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160 million missing women

A review of Mara Hvistendahl's book *Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys Over Girls and the Consequences of a World Full of Men* (2011)

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Picture this. It is the Oscars. A star rises to the sound of applause to accept her award. She gives her speech, thanks various people and pauses at the end to draw attention to a cause. It is not AIDS or cancer: It is females who are missing due to sex selection.

While the scenario described above is fictitious, the issue of sex selection demands attention. Mara Hvistendahl's new book, *Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men*, neatly lays out the dire reality of 160 million missing females worldwide, because they were never born. These females were aborted because their parents wanted sons.

Public attention to these missing females is surprisingly low, even though demographers have known about the issue for decades. French demographer Christophe Guilmoto said, "[S]ex selection merits comparison with AIDS."

The numbers, in fact, make the AIDS epidemic look small. There are 160 million missing females because of sex selection compared with 25 million AIDS victims. Guilmoto compares the two issues "to gauge the relative lack of interest that the female deficit has attracted."

Hvistendahl's book is well researched and is written in a captivating, journalistic style. It takes readers on a tour of China, India, Vietnam, Korea and other places known to have extensive sex selection. Her reporting style is largely even-handed, as if to ask readers to refrain from pointing fingers. At the end, she briefly describes a situation in the United States where a small group of wealthy people uses expensive technology for pre-implantation sex selection – although in this case, largely to choose girls.

Skewed sex ratios across the globe

Sex ratios are skewed in some of the globe's most populous countries. A normal birth ratio is between 104 and 106 boys for every 100 girls. Anything above that means there have been sex-selection abortions (all later-term abortions, when the sex of a fetus is evident) to ensure boys are born. China has 121 boys for every 100 girls, and India has

112 boys for every 100 girls. Statistics from unexpected countries betray the fact that sex-selection abortion is taking place – Azerbaijan has 115 boys for every 100 girls and Armenia has 120, for example.

Hvistendahl looks at the way cultural trends and economic, geopolitical (for example, the fear of communism spreading) and technological developments combine to create conditions for more and more missing females. This is not an assessment of gender discrimination in the developing world; it is about the different forces coming together, leading to the elimination of one gender.

Discrimination and historic preference are among the factors in China that dictate that every family wants a son. However, Hvistendahl argues it is actually the improved economic position of many families that combines with access to ultrasound technology and Chinese population control policies that lead to the elimination of females. She unearths startling facts about U.S. firms profiting from the mass sale of ultrasound technology in India, as well as U.S. foundations such as Ford and Rockefeller and Planned Parenthood that firmly support and fund population control.

If sex selection is a cancer, prejudice against women is the cigarette; but population control, combined with easy access to ultrasound technology and abortion is the lighter. While the book spans the gamut of forces that push for sex-selection abortion, population control pushes sex selection from the realm of prejudice against women into the elimination of females.

The role of population control

Before population control measures were put in place, families would continue to try for a boy without aborting their girls first. The result was large families. Once population control ideas took hold, sex selection was viewed as a necessary relief from the large families that were the direct result of continually trying for a boy. A paper published in a 1975 edition of the medical journal *Indian Pediatrics* explains: "In India cultural and economic factors make the parents desire a son, and in many instances the couple keeps on reproducing just to have a son. Prenatal determination of sex would put an end to this unnecessary fecundity."

In a fascinating point in the book (in fact, the reporting is, from beginning to end, quite riveting) Hvistendahl travels to meet the author of *The Population Bomb* (1968): Paul Ehrlich. Ehrlich, once the superstar of the population control movement and a fear monger who created worries that overpopulation would see people starve en masse, was a proponent of sex-selection abortion. Today, at the age of 77, it turns out he still holds these same Draconian views. She reports Ehrlich saying, "There have been clearly, from anecdotal situations, people who keep trying in order to have a boy. Obviously if you can give them a boy the first time ..." He trails off, with the implication being his personal support for whatever parents want.

The role of the United Nations Population Fund

The connection between population control and sex selection is just one example among many Hvistendahl makes and illuminates through in-depth, thoughtful reporting and countless interviews with demographers of seemingly every nationality. She does not

hesitate to give negative press to those she personally would like to support. Hvistendahl is pro-choice and thinks abortion is a woman's right. Yet, she does not hesitate to say that pro-choice feminists are one of the reasons this subject does not receive greater scrutiny – they simply cannot find the right talking points. A UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) employee tells her:

"Privately, UNFPA officers say they are in a bind. 'We have had a challenge making sure that when we communicate we are able to preserve women's right to abortion but at the same time say that sex selection on the basis of the gender of the future child is incorrect because it amounts to discrimination. How do you hold on to this discrimination tag and at the same time talk about safe abortion and access to it? It has been a huge challenge for us.... We are walking a tightrope.'

To this day, the UNFPA has no position on sex-selection abortion."

Given the dangerous outcomes of the sex imbalance, which include the selling and buying of wives and increased prostitution and human trafficking, not to mention millions of lonely and bored men with no prospect of ever having a family, it is an issue that we ought to be more aware of. For now, the imbalance of gender ratio is likely to continue. Hvistendahl notes this is especially so as other developing societies, such as those in the Middle East, gain economic sufficiency and the technology necessary to make sex-selection abortion more frequent.

Sadly, the fictitious scenario of the Hollywood star championing a woman's right to life is unlikely to surface any time soon, because the motivation behind sex-selection abortion is the same as in every abortion: choice. Shuzhuo Li, a Chinese demographer interviewed in the book, sums it up nicely: "Everyone knows about [gender imbalance]. But they all think they can invest a lot in their son and have him grow up well and find a nice daughter-in-law. Other people's sons aren't their business. They know individual choice affects social benefit, but still they want choice."

Exposing sex selection for the evil it is creates a catch-22, because it pulls together the most politically correct of public causes – women's rights, with the least – abortion. In the meantime, Hvistendahl does a great service in her first book by drawing some attention to the problem and its worldwide repercussions.

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