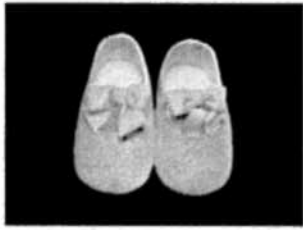


Gendercide

Killed, aborted or neglected, at least 100m girls have disappeared—and the number is rising



IMAGINE you are one half of a young couple expecting your first child in a fast-growing, poor country. You are part of the new middle class; your income is rising; you want a small family. But traditional mores hold sway around you, most important in the preference for sons over daughters. Perhaps hard physical labour is still needed for the family to make its living. Perhaps only sons may inherit land. Perhaps a daughter is deemed to join another family on marriage and you want someone to care for you when you are old. Perhaps she needs a dowry.

Now imagine that you have had an ultrasound scan; it costs \$12, but you can afford that. The scan says the unborn child is a girl. You yourself would prefer a boy; the rest of your family clamours for one. You would never dream of killing a baby daughter, as they do out in the villages. But an abortion seems different. What do you do?

For millions of couples, the answer is: abort the daughter, try for a son. In China and northern India more than 120 boys are being born for every 100 girls. Nature dictates that slightly more males are born than females to offset boys' greater susceptibility to infant disease. But nothing on this scale.

For those who oppose abortion, this is mass murder. For those such as this newspaper, who think abortion should be "safe, legal and rare" (to use Bill Clinton's phrase), a lot depends on the circumstances, but the cumulative consequence for societies of such individual actions is catastrophic. China alone stands to have as many unmarried young men—"bare branches", as they are known—as the entire population of young men in America. In any country rootless young males spell trouble; in Asian societies, where marriage and children are the recognised routes into society, single men are almost like outlaws. Crime rates, bride trafficking, sexual violence, even female suicide rates are all rising and will rise further as the lopsided generations reach their maturity (see page 77).

It is no exaggeration to call this gendercide. Women are missing in their millions—aborted, killed, neglected to death. In 1990 an Indian economist, Amartya Sen, put the number at 100m; the toll is higher now. The crumb of comfort is that countries can mitigate the hurt, and that one, South Korea, has shown the worst can be avoided. Others need to learn from it if they are to stop the carnage.

The dearth and death of little sisters

Most people know China and northern India have unnaturally large numbers of boys. But few appreciate how bad the problem is, or that it is rising. In China the imbalance between the sexes was 108 boys to 100 girls for the generation born in the late 1980s; for the generation of the early 2000s, it was 124 to 100. In some Chinese provinces the ratio is an unprecedented 130 to 100. The destruction is worst in China but has spread far beyond. Other East Asian countries, including Taiwan and Singapore, former communist states in the western Balkans and the Caucasus, and even sections of America's population

(Chinese- and Japanese-Americans, for example): all these had distorted sex ratios. Gendercide exists on almost every continent. It affects rich and poor; educated and illiterate; Hindu, Muslim, Confucian and Christian alike.

Wealth does not stop it. Taiwan and Singapore have open, rich economies. Within China and India the areas with the worst sex ratios are the richest, best-educated ones. And China's one-child policy can only be part of the problem, given that so many other countries are affected.

In fact the destruction of baby girls is a product of three forces: the ancient preference for sons; a modern desire for smaller families; and ultrasound scanning and other technologies that identify the sex of a fetus. In societies where four or six children were common, a boy would almost certainly come along eventually; son preference did not need to exist at the expense of daughters. But now couples want two children—or, as in China, are allowed only one—they will sacrifice unborn daughters to their pursuit of a son. That is why sex ratios are most distorted in the modern, open parts of China and India. It is also why ratios are more skewed after the first child: parents may accept a daughter first time round but will do anything to ensure their next—and probably last—child is a boy. The boy-girl ratio is above 200 for a third child in some places.

How to stop half the sky crashing down

Baby girls are thus victims of a malign combination of ancient prejudice and modern preferences for small families. Only one country has managed to change this pattern. In the 1990s South Korea had a sex ratio almost as skewed as China's. Now, it is heading towards normality. It has achieved this not deliberately, but because the culture changed. Female education, anti-discrimination suits and equal-rights rulings made son preference seem old-fashioned and unnecessary. The forces of modernity first exacerbated prejudice—then overwhelmed it.

But this happened when South Korea was rich. If China or India—with incomes one-quarter and one-tenth Korea's levels—wait until they are as wealthy, many generations will pass. To speed up change, they need to take actions that are in their own interests anyway. Most obviously China should scrap the one-child policy. The country's leaders will resist this because they fear population growth; they also dismiss Western concerns about human rights. But the one-child limit is no longer needed to reduce fertility (if it ever was: other East Asian countries reduced the pressure on the population as much as China). And it massively distorts the country's sex ratio, with devastating results. President Hu Jintao says that creating "a harmonious society" is his guiding principle; it cannot be achieved while a policy so profoundly perverts family life.

And all countries need to raise the value of girls. They should encourage female education; abolish laws and customs that prevent daughters inheriting property; make examples of hospitals and clinics with impossible sex ratios; get women engaged in public life—using everything from television newscasters to women traffic police. Mao Zedong said "women hold up half the sky." The world needs to do more to prevent a gendercide that will have the sky crashing down. ■



Gendercide

The worldwide war on baby girls

Also in this section

80 Distorted sex ratios in India

Technology, declining fertility and ancient prejudice are combining to unbalance societies

XINRAN XUE, a Chinese writer, describes visiting a peasant family in the Yimeng area of Shandong province. The wife was giving birth. "We had scarcely sat down in the kitchen", she writes*, "when we heard a moan of pain from the bedroom next door...The cries from the inner room grew louder—and abruptly stopped. There was a low sob, and then a man's gruff voice said accusingly: 'Useless thing!'

"Suddenly, I thought I heard a slight movement in the slops pail behind me," Miss Xinran remembers. "To my absolute horror, I saw a tiny foot poking out of the pail. The midwife must have dropped that tiny baby alive into the slops pail! I nearly threw myself at it, but the two policemen [who had accompanied me] held my shoulders in a firm grip. 'Don't move, you can't save it, it's too late.'

"'But that's...murder...and you're the police! The little foot was still now. The policemen held on to me for a few more minutes. 'Doing a baby girl is not a big thing around here,' [an] older woman said comfortingly. 'That's a living child,' I said in a shaking voice, pointing at the slops pail. 'It's not a child,' she corrected me. 'It's a girl

baby, and we can't keep it. Around these parts, you can't get by without a son. Girl babies don't count.'"

In January 2010 the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) showed what can happen to a country when girl babies don't count. Within ten years, the academy said, one in five young men would be unable to find a bride because of the dearth of young women—a figure unprecedented in a country at peace.

The number is based on the sexual discrepancy among people aged 19 and below. According to CASS, China in 2020 will have 30m-40m more men of this age than young women. For comparison, there are 23m boys below the age of 20 in Germany, France and Britain combined and around 40m American boys and young men. So within ten years, China faces the prospect of having the equivalent of the whole young male population of America, or almost twice that of Europe's three largest countries, with little prospect of marriage, untethered to a home of their own and without the stake in society that marriage and children provide.

Gendercide—to borrow the title of a 1985 book by Mary Anne Warren—is often seen as an unintended consequence of China's one-child policy, or as a product of

poverty or ignorance. But that cannot be the whole story. The surplus of bachelors—called in China *guanggun*, or "bare branches"—seems to have accelerated between 1990 and 2005, in ways not obviously linked to the one-child policy, which was introduced in 1979. And, as is becoming clear, the war against baby girls is not confined to China.

Parts of India have sex ratios as skewed as anything in its northern neighbour. Other East Asian countries—South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan—have peculiarly high numbers of male births. So, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, have former communist countries in the Caucasus and the western Balkans. Even subsets of America's population are following suit, though not the population as a whole.

The real cause, argues Nick Eberstadt, a demographer at the American Enterprise Institute, a think-tank in Washington, DC, is not any country's particular policy but "the fateful collision between overweening son preference, the use of rapidly spreading prenatal sex-determination technology and declining fertility." These are global trends. And the selective destruction of baby girls is global, too.

Boys are slightly more likely to die in infancy than girls. To compensate, more boys ►►

* "Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother", by Xinran. Reviewed on page 104.

are born than girls so there will be equal numbers of young men and women at puberty. In all societies that record births, between 103 and 106 boys are normally born for every 100 girls. The ratio has been so stable over time that it appears to be the natural order of things.

That order has changed fundamentally in the past 25 years. In China the sex ratio for the generation born between 1985 and 1989 was 108, already just outside the natural range. For the generation born in 2000-04, it was 124 (ie, 124 boys were born in those years for every 100 girls). According to CASS the ratio today is 123 boys per 100 girls. These rates are biologically impossible without human intervention.

The national averages hide astonishing figures at the provincial level. According to an analysis of Chinese household data carried out in late 2005 and reported in the *British Medical Journal**, only one region, Tibet, has a sex ratio within the bounds of nature. Fourteen provinces—mostly in the east and south—have sex ratios at birth of 120 and above, and three have unprecedented levels of more than 130. As CASS says, “the gender imbalance has been growing wider year after year.”

The BMJ study also casts light on one of the puzzles about China's sexual imbalance. How far has it been exaggerated by the presumed practice of not reporting the birth of baby daughters in the hope of getting another shot at bearing a son? Not much, the authors think. If this explanation were correct, you would expect to find sex ratios falling precipitously as girls who had been hidden at birth start entering the official registers on attending school or the doctor. In fact, there is no such fall. The sex ratio of 15-year-olds in 2005 was not far from the sex ratio at birth in 1990. The implication is that sex-selective abortion, not under-registration of girls, accounts for the excess of boys.

Other countries have wildly skewed sex ratios without China's draconian population controls (see chart 1). Taiwan's sex ratio also rose from just above normal in 1980 to 110 in the early 1990s; it remains just below that level today. During the same period, South Korea's sex ratio rose from just above normal to 117 in 1990—then the highest in the world—before falling back to more natural levels. Both these countries were already rich, growing quickly and becoming more highly educated even while the balance between the sexes was swinging sharply towards males.

South Korea is experiencing some surprising consequences. The surplus of bachelors in a rich country has sucked in brides from abroad. In 2008, 11% of marriages were “mixed”, mostly between a Ko-

* “China's excess males, sex selective abortion and one child policy”, by Wei Xing Zhu, Li Lu and Therese Hesketh. BMJ 2009

Where boys are off balance

Males per 100 females at birth, 2000-05



rean man and a foreign woman. This is causing tensions in a hitherto homogenous society, which is often hostile to the children of mixed marriages. The trend is especially marked in rural areas, where the government thinks half the children of farm households will be mixed by 2020. The children are common enough to have produced a new word: “Kosians”, or Korean-Asians.

China is nominally a communist country, but elsewhere it was communism's collapse that was associated with the growth of sexual disparities. After the Soviet Union imploded in 1991, there was an upsurge in the ratio of boys to girls in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Their sex ratios rose from normal levels in 1991 to 115-120 by 2000. A rise also occurred in several Balkan states after the wars of Yugoslav succession. The ratio in Serbia and Macedonia is around 108. There are even signs of distorted sex ratios in America, among various groups of Asian-Americans. In 1975, calculates Mr Eberstadt, the sex ratio for Chinese-, Japanese- and Filipino-Americans was between 100 and 106. In 2002, it was 107 to 109.

But the country with the most remarkable record is that other supergiant, India. India does not produce figures for sex ratios at birth, so its numbers are not strictly comparable with the others. But there is no doubt that the number of boys has been rising relative to girls and that, as in China, there are large regional disparities. The north-western states of Punjab and Haryana have sex ratios as high as the provinces of China's east and south. Nationally, the ratio for children up to six years of age rose from a biologically unexceptionable 104 in 1981 to a biologically impossible 108 in

2001. In 1991, there was a single district with a sex ratio over 125; by 2001, there were 46.

Conventional wisdom about such disparities is that they are the result of “backward thinking” in old-fashioned societies or—in China—of the one-child policy. By implication, reforming the policy or modernising the society (by, for example, enhancing the status of women) should bring the sex ratio back to normal. But this is not always true and, where it is, the road to normal sex ratios is winding and bumpy.

Not all traditional societies show a marked preference for sons over daughters. But in those that do—especially those in which the family line passes through the son and in which he is supposed to look after his parents in old age—a son is worth more than a daughter. A girl is deemed to have joined her husband's family on marriage, and is lost to her parents. As a Hindu saying puts it, “Raising a daughter is like watering your neighbours' garden.”

“Son preference” is discernible—overwhelming, even—in polling evidence. In 1999 the government of India asked women what sex they wanted their next child to be. One third of those without children said a son, two-thirds had no preference and only a residual said a daughter. Polls carried out in Pakistan and Yemen show similar results. Mothers in some developing countries say they want sons, not daughters, by margins of ten to one. In China midwives charge more for delivering a son than a daughter.

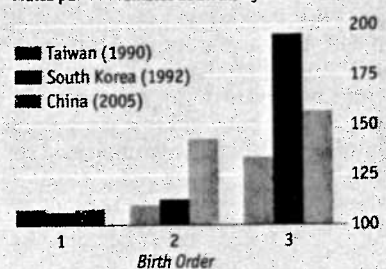
Chasing puppy-dogs' tails

The unusual thing about son preference is that it rises sharply at second and later births (see chart 2). Among Indian women with two children (of either sex), 60% said they wanted a son next time, almost twice the preference for first-borns. This reflected the desire of those with two daughters for a son. The share rose to 75% for those with three children. The difference in parental attitudes between first-borns and subsequent children is large and significant.

Until the 1980s people in poor countries ▶▶

No younger sisters

Males per 100 females at birth, by birth order



could do little about this preference: before birth, nature took its course. But in that decade, ultrasound scanning and other methods of detecting the sex of a child before birth began to make their appearance. These technologies changed everything. Doctors in India started advertising ultrasound scans with the slogan "Pay 5,000 rupees (\$110) today and save 50,000 rupees tomorrow" (the saving was on the cost of a daughter's dowry). Parents who wanted a son, but balked at killing baby daughters, chose abortion in their millions.

The use of sex-selective abortion was banned in India in 1994 and in China in 1995. It is illegal in most countries (though Sweden legalised the practice in 2009). But since it is almost impossible to prove that an abortion has been carried out for reasons of sex selection, the practice remains widespread. An ultrasound scan costs about \$12, which is within the scope of many—perhaps most—Chinese and Indian families. In one hospital in Punjab, in northern India, the only girls born after a round of ultrasound scans had been mistakenly identified as boys, or else had a male twin.

The spread of fetal-imaging technology has not only skewed the sex ratio but also explains what would otherwise be something of a puzzle: sexual disparities tend to rise with income and education, which you would not expect if "backward thinking" was all that mattered. In India, some of the most prosperous states—Maharashtra, Punjab, Gujarat—have the worst sex ratios. In China, the higher a province's literacy rate, the more skewed its sex ratio. The ratio also rises with income per head.

In Punjab Monica Das Gupta of the World Bank discovered that second and third daughters of well-educated mothers were more than twice as likely to die before their fifth birthday as their brothers, regardless of their birth order. The discrepancy was far lower in poorer households. Ms Das Gupta argues that women do not necessarily use improvements in education and income to help daughters. Richer, well-educated families share their poorer neighbours' preference for sons and, because they tend to have smaller families, come under greater pressure to produce a son and heir if their first child is an unlooked-for daughter*.

So modernisation and rising incomes make it easier and more desirable to select the sex of your children. And on top of that smaller families combine with greater



wealth to reinforce the imperative to produce a son. When families are large, at least one male child will doubtless come along to maintain the family line. But if you have only one or two children, the birth of a daughter may be at a son's expense. So, with rising incomes and falling fertility, more and more people live in the smaller, richer families that are under the most pressure to produce a son.

In China the one-child policy increases that pressure further. Unexpectedly, though, it is the relaxation of the policy, rather than the policy pure and simple, which explains the unnatural upsurge in the number of boys.

In most Chinese cities couples are usually allowed to have only one child—the policy in its pure form. But in the countryside, where 55% of China's population lives, there are three variants of the one-child policy. In the coastal provinces some 40% of couples are permitted a second child if their first is a girl. In central and southern provinces everyone is permitted a second child either if the first is a girl or if the parents suffer "hardship", a criterion determined by local officials. In the far west and Inner Mongolia, the provinces do not really operate a one-child policy at all. Minorities are permitted second—sometimes even third—children, whatever the sex of the first-born (see map).

The provinces in this last group are the only ones with close to normal sex ratios. They are sparsely populated and inhabited by ethnic groups that do not much like abortion and whose family systems do not disparage the value of daughters so much. The provinces with by far the highest ratios of boys to girls are in the second group, the ones with the most exceptions to the one-child policy. As the BMJ study shows, these exceptions matter because of the preference for sons in second or third births.

For an example, take Guangdong, China's most populous province. Its overall sex ratio is 120, which is very high. But if you take first births alone, the ratio is "only" 108. That is outside the bounds of normality but not by much. If you take just second children, however, which are per-

mitted in the province, the ratio leaps to 146 boys for every 100 girls. And for the relatively few of births where parents are permitted a third child, the sex ratio is 167. Even this startling ratio is not the outer limit. In Anhui province, among third children, there are 227 boys for every 100 girls, while in Beijing municipality (which also permits exceptions in rural areas), the sex ratio reaches a hard-to-credit 275. There are almost three baby boys for each baby girl.

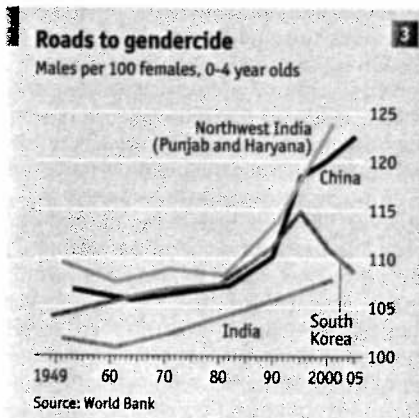
Ms Das Gupta found something similar in India. First-born daughters were treated the same as their brothers; younger sisters were more likely to die in infancy. The rule seems to be that parents will joyfully embrace a daughter as their first child. But they will go to extraordinary lengths to ensure subsequent children are sons.

The hazards of bare branches

Throughout human history, young men have been responsible for the vast preponderance of crime and violence—especially single men in countries where status and social acceptance depend on being married and having children, as it does in China and India. A rising population of frustrated single men spells trouble.

The crime rate has almost doubled in China during the past 20 years of rising sex ratios, with stories abounding of bride abduction, the trafficking of women, rape and prostitution. A study into whether these things were connected† concluded that they were, and that higher sex ratios accounted for about one-seventh of the rise in crime. In India, too, there is a correlation between provincial crime rates and sex ratios. In "Bare Branches"‡, Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer gave warning that the social problems of biased sex ratios would lead to more authoritarian policing. Governments, they say, "must decrease the threat to society posed by these young men. Increased authoritarianism in an effort to crack down on crime, gangs, smuggling and so forth can be one result."

Violence is not the only consequence. In parts of India, the cost of dowries is said to have fallen (see box on next page). Where people pay a bride price (ie, the



* "Why is son preference so persistent in East and South Asia?" By Monica Das Gupta, Jiang Zhenghua, Li Bohua, Xie Zhenming, Woojin Chung and Bae Hwa-Ok. World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper 2942.

† "Sex ratios and crime: evidence from China's one-child policy", by Lena Edlund, Hongbin Li, Junjian Yi and Junsen Zhang. Institute for the Study of Labour, Bonn. Discussion Paper 3214

‡ "Bare Branches", by Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer. MIT Press, 2004

groom's family gives money to the bride's), that price has risen. During the 1990s, China saw the appearance of tens of thousands of "extra-birth guerrilla troops"—couples from one-child areas who live in a legal limbo, shifting shift restlessly from city to city in order to shield their two or three children from the authorities' baleful eye. And, according to the World Health Organisation, female suicide rates in China are among the highest in the world (as are South Korea's). Suicide is the commonest form of death among Chinese rural women aged 15-34; young mothers kill themselves by drinking agricultural fertilisers, which are easy to come by. The journalist Xinran Xue thinks they cannot live with the knowledge that they have aborted or killed their baby daughters.

Some of the consequences of the skewed sex ratio have been unexpected. It has probably increased China's savings rate. This is because parents with a single son save to increase his chances of attracting a wife in China's ultra-competitive marriage market. Shang-Jin Wei of Columbia University and Xiaobo Zhang of the International Food Policy Research Institute in Washington, DC, compared savings rates for households with sons versus those with daughters. "We find not only that households with sons save more than households with daughters in all regions," says Mr Wei, "but that households with sons tend to raise their savings rate if they also happen to live in a region with a more skewed sex ratio." They calculate that about half the increase in China's savings in the past 25 years can be attributed to the rise in the sex ratio. If true, this would suggest that economic-policy changes to boost consumption will be less effective than the government hopes.

Over the next generation, many of the problems associated with sex selection will get worse. The social consequences will become more evident because the boys born in large numbers over the past decade will reach maturity then. Meanwhile, the practice of sex selection itself may spread because fertility rates are continuing to fall and ultrasound scanners reach throughout the developing world.

Yet the story of the destruction of baby girls does not end in deepest gloom. At least one country—South Korea—has reversed its cultural preference for sons and cut the distorted sex ratio (see chart 3 on previous page). There are reasons for thinking China and India might follow suit.

South Korea was the first country to report exceptionally high sex ratios and has been the first to cut them. Between 1985 and 2003, the share of South Korean women who told national health surveyors that they felt "they must have a son" fell by almost two-thirds, from 48% to 17%. After a lag of a decade, the sex ratio began to fall in the mid-1990s and is now 110 to 100. Ms Das

Distorted sex ratios in India

Haryana's lonely bachelors

MANDGAON, HARYANA

Struggling to cope with a dearth of brides

BALJEET SINGH dandles his baby daughter on his knee, a picture of contented fatherhood. Last year the 37-year-old Hindu truck driver became the envy of his friends when he married a 16-year-old Muslim from Assam, in India's north-east. The unorthodox marriage suited both. Mr Singh's romantic life had become a casualty of India's preference for boy babies, which in his state, Haryana, has led to the most skewed sex ratio in India: 116 to 100, according to the 2001 census, compared with a national average of 108. By the age of 30, says Mr Singh, he had given up hope of finding a girl from his own village, Nandgaon, or from his state. His wife, Sona Khatum, comes from an impoverished



Sona Khatum and daughter, lucky ones

Gupta argues that though it takes a long time for social norms favouring sons to alter, and though the transition can be delayed by the introduction of ultrasound scans, eventually change will come. Modernisation not only makes it easier for parents to control the sex of their children, it also changes people's values and undermines those norms which set a higher store on sons. At some point, one trend becomes more important than the other.

It is just possible that China and India may be reaching that point now. The census of 2000 and CASS study both showed the sex ratio stable at around 120. At the very least, it seems to have stopped rising. Locally, Ms Das Gupta argues*, the provinces which had the highest sex ratios (and have two-thirds of China's population) have seen a deceleration in their ratios since 2000, and provinces with a quarter of the population have seen their ratios fall. In India, one study found that the cultural preference for sons has been falling,

family in one of India's poorest states, though village rumour mutters that she may be an illegal migrant from Bangladesh. Mr Singh paid handsomely. "Here, I've always been made comfortable," she says shyly, from beneath her veil.

Ms Khatum is one of an increasing number of brides imported into Haryana, one of India's richest states. The Red Cross Society of India, which campaigns against gendercide in the country, reckons that at least 100 brides have been brought into Bhiwani, one of Haryana's 21 districts. Nandgaon, a village of some 1,700 people, most of them farmers, is a microcosm of bachelor angst. The Red Cross reckons that at least 100 bachelors have passed the age range thought ideal for marriage, which is 20 to 25. At least five have married women from other states, and "lots of my friends ask me, how can I find one?" says Mr Singh.

Besides ushering in a new tolerance of outsiders, the bride shortage has changed social mores in other ways. Villagers say that no girl may marry into a neighbouring village until her in-laws promise to provide a girl in return. They also say that girls' parents are no longer expected to pay big dowries; instead, the onus is on young men to provide well for their future brides.

Meanwhile, the greying bachelors pine on. "I still want a wife," says Babulal Yadav, a 50-year-old farmer. "I'm used to being alone. But I want a son."

too, and that the sex ratio, as in much of China, is rising more slowly. In villages in Haryana, grandmothers sit veiled and silent while men are present. But their daughters sit and chat uncovered because, they say, they have seen unveiled women at work or on television so much that at last it seems normal to them.

Ms Das Gupta points out that, though the two giants are much poorer than South Korea, their governments are doing more than it ever did to persuade people to treat girls equally (through anti-discrimination laws and media campaigns). The unintended consequences of sex selection have been vast. They may get worse. But, at long last, she reckons, "there seems to be an incipient turnaround in the phenomenon of 'missing girls' in Asia." ■

* "Is there an incipient turnaround in Asia's 'missing girls' phenomenon?" By Monica Das Gupta, Woojin Chung and Li Shuzhuo. World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper 4846.