

## **For the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations**

Submitted Testimony of Mara Hvistendahl

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to weigh in on the very important issue of sex selection, which is shaping the lives of people in developing countries, and particularly women and girls, in increasingly pernicious ways. At the request of the Subcommittee, I am making this written submission on the consequences of India's skewed sex ratio in order to assist the Committee as it holds a hearing on the topic of India's missing girls.

I am Mara Hvistendahl, a correspondent and contributing editor with *Science Magazine* based in Shanghai and the author of the book *Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys Over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men*. Today I would like to address the downstream effects of sex selection, which are detailed in my book. You have heard testimony explaining that various forms of sex selection are estimated to account for over one hundred million missing girls. Sex-selective abortion following ultrasound scans is by far the most common means of sex selection worldwide, but there are others, including preimplantation genetic diagnosis performed during in-vitro fertilization and the emerging method of abortion following fetal DNA tests. These practices now affect a vast range of countries, including Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, China, Georgia, India, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam. Within India, the northwestern states and Delhi are most acutely affected by sex selection.

It is likely that sex selection has emerged in areas that have yet to be identified by demographers; indeed, parents select for sex, though on a much more limited scale, in the United States. The after-effects of sex selection extend beyond a dearth in the number of

girls born. Countries with large numbers of surplus males have seen a spike in trafficking, prostitution, and bride-selling.

## **Human trafficking**

Some economists hold that the scarcity of women will ultimately lead to an improvement in the status of women and girls in Asia. For those who know what is happening on the ground, that analysis appears a cruel joke. Women have increased in value, but only in the crudest sense. For those born into high sex ratio areas, scarcity may bring more bargaining power when it comes time to marry. But attracting a high bride-price is not equivalent to gaining more autonomy, and the increased value experienced by women in high sex ratio areas like India's northwest occurs only at the most basic level. Meanwhile, poor women are suffering greatly as a result of the gender imbalance. The high prices now drawn by women have compelled traffickers, agents, and gangs to venture into a booming trade in sex workers and bought brides.

India has a long history of human trafficking. The flow of women from poor villages to more well-off areas began centuries ago. Nineteenth-century British colonial officers recorded dozens of cases of trafficked women and girls each year, most of them young girls who ended up forced into marriage. But domestic trafficking has steadily increased in recent years, to the extent that today it is a major issue.

India's impoverished northeast is a common source of trafficked women. Some women are easily duped with false job offers and other pretenses. Ambitious teenagers realize the opportunities available to them if they stay in their villages are limited, leaving them susceptible to trafficking. In other cases, parents may sell their daughters, making violations difficult to track.

Trafficked women are often transported to the northwest, which is wealthier but, thanks to decades of sex selection, short of women. Regional differences in India can be stark,

and trafficked women frequently arrive at their destination unequipped in local culture and often unable to speak the local language. Those sold into marriage often find themselves paired with a much older husband, with the age gap frequently extending to fifteen to twenty years.

Fees paid for a young bride throughout Asia start at a few hundred dollars, but as women become more scarce, prices will likely rise. Meanwhile, the normalization of sex and marriage trafficking makes it possible for people living in areas where sex selection is widespread to ignore its consequences. Instead of facing up to the dearth of women, locals simply import women from poorer places—transferring the imbalance elsewhere.

## **Prostitution**

Historically, prostitution thrives in places where men outnumber women. In nineteenth-century France, industrialization spawned an urban migration that left cities full of men. Brothels flourished. A similar phenomenon occurred in 1930s Shanghai, where historical estimates hold that one in every thirteen women was a sex worker. Today too, female sex workers have proliferated in parts of Asia where the sex ratio is most skewed. Indian newspapers have also carried reports of an increase in activity by male sex workers. But because sex workers are trafficked domestically rather than internationally, the sex trade in India is very difficult to monitor.

Medical researchers are now closely watching the skewed sex ratio in China and India for its effects on HIV infections. As the addition of millions of surplus men to the Asian population fuels the demand for sex work, a spike in HIV rates is expected. Surplus men, moreover, are a “bridging population”—a group that transfers the virus from a high-risk people to low-risk people. A surplus man may contract HIV from a sex worker, for example, and later transmit the virus to a bought bride. Public health strategies for HIV prevention and treatment must take into account the increasing influence of surplus men.

## **Bride-selling**

Gangs sell women into both sex work and marriage. The majority of trafficked women, however, end up as bought brides. Demographers say India is in the grips of a “marriage squeeze”—a gap between the numbers of marriageable men and women. It can take a while before a squeeze is acutely felt. At the beginning, so-called leftover men may marry younger women. But later cohorts of men are left with few potential female partners. The effects of a squeeze trickle down. A sustained drop in the fertility rate, as has happened in India, can exacerbate a squeeze.

Today, northwest India is at one of the later stages of a marriage squeeze. By 2020, an estimated 15 to 20 percent of men in the region will be surplus. This is a significant change in a society with a traditionally high rate of marriage; until recently, the proportion of Indian men who remained bachelors hovered around 1 percent. Despite the rapid increase in the proportion of surplus men, bachelors and their families remain under enormous social pressure to find brides. In some instances in China, men have also become victims of traffickers, who tricked them with promises of a wife and then delivered nothing.

Once, families in India’s northwestern states looked down on those who resorted to buying brides from poorer areas. The trade has gradually become normalized, and elaborate rituals have arisen to help families pretend that the unions they arrange are standard. Traditionally in India, it is the bride’s family that should pay the groom’s upon marriage, not the other way around. Today, that has been reversed—the groom buys the bride—but some families continue to pretend that they are following the old ways. The groom may give the bride’s parents a symbolic sum of money, for example, with the bride’s parents then handing the money right back to him.

In some areas, locals have come up with even more extreme and inhumane solutions to the shortage of women. Cases of polyandry—women trafficked to a high sex ratio region to marry multiple brothers—have cropped up in both China and India. Child marriage is another recourse. India accounts for 40 percent of global child marriages. The recent deluge of surplus men has encouraged this unfortunate trend.

In wealthier Asian nations with skewed sex ratios, the bride trade has become formalized. South Korea and Taiwan now have established agencies that peddle brides from poorer Asian countries, with the women's photos displayed in online galleries. On the other end of the international bride trade, families in Vietnam's Mekong Delta have gotten rich by selling women through these agencies. India may be expected to someday develop a sophisticated industry along these lines. At that point, it would face more scrutiny, both from governments and from organizations like the International Organization for Migration, which monitors trafficking. For the moment, however, a woman brought to northwest India from the northeast receives little to no assistance, legal representation or education, or language or cultural training. Likewise, there is scarce funding available for preventing the flow of women from sending villages. Both of these areas deserve more attention.

## **Conclusion**

The above are only a few of the downstream effects of sex selection. Both news reports and my own research suggest that there has been an increase in sexual and domestic violence in high sex ratio regions as well. There are also signs that crime is on the rise in these areas. Finally, if history is any guide, it is very likely that an excess of young men in the population will ultimately yield instability and social unrest.

For now, the clear evidence that regions with extra men have seen a spike in trafficking of women, prostitution, and bride-selling—combined with the injustice inherent in the fact that the global population now lacks over one hundred million females who should

be there—should present cause for action. Sex selection has received insufficient attention at the international level. Nations like India should be provided with support in addressing sex selection, both in stopping it and in dealing with its downstream effects. Ultimately, proposals for fighting sex selection should take into account existing and emerging sex determination technologies—including portable ultrasound machines, preimplantation genetic diagnosis, and fetal DNA tests. Many of these originate in the United States.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue.