

Missing women: social inequality outweighs women's survival advantage in Asia and north Africa.

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In Europe and North America women tend to outnumber men. For example, in the United Kingdom, France, and the United States the ratio of women to men exceeds 1.05. In many Third World countries, however, especially in Asia and north Africa, the female:male ratio may be as low as 0.95 (Egypt), 0.94 (Bangladesh, China, and west Asia), 0.93 (India), or even 0.90 (Pakistan). These differences are relevant to an assessment of female inequality across the world.[1-6]

Everywhere about 5% more boys than girls are born. But women are harder than men and, given similar care, survive better at all ages - including in utero.[7] There are other causes for this preponderance of women - for example, some remaining impact of the deaths of men in the last world war and more cigarette smoking and violent deaths among men. But even taking these into account, women would still outnumber men if given similar care.[7]

Social factors must therefore explain the low female:male ratios in Asian and north African countries. These countries would have millions more women if they showed the female: male ratios of Europe and the United States.[4] Calculated on this basis, China is missing more than 50 million women.

Using European or American ratios may not, however, be appropriate. Because of lower female mortality in Europe and America the female:male ratio rises gradually with age. A lower ratio would therefore be expected in Asia and north Africa partly because of a lower life expectancy and higher fertility rate. There are several ways of adjusting for this. One is to adopt the female:male ratios of sub-Saharan Africa, where there is little female disadvantage in terms of relative mortality but where life expectancy is no higher and fertility rates no lower than those in Asia and north Africa. Using the sub-Saharan ratio of 1.022 yields an estimate of 44 million missing women in China, 37 million in India, and a total of more than 100 million worldwide.[5]

Using population models based on Western demographic experience it is possible to estimate roughly how many women there would be without any female disadvantage in survival, given the actual life expectancy and the fertility rates in these countries. Coale estimates 29 million missing women in China, 23 million in India, and an overall total of 60 million for selected countries.[6] Though lower, these numbers are still enormous.

Why is overall mortality for females higher than that for males in these countries? Consider India, where age specific mortality for females consistently exceeds that for males until the fourth decade. Although the excess mortality at childbearing age may be partly due to maternal mortality, obviously no such explanation is possible for female disadvantage in survival in infancy and childhood. Despite occasional distressing accounts of female infanticide, this could not explain the extra mortality or its age distribution. The comparative neglect of female health and nutrition, especially - but not exclusively - during childhood, would seem the prime suspect. Considerable direct evidence exists of neglect of female children in terms of health care, admission to hospitals, and even feeding.[89]

Even though the position in India has been more extensively studied than that in other countries, similar evidence of relative neglect of the health and nutrition of female children may be found in other countries in Asia and north Africa. In China some evidence suggests that the extent of neglect may have increased sharply in recent years, particularly since compulsory restrictions on the size of families were introduced in some parts of the country in the late 1970s. There are also some new, ominous signs in China, such as a substantial increase in the reported ratio of male to female births - quite out of line with the rest of the world. It could quite possibly indicate "hiding" of newborn female children (to avoid the rigours of compulsory restriction on the size of the family), but it could, no less plausibly, reflect a higher female infant mortality - whether or not induced (with new births and new deaths both going unreported).

What causes the relative neglect of females, and how can it be changed? Possible influences include traditional cultures and values. But some economic links have also emerged, and some connections between economic status and social standing have been identified. For example, the ability to earn an outside income through paid employment seems to enhance the social standing of a woman (which is the case in sub-Saharan Africa). This makes her contribution to the prosperity of the family more visible. Also, being less dependent on others, she has more voice. The higher status of women also affects ideas on the female child's "due." Secondly, education, especially female literacy, may make a substantial difference. Thirdly, women's economic rights (for example, land ownership and inheritance) may be important.[10 11] Public policy can influence all of these.

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The Indian state of Kerala provides an illuminating exception to the prevailing experience. It has the most developed school education system in India, which dates from the early nineteenth century, with strongly supportive state policies in the "native kingdoms" of Travancore and Cochin.[5] Adult literacy rate is now over 90%. Property inheritance passes through the female line for an influential part of the community (the Nairs). Many women participate in "gainful" economic activities. Kerala also has an extensive health care system, which has been built up through public policy. Even though Kerala is one of the poorer Indian states, life expectancy at birth there now exceeds 73 years for women and 67 years for men.

The female:male ratio of the Kerala population is now around 1.04 - similar to that in Europe and America (and most unlike that in the rest of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, China, west Asia, and north Africa). It seems that the "missing women" may be rescuable, after all, by public policy.

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