



In India, China, Korea and, according to some reports, the West, a growing shortage of females is arising out of the desire of some couples to have male babies. Some parts of India have only 770 women to every 1,000 men. (Sajjad Hussain/AFP/Getty Images)

IN DEPTH

Gender gap

Selecting gender

A demographic time bomb

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The ability to determine the sex of a fetus — and therefore to abort those that are unwanted — is a demographic time bomb that has already left parts of Asia with too many men and not enough women.

Now, a couple of recent studies suggest the phenomenon could be on its way to the West, where it is sure to reignite the abortion debate here. Researchers in the United States and Britain have uncovered evidence that prenatal sex selection testing looks to be having an impact on

gender demographics among some members of the East and South Asian communities.

Canada does not keep track of such statistics, government officials say. But activists says it is time to start, particularly because there has been anecdotal evidence that women may be coming here to avail themselves of gender-based abortions.

In the broader world, China's one-child policy, rigorously enforced, has all but banished women from many parts of the countryside. Korea is also struggling with a shortfall in its female population.

In India, statistician and demographer Ashish Bose blames what he calls "an unholy alliance between technology and tradition, made worse by [Indian] government family planning policies."

Bose says newly affluent Indian couples are using sex-determinant DNA testing, ultrasounds and abortions to opt for male babies over females. Abortion is generally legal in India but not for purposes of choosing the gender of a new born.

Bose says prosecutions of doctors and complicit couples are few and far between.

Some Indian doctors maintain that the problem has been exaggerated, but statistics belie that. In parts of north India, there are fewer than 800 women for every 1,000 men. A more normal ratio would be an almost equal number of males and females.

"It gets worse when you look at second children and third," Bose says, "If the first child is a girl, then the second is twice as likely to a boy, three times as likely for the third, and it's not luck that's determining this — it's sex selection techniques, female feticide by abortion."

"This is nothing less than a social and economic disaster."

Evidence is mounting that the problem is spreading to some members of the South Asian community in other countries, Bose says. "You can find the same mentality among some of our people who settled abroad," he says.

Concerns spreading



Modern ultrasound technology is mostly used to see if a fetus is healthy, but it can be a factor in sex-selective abortion. (Ajit Solanki/Associated Press)

A [study](#) published in March 2008 in the United States in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences looks at data from the last U.S. census in 2000 to conclude that sex selection is probably to blame for an unexpected increase in the number of boy children in American families of Chinese, Indian and Korean origin.

The findings "suggest that in a sub-population with a traditional son preference, the technologies are being used to generate male births when preceding births are female," co-authors Douglas Almond and Lena Edlund said.

"We should emphasize that our paper does not imply that sex selection is practiced by all or even most Asian-Americans," the authors said in an email to the Associated Press.

In Britain, researchers at Oxford University found a sharp decline in the number of young females among British families of Indian descent. Sylvie Dubuc of Oxford's Department of Social Policy and Social work was the lead researcher on the project. She described the increasing imbalance in the gender ratio among the families she studied as "not normal."

"The most probable explanation seems to be sex selective abortion by a minority of mothers born in India," Dubuc told the [Times of India](#) newspaper.

Among those who believe that sex-selective abortion is also a problem in Canada is federal opposition health critic Ujjal Dosanjh. A prominent member of British Columbia's South Asian community, Dosanjh says Canada needs to be concerned about imbalances in the ratio of boys to girls in Vancouver, Greater Toronto and elsewhere.

The former federal health minister and B.C. premier says newly available DNA tests that determine the sex of a fetus at six weeks or less could easily lead to more abortions among couples seeking to have sons, a practice he describes as "absolutely irresponsible".

Right to choose paramount in Canada

Speaking to CBC's *The Current*, Dosanjh said the tests need to be regulated and a debate launched about whether it's acceptable to have an abortion because of the gender of a fetus.

"The women's' right to choose, for me that's paramount," he said, "[but] I believe we need to make sure that [if] people are aborting simply for gender selection, that is absolutely not supported.

"This is about gender equality. If there is a medical need for these tests, I have no difficulty ... to deal with disease," Dosanjh said. "Being a female absolutely is not a disease."

That's also the position of the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada [which recently said that](#) using abortion to determine the gender of a family's offspring "cannot ethically be condoned in this country."

Medical ethicists say the issue is complicated because Canada's abortion law recognizes a woman's right to choose as paramount. Tim Caulfield, research director of the Health Law Institute at the University of Alberta, told *The Current* that more research needs to be done into potential links between fetal sex selection and abortion in Canada.

"Anytime you pass a law, you're regulating individual choice," Caulfield said, "and how do you regulate ... reproductive autonomy? That's a sensitive issue."

It's one that Canada may have to start measuring and debating soon.



Ultrasound tests may reveal the sex of a fetus at 18 to 20 weeks, but new DNA testing can give an almost certain result at five to six weeks. (Joe Raedle/Getty Images)

