated at 153 boys per 100 girls. And yet, that hardly made it the county in China with the most extreme sex ratio. Photographer Ariana Lindquist and I simply went there because she knew people from the area, and we figured that those contacts would help us delve deeper into the issue.

We spent a lot of time with a woman whom I call Liao Li. She was a strong, independent woman—a mother of two girls and one boy who in many ways called the

shots in her family. She managed the finances, made a lot of the major decisions, and kept the family cell phone when her husband was off working construction jobs. While she and her husband sometimes struggled to make ends meet, they weren't the poorest family in their town. For all of these reasons, she struck me as a great guide to the area.

Over the several days I spent with Liao Li, she was quite critical about the epidemic of sex selection that had hit Suining. A few times she said things like, "Girls are very good. They take care of you when you're older." Sex selection, she told me, is "stupid thinking, when you are, after all, yourself a woman." But then shortly before we returned to Shanghai, she invited Ariana and me over for dinner. We drank some warm beer, and I talked a little about my research. As the dinner progressed, Liao Li stood up and said, "I aborted two girls."

That threw me for a loop. As my reporting took me to countries as varied as India, Albania, South Korea, and Vietnam, however, I learned that Liao Li's situation is in fact fairly typical. The perpetrators of sex selection are not, as is commonly portrayed, primarily poor people in villages. Throughout South and East Asia, the Caucasus region, and the Balkans, sex selection starts in urban areas, among wealthy or middle-class and well-educated couples, and trickles down from there.

Unfortunately, in 2016 sexism is far from dead, and a preference for boys still persists in most parts of the world. Second, economic development means that just as people move to cities and start having fewer children, a new technology—ultrasound—becomes available. The third factor is that many of the countries where sex selection is practiced have a history of coercive population policies and of abortion being forced on women as birth control. When all of these factors—son preference, access to new technology, and pressure on birth rates—are combined, people take measures to ensure that they have a son.

Sex selection is therefore a very modern problem. But it's also a problem for which Western nations, including the United States, bear responsibility.

If you were shaping policy in Washington, D.C. forty years ago, there is a good chance that you would have been asked to consider the issue of population growth, which was front and center at the time. Best-selling books like the *Population Bomb* warned of a population explosion. Population growth was a problem at the time, for a number of reasons. But Western intellectuals became obsessed with solving the problem by intervening in the developing world, where birth rates were highest. And that is where we went wrong.

Sociologists, anthropologists, and biologists were enlisted in the quest to lower birth rates. The legendary Margaret Mead reportedly contributed her expertise, and studies were done exploring why families were so large. It soon became clear that women in many parts of the world continued having children until they had a son. The idea emerged to guarantee them a son on the first try and avoid all those extra births—never mind that the extra births were girls.

The notion of sex selection had been around since the time of Aristotle. But by the 1960s, with recent breakthroughs in genetics and in our understanding of reproduction, it was finally becoming a reality. As a science journalist, I am embarrassed to note that the world's top science magazines featured gushing articles on possible sex selection methods. Everyone took for granted that these new methods would be used to select for boys.

What's particularly shocking today is that America's advocates of sex selection actually considered the horrid effects of a world with many more men than women. They knew that women's rights would suffer, that women would be coveted as wives and mothers and traded as chattel. In 1973, British microbiologist John Postgate wrote a cover story for the *New Scientist* on the prospect of widespread sex selection in which he wrote, "It is probable that a form of purdah would become necessary. Women's right to work, even to travel freely, would probably be forgotten transiently." And yet, Postgate and others continued to promote sex selection as a population control method.

Another vocal proponent of sex selection at the time was the medical director of the Population Council, Sheldon Segal. In the mid-1960s, Segal was posted to Delhi, where he started the department of reproductive medicine at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. While there, he trained doctors to perform an early method of sex determination. A few years later, in 1975, AIIMS became the site of shocking medical experiments. Doctors offered poor pregnant women in Delhi sex determination and then tracked whether they aborted—and wrote up the results in a medical journal. Of course women tended to abort if they were carrying girls. That was how sex selection was introduced to India.

That same year, the *Chinese Medical Journal*—now one of China's top journals—published a paper by a group of doctors in Liaoning province on a very similar experiment at Tietung Hospital Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology. Sex selection's usefulness as a population control method is one reason why the Chinese government now has little incentive to eradicate it.

Today, many of John Postgate's predictions have come true. China has seen a pernicious rise in bride-buying and trafficking of women, both for marriage and for sex. So-called "marriage agencies" have cropped up across China to help men buy wives. Women are typically trafficked from poorer western provinces to eastern China; while reporting my book I met several women who had been brought to Jiangsu province from rural Yunnan. Increasingly women are also brought in from neighboring countries like Vietnam and North Korea. The U.S. State Department rightly lists China's gender imbalance as a major cause of trafficking in the region.

What's more, we have historical amnesia. Western institutions played a critical role in bring sex selection to Asia. And yet, I can't tell you how many reports I've read that blame sex selection squarely on traditional values.

Meanwhile, the nature of sex selection is changing as technology marches forward. Already it is no longer just about abortion and ultrasound. Instead it involves so-called fetal DNA tests, or blood tests a woman can take as early as seven weeks of pregnancy to determine fetal sex. In the United States these are already widely available, and when I had my first child in China in 2013, they were becoming available in Shanghai as well. Sex selection is also practiced during in-vitro fertilization, using a technique called preimplantation genetic diagnosis. We need to ensure that such technologies are properly used. America is the Wild West for assisted reproductive technology, which is heavily regulated in Western Europe and Australia. Because of a lack of regulatory oversight here, couples from China and India now fly to California to choose the sex of their babies using IVF.

As a major international issue, affecting South Asia and Eastern Europe as well as China, sex selection demands an international response. Moreover, as the entity responsible for the population control policies that contribute to the preponderance of boys being born, the Chinese government cannot be expected to solve its sex-ratio problem without international pressure. As a nation concerned with humanitarian causes, and as the birthplace of the technologies that are now so brutally affecting populations in Asia, the United States should play a leading role in combating sex selection.

Congress should urge the United Nations to devote more attention to publicizing the pernicious after-effects of sex selection worldwide, and to pursuing meaningful action to prevent it. Legislators should outlaw the use of IVF for social sex selection, or sex selection not connected to sex-linked diseases. Congress should further regulate the use of fetal DNA tests and limit their use to genetic disease, while also ensuring that they are administered in clinics with oversight from a genetic counselor.

I want to add that the solution to sex-ratio imbalance is not to further infringe on the rights of women by limiting access to family planning. If we were to ban abortion outright, women would suffer, and sex selection would not stop. (China and India already outlaw sex-selective abortions, to little effect.) Limiting access to abortion also does nothing to prevent couples from turning to IVF to get a son. The solution is instead to eradicate the population control policies—including China's current two-child policy—that encourage people to abort girls; to introduce incentive schemes tailored to the urban residents who actually practice sex selection; and to better regulate new reproductive technologies, both in the United States and beyond.

