

China Admits Big Fall in Ratio of Baby Girls to Boys

BEIJING—The gender imbalance in babies born in China has increased dramatically to 117 boys for every 100 girls, according to official figures released here recently.

China blamed the imbalance on selective abortion of female fetuses and under-reporting of girls. But critics claimed the authorities were ignoring widespread infanticide and abandonment of baby girls.

The latest figures, which the National Bureau of Statistics said dated from the end of 1999, compares with a ratio of 111:100 in 1990 and an international norm of 106:100.

The figures, released alongside preliminary results of China's 2000 census, reignited debate over the negative effects of China's 20-year-old "one-child policy."

The policy restricts married couples to having no more than one child unless they are farmers and their first child is a girl.

Zhu Zhixin, director-general of the statistics bureau, blamed the gender imbalance on an under-reporting of girls and selective abortion of baby girls.

He said the government was addressing the problem by banning the use of ultrasound technology, which in recent years has become widely used to identify female fetuses, which are then frequently aborted.



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"It is understandable that people are concerned with the sex ratio at birth. We attach importance to this and are strengthening the work in this field so things will get better," Zhu said.

But human-rights activists said the gender imbalance was a direct result of the one-child policy and the lack of social security for the rural population, which encourages them to have a preference for sons.

"I think these numbers are very disturbing," said Sophia Woodman, the Hong Kong-based spokesperson for Human Rights in China.

"It's time the government recognised this problem as partly a result of the population control policy and really begin to discuss it seriously and allow in-depth research and public discussion and set up real policies that address it.

"It's wrong to say 'We don't need to take it seriously because it could be under-reporting.'"

Jean-Pierre Cabestan, director of the French Centre for Research on Contemporary China, said the gender imbalance in some parts of China could be much higher than the average.

"In some rural areas and cities, it's very, very high," Cabestan said.

A widespread failure to report the birth of girls to avoid fines for violating the one-child policy is a factor, with some demographers estimating that as

many as 15 percent of births in China are not reported, Woodman said.

Family planning officials under-report births to meet quotas and parents hide their excess children by sending them to live with relatives.

Despite the ban on using ultrasound scans to determine the sex of the foetus, many hospital staff are easily bribed to bend the rules.

Beijing has long blamed the preference for boys over girls on traditional Chinese culture. But critics say it is no accident that peasants cling to a preference for sons, while city dwellers have become more accepting of having a daughter.

While the government has vowed to pour resources into creating a social security safety net to meet increasing unemployment and ageing population in the cities, it has openly admitted the services would exclude peasants—who make up 80 percent of the population.

"The imbalance in treatment of urban and rural people is a major factor in this issue," Woodman said.

"Very good research has shown that Chinese people want to have girls and appreciate girl children. But in the rural areas, it's just a fact of life that the son stays with his parents and the daughter marries away. However filial your daughter is, she's not going to live with you in old age."

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