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Briefing | The fairer sex

More and more parents around the world prefer girls to boys

The bias in favour of boys is shrinking in developing countries even as a preference for girls emerges in the rich world

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ILLUSTRATION: ALVA SKOG

Jun 5th 2025 | 14 min read

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AN AMERICAN COUPLE is throwing a party to commemorate the moment when they discover what sex their unborn child will be. "It's a boy!" they blurt out, in a TikTok video that has since gone viral. But the mother-to-be cannot feign excitement for long. Within seconds she is clutching her partner and sobbing. He reassures her that they will have a daughter at some point, before they leave the room, too upset to stay with their guests.

"Gender reveal" parties can be elaborate, with the news of what sex an expectant couple's baby will be delivered by confetti cannons or smoke bombs, which explode in telltale pink or blue. There are breathless hashtags: #boyorgirl and #TractorsOrTiaras. But festivities that end in disappointment for the unsuspecting #boymom and pity from those attending have spawned a whole new genre on social media, "gender disappointment" videos, some of which attract millions of views. Countless posts show or describe "feeling sad you aren't having a little girl".

Parents around the world used to have a pronounced preference for sons. In many cultures boys traditionally inherit both the family's name and its wealth. Indeed, sons were considered so much more desirable than daughters that many parents would choose to abort baby girls, leaving whole cohorts of children with far more boys than girls in China and India, among other places. But in recent years that preference for boys has diminished dramatically in developing countries—and signs of a bias in favour of girls are emerging in the rich world. For perhaps the first time in humanity's long history, in many parts of the world it is boys who are increasingly seen as a burden and girls who are a boon.

In the natural course of things, there are roughly 105 male births for every 100 female ones, which appears to be an evolutionary response to higher male mortality. The rate does fluctuate somewhat, for reasons scientists do not fully understand. Male births tend to spike immediately after wars, for instance. But until the 1980s, when ultrasound became cheap enough to let most would-be parents learn the sex of a fetus, there were few ways to act on a preference for boys beyond having lots of children and coddling the male ones. And since families tended to be big, most parents would anyway end up with a mix of boys and girls.

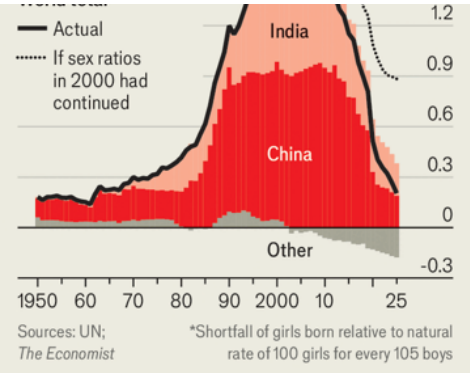
Little bundles of misery

In recent decades, however, as parents in much of the world began having fewer children, they could no longer assume that at least one of their children would be a boy. Ultrasound gave parents a way to choose. The result was a massacre of female fetuses. Roughly 50m fewer girls have been born since 1980 than you would naturally expect, according to *The Economist*'s calculations. In the worst year, 2000, there were around 1.7m more male births than there should have been. As recently as 2015, the number of excess male births was still above 1m—which suggests that a similar number of unborn girls must have been done away with.

Yet this year, *The Economist* estimates, that figure will fall to about 200,000. The precipitous drop in the sex imbalance equates to roughly 7m girls saved since 2001 and counting. The global preference for sons has almost disappeared, and with it the hordes of missing girls (see chart).



The countries with the biggest skews in favour of boys in sex ratios at birth have seen a reversion towards the natural rate. In South Korea almost 116 boys were born for



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every 100 girls in 1990. The imbalance was even more pronounced in bigger families. Among third-born children, there were more than 200 boys for every 100 girls. Among fourth-born children, the ratio approached 250 boys for every 100 girls. Yet today South Korea has a near-even distribution between the sexes.

Critically, the desire for sons has also diminished rapidly in China and India, although the sex ratio at birth remains skewed in both countries. In China it has fallen from a peak of 117 for most of the 2000s to 111 in 2023. In India the rate was 107 that year, down from 109 in 2010.

Polling data bear out this shift. In many developing countries, to the extent that people express any preference about the sex of their children, they now seem to want a mix of boys and girls. Bangladeshi women who have not yet had children, for instance, report an almost identical desire for sons and daughters. Among those with one or two children, having a son increases the desire for daughters and having a daughter increases the desire for sons. Researchers have also observed a similar yen for balance in most of sub-Saharan Africa.

In the long run, the shrinking of the preference for boys should return those countries with the most skewed populations to something approaching a normal sex distribution. That means eventual deliverance from a host of social problems associated with a deficit of girls, from increased crime to human-trafficking of foreign brides—although it will take decades for the legacy of past bias to disappear.

In the rich world, in the meantime, evidence is growing of an emerging preference for girls. Between 1985 and 2003, the share of South Korean women who felt it “necessary” to have a son plunged from 48% to 6%, according to South Korea’s statistics agency. Nearly half now want daughters. Similarly in Japan, polls suggest a clear preference for girls. The Japanese National Fertility Survey, a poll conducted every five years, shows that in 1982, 48.5% of married couples wanting only one child said they would prefer a daughter. By 2002, 75% did. A similar swing existed for parents wanting two or three children.

In a handful of places, the overall birth statistics appear to reflect a preference for girls over boys. The sex ratio at birth is slightly lower than the norm in parts of the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa, for example. A few countries in those regions have ratios as low as 100 or 101. More than one in three households in the Caribbean is headed by a woman, and the share of Caribbean women who say they would rather have daughters is bigger than the proportion who prefer sons. In sub-Saharan Africa a man’s traditional obligation to pay a hefty “bride price” to the family of the woman he marries may have helped make girls more desirable.

But in most countries, any preference for girls expressed in polls is not strong enough to show in the overall sex ratio at birth. Most parents-to-be seem to balk at sex-selective abortions, in other words. Nonetheless a bias towards girls is visible in instances when it is easier to act on, such as when seeking children through adoption or fertility treatment. The time-honoured indicator of preference—whether parents go on procreating depending on what sex their existing children are—suggests a hankering for girls.

Baby bummers

In America parents with only daughters were once more likely than parents with only sons to keep having children, presumably to try for a boy. That was the thesis set out in a study published in 2008 by Gordon Dahl of the University of California, San Diego, and Enrico Moretti at the University of California, Berkeley. The report, which analysed census data from 1960 to 2000, concluded that parents in America favoured sons.

That preference has since reversed, however. A study in 2017 led by Francine Blau, an economist at Cornell University, found that having a girl first is now associated with lower fertility rates in America. The research, which uses data from 2008 to 2013, suggested a preference for girls among married couples.

Other rich countries follow a similar pattern. A pro-girl bias has been detected throughout Scandinavia. In these countries, parents with one son and one daughter have fewer children; those with two sons have markedly higher birth rates than parents with two daughters. Finns whose first child is a girl tend to have slightly fewer children. Studies have also suggested a preference for girls in the Czech Republic, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Portugal.

Fertility treatment provides further evidence of a bias towards girls. At New York City IVF, a clinic in Midtown Manhattan, parents pay as much as $20,000 to select the sex of babies conceived through in-vitro fertilisation (IVF). Wealthy families travel from countries like Britain, where the practice is banned. “In the past, it was all about boys,” says Alyaa Elassar, who leads the practice. But increasingly, parents opt for baby girls.

Adoptive parents, too, tend to want girls. Those in America were willing to pay as much as $16,000 to secure a daughter, according to a study published in 2010. In 2009 Abbie Goldberg of Clark University asked more than 200 American couples hoping to adopt whether they wanted a boy or a girl. Although many of them said they did not mind, heterosexual men and women and lesbians all leaned on average towards girls; only gay men preferred boys. In South Korea girls account for a clear majority of adoptions. Although the greater interest in adopting girls has no effect on sex ratios at birth at all, it gives a good indication of where parents’ preferences lie.

The reasons behind the growing preference for girls and the relative devaluation of boys are not at all clear. There could be many contributing factors. In Ms Goldberg’s study, which sorted parents by their sexual orientation, different groups gave different reasons for their leanings. Heterosexual men, for example, felt girls would be “easier to raise”, more “interesting” and “complex” as well as “less physically challenging” than boys. Lesbians were concerned about whether they would be able to socialise boys and so on.

In countries that used to suffer from a severe bias in favour of boys, the shift may simply reflect a desire to avoid the problems that have flowed from skewed sex ratios. In China, where men are so preponderant that many have ended up as unmarried, childless “bare branches”, parents may be seeking to avoid a lonely life for their children. It is also expensive to have boys, insofar as middle-class urban men are typically expected to own an apartment before they can get married. Parents of boys often complain about the ruinous expense of helping them buy homes.

Another possibility is that a preference for girls may not be a sign of emancipation but a reflection of enduring gender roles. The assumption that daughters will be more nurturing whereas sons will grow distant is ingrained even in the most egalitarian societies. In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, where women are relatively well represented both in business and in politics, couples nonetheless place greater importance on having at least one daughter than on having at least one son. Some

sociologists posit that this is because daughters are much more likely than sons to provide care for elderly parents living alone.

Babes in the woods

The growing desire for daughters may also reflect the social ills that afflict men in much of the rich world. Men still dominate business and politics and earn more for the same work almost everywhere—but they are also more likely to go off the rails. In many rich countries, teenage boys are more likely to be both perpetrators and victims of violent crimes. They also are more likely to commit suicide. Boys trail girls at all stages of education and are expelled from school at far higher rates. They are less likely than women to attend university. The gender gap at American universities is bigger today than in 1972, when laws prohibiting gender discrimination in education were enacted. But it is no longer women who are underrepresented.

Competitive parents may see girls as more likely to reflect well on them than boys. After all, boys develop fine motor skills later than girls. They are also worse at sitting still. Those are drawbacks in a world of toddlers' music lessons and art classes. "We no longer have trophy wives," says Richard Reeves, president of the American Institute for Boys and Men, which seeks to remedy male social problems. "We have trophy kids."

The gender divide continues into adulthood. Whereas high-achieving young women move out of the family home, young men are less likely to leave. An example is Japan, with its staggering numbers of young recluses known as *hikikomori*, most of whom are men. Young men in America are also more likely to remain in their parents' homes than girls. Around one in five American men aged 25-34 lives with his parents, compared with just over one in ten women of the same age.



ILLUSTRATION: ALVA SKOG

A cultural reckoning with misogyny might also be a factor. In a book called "BoyMom: Reimagining Boyhood in the Age of Impossible Masculinity", Ruth Whippman observes that the world has recently been exposed to a torrent of news about poor male behaviour. The #MeToo movement revealed male predation first in Hollywood, and then in a series of other industries and countries. Men such as Harvey Weinstein, Jeffrey Epstein and Andrew Tate have all become household names after being charged with multiple counts of various forms of abuse of women (and in Epstein's case, girls).

More recently, the story of Gisèle Pelicot, a Frenchwoman who was repeatedly drugged and raped by her husband and 50 other men, has stirred public indignation. "Adolescence", a Netflix drama about a 13-year-old British boy who is arrested for murder, sparked a global conversation about misogynistic behaviour in boys. It is a

murder, sparked a global conversation about misogynistic behaviour in boys. It is a fraught time to be raising boys, according to Ms Whippman. The list of fears is long, she writes in "Boymom": "Rapist, school-shooter, incel, man-child, interrupter, mansplainer, self-important stoner, emotional-labour abstainer, non-wiper of kitchen counters."

A telling sign of the general alarm about boys in the rich world is the interest politicians have begun taking in the subject. Last year Britain's Parliament opened an investigation into male underachievement in schools. Norway has gone a step further, launching a Men's Equality Commission in 2022. Its final report in 2024 concluded that tackling challenges for boys and men would be the "next step" in gender equality.

Legislators across America's political spectrum are making similar noises. Utah's governor, Spencer Cox, a Republican, has created a task-force on male well-being; Maryland's governor, Wes Moore, a Democrat, has committed to "targeted solutions to uplift our men and boys"; Michigan's governor, Gretchen Whitmer, a woman (and a Democrat), wants to get more young men into Michigan's colleges and vocational courses.

It is important to keep the gloom about boys in the rich world in perspective. "There is little evidence that a desire for daughters translates into behaviour that discriminates against boys—or girls," says Lisa Eklund of Lund University in Sweden. With 100,000 sex-selective abortions of female fetuses still taking place in China each year, eradicating prejudice against girls should remain a priority.

But technology may soon alter the picture, just as cheap ultrasounds did 50 years ago. Given an easy way to act on their preference for girls, parents in the rich world might start doing so in greater numbers. New testing methods are allowing parents to learn the sex of their unborn child much earlier in its gestation. Some kits can be bought online or in shops, require just a few drops of blood from the mother and work from as little as six weeks. At that stage friends and family may not know that the mother is pregnant and therefore need not know if she ends the pregnancy.

IVF and other fertility treatments are also becoming cheaper, more effective and so more common. In America, where sex-selective IVF is legal, around a quarter of all IVF attempts now lead to live births, compared with 14% during the 1990s. Some 90% of couples who use a technique called sperm-sorting to select the sex of their child said they wanted a balance of sons and daughters. Even so, in practice 80% of them opted for girls. If that imbalance endures even as such methods spread, America's sex ratios will soon start to skew.

And even if sex ratios at birth remain at the natural level, the preference for girls is still important. Just as sex-selective abortions in the developing world are a reflection of underlying disparities and prejudices, the incipient bias towards girls in the rich world presumably reveals something about how societies function. Relieving the social pressures that lead parents to prefer girls to boys would be a good idea, irrespective of the latest statistics on the sex ratio at birth. ■

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