

# GLOBAL PROGRAMME TO PREVENT SON PREFERENCE AND THE UNDERVALUING OF GIRLS

FACTSHEET  
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Viet Nam

## 1 BACKGROUND

The sex ratio at birth in Viet Nam has increased rapidly since 2004 to a high level of 112.1 boys for every 100 girls born in 2017. As recently as 2000, the sex ratio at birth was at the biologically normal level of between 102 and 106 boys born per 100 girls in the year.

Sex ratio at birth in Viet Nam is already high at the first birth (110.2) and reaches 115.5 to 120 boys per 100 girls at the third birth during 2010-2014.

The increase is even more striking in certain geographic areas and by birth order. Of the six socio-economic regions, four have the sex ratio at birth in urban areas is significantly higher than in rural areas. In the two richest agricultural regions, the Red River Delta and the Mekong River Delta, the sex ratio at birth is higher in the rural areas than in the urban areas. The sex ratio at birth in the Red River Delta, exceeds 125 in three provinces in this region in 2016.

The differences in sex ratio at birth levels by region, coupled with other socio-economic and cultural determinants show the complexity of the situation of sex ratio at birth in Viet Nam. This complexity requires targeted intervention strategies that are suitable to different contexts.

Strong evidence shows that this demographic imbalance is caused by son preference and gender-biased sex selection. This favouring male children is a powerful manifestation of gender inequality and discrimination against women.

## Son Preference

The primary factor driving son preference among many couples is deeply rooted in the traditional culture and patriarchal family systems, and the social norms of valuing boys more than girls in general.

- Together, these three factors –
- son preference, sex selection
- technology and low fertility –
- create the socio-cultural conditions
- for gender-biased sex selection
- in favour of sons.

In Viet Nam as elsewhere, kinship systems tend to entail systematic gender-based discrimination within the family. The term “patrilineal” refers to a kinship system where descent is reckoned through males; people believe that only sons can continue the family line. “Patrilocal” refers to a system where married couples reside with or close to the man’s relatives, while the woman must leave her family of birth when she marries. In patrilineal/ patrilocal kinship systems, adult sons usually hold responsibility for old-age care for their parents, often sharing a household with them, and sons tend to inherit substantially more from their parents than daughters do. In bilateral kinship systems, in contrast, sons and daughters are treated more equally.

## Modern Sex Selection Technology

Son preference has a long history in Viet Nam, but it now acts in combination with a new factor: access to prenatal sex selection technology. This has increased dramatically over the past decade, with ultrasonography and selective abortion being available and affordable to most people.

## Fertility Decline

Government policies and local fertility preferences in many parts of Viet Nam favour a small-size family with no more than two children. As the number of children declines, and many couples want to have at least one son, they may practice sex selection in favour of boys from the first birth.



## NATIONAL FRAMEWORKS: LAWS, POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

### International commitments

Viet Nam is a signatory of several human rights conventions that guarantee equality between men and women. These include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The country is also committed to the goals of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Sustainable Development Goals.

### National level

Viet Nam's Constitution (2013) emphasizes that women and men must be treated equally, banning laws, customs,

and traditions that deny women the same opportunities as men. According to the Constitution and the 2015 Civil Code, women have the same right to inherit property as men. In practice, however, women's rights to inheritance are often violated, as their access to land is compromised by the high concentration of inheritance among men.

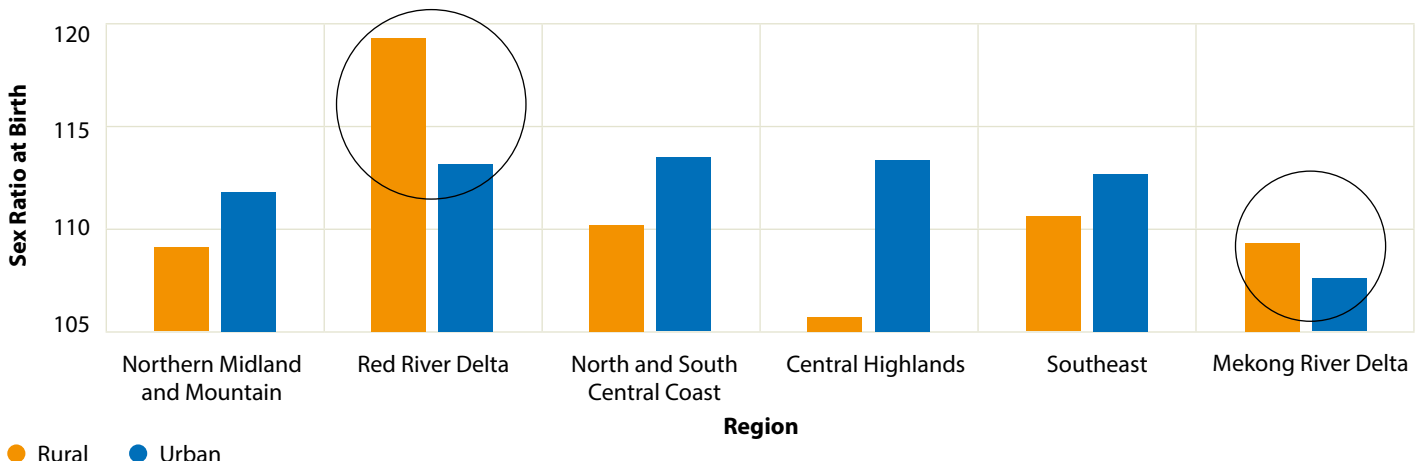
In November 2006, the Viet Nam National Assembly passed the Gender Equality Law and one year later passed the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control. Pursuant to the Gender Equality Law, the Government of Viet Nam approved The National Strategy on Gender Equality for 2011–2020 and the National Action Programme on Gender Equality for 2016–2020. These documents codify the Government's commitments to eliminate gender inequalities and reinforce the recognition of women's significant contributions to Viet Nam's socio-economic development and poverty eradication.

The Government of Viet Nam has recognized the imbalanced sex ratio at birth and taken efforts to address the issue through policies and legislation, aiming to return the sex ratio at birth to the biologically normal level by 2025.

Key policies and legislation addressing Viet Nam's skewed sex ratio at birth:

- The 2003 Population Ordinance and the Decree no. 104/2003/ND-CP ban sex identification of fetuses and sex selection in any form.
- Decree no. 176/2013/ND-CP lists detailed penalties for acts of sex selection.
- The Law on Gender Equality (Article 40) states that sex selection, including inciting other people to select for sex, is illegal.
- The 2011-2020 National Strategy on Population and Reproductive Health aims to return the sex ratio at birth to the biologically normal level by 2025.

### Sex ratio at birth by region and rural/urban areas in Viet Nam, 2010–2014



Source: GSO (2015). Sex imbalances at birth in Viet Nam 2014: Recent trends, factors and variations.



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## 3 CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Challenges

A key challenge in relation to addressing son preference and Gender-Biased Sex Selection in Viet Nam is the balance between ensuring law enforcement that bans the practice of gender-biased sex selection and protecting women's reproductive rights.

The draft Population Law included provisions that were intended to reduce sex ratio at birth imbalance by restricting women's right to abortion. These provisions raise concerns about how they may affect women's reproductive rights. Furthermore, stronger laws and enforcement actions to limit prenatal sex selection may only serve to force more women into having an illegal and unsafe abortion.

Rapid social transformations and growing employment opportunities for women in Viet Nam have not been accompanied by changes in traditional gender arrangements and as a result, son preference persists. Pilot initiatives have shown that people's knowledge about the sex ratio at birth imbalance and their awareness

of the illegality of sex selection may improve, but the root causes of sex-selective practices are resistant to change.

At the same time, there is lack of data about the intensity of son preference across social groups. That limits the possibility to refine intervention strategies for each group.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on research in Viet Nam and lessons from other countries.

#### **Address social norms and the mindset that support son preference:**

- Address gender inequality with a special focus on gender-based discrimination within the family. Changes in residence and inheritance practices can enhance women's empowerment and the value of girls in the eyes of parents and communities.



**Photo:** © UNFPA Viet Nam, Nguyen Minh Duc

- Improve of women’s access to legal assistance. It is important to enhance people’s knowledge of women’s rights and to encourage daughters to claim their rights to family assets. Legal assistance to women can help to better ensure women’s rights to inheritance.
- Engage men to establish new family practices. It is important to continue advocating for men’s engagement in ending discrimination against women and girls, promoting positive perceptions in society about alternative masculinity that supports gender equality, and taking an active role in ending gender-biased sex selection.
- Strengthen social protection systems for older people to reduce the demand for having sons.

**Reduce and prevent misuse of technology:**

- Continue enforcement of the regulation on penalties for gender-biased sex determination and gender-

biased sex selection without limiting the rights of women to reproductive health care and their reproductive rights.

**Conduct research and monitoring to inform the design and implementation of intervention measures:**

- Implement qualitative research to understand how the practice of son preference is passed on and sustained and how it can be intervened in effectively.
- Conduct impact assessment of interventions, documenting good and failed practices to address sex ratio at birth imbalance in order to adjust or replicate initiatives already implemented in parts of the country.
- Implement continuous monitoring of sex ratio at birth trends in the country through all statistical instruments available.

**UNFPA Global Programme to Prevent Son Preference and Gender-biased Sex Selection**

The programme will contribute to addressing the imbalance in sex ratio via strengthening evidence-based national policies and programmes to tackle son preference, low value of girls and gender inequalities resulting in gender-biased sex selection in identified countries of prevalence in Asia (Bangladesh, Nepal and Viet Nam) and the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia).

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