

# Perceptions and Attitudes

regarding the phenomenon of  
“Missing Girls” in the South Caucasus:  
Perspectives from a Regional Study\*



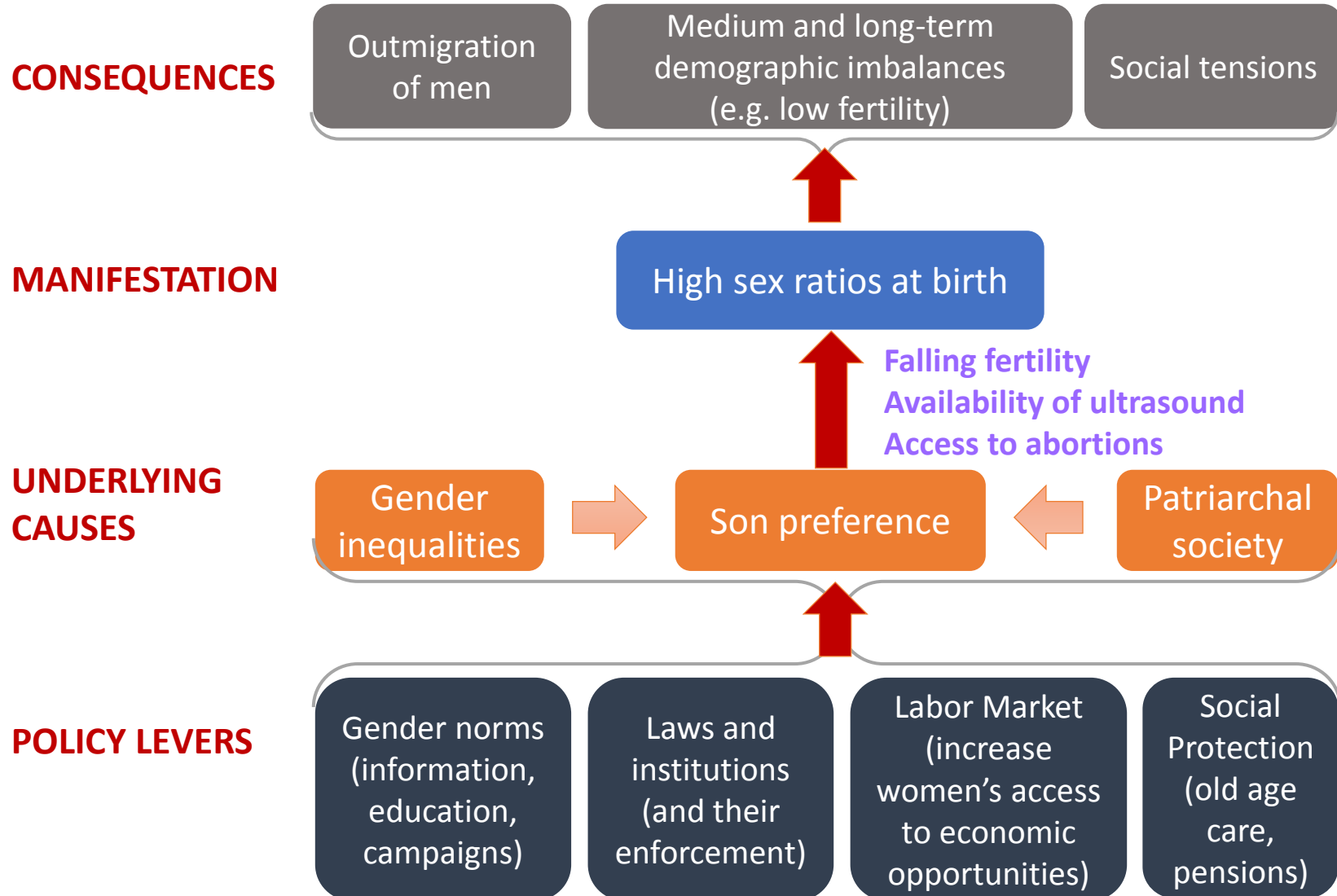
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Yerevan, 3 March 2015

\*Nora Dudwick, 2014

# The regional study had three main objectives

1. Identify the **reasons** and **circumstances** that have contributed to sex selection in the South Caucasus region
2. Explore public awareness about the trend and the potential **consequences** of continued sex selection
3. Explores **policy options** with potential to reduce this trend

# A framework to think about the “Missing Girls” phenomenon



# Rigorous qualitative research deepens our understanding of the issue the region

- How **social norms** and the **local context** affect son preference
  - Are they changing? How? With what impact on son preference?
  - Does this vary across rural/urban or other contexts? How?
- The **interplay of factors and processes** behind sex selection
  - What are the pressures leading to sex selection? Do they affect women and men differently? Are they changing? How?
  - How are decisions on sex selections taken at the household level?
- **People's understanding** of the issue and its consequences
- How men and women are likely to **respond** to possible policy solutions

# Regional methodology

## Four **communities** per country, capturing the country's diversity:

- 1 in capital city + 1 other urban community + 2 rural or semi-rural communities
  - ➔ Efforts taken to include diversity in economic conditions, migration dynamics, sex ratios at birth, ethnic minorities, etc.

## Six sex-/age-disaggregated **focus groups** and **life stories** per community:

- Young, never married, 18-25 years old (men and women)
- Ever married, 26-45 years old (men and women)
- Ever-married, 60 and older (men and women)
  - ➔ Efforts taken to include diversity in education, profession and family composition

## Five **expert interviews** per community + additional five/capital:

- Informal community leaders or local officials, and religious leaders
- Representatives of NGOs working on gender issues,
- Education providers, lawyers, sociologists and demographers.
- Health care providers (gynecologists, obstetricians, ultrasound specialists)

# Reasons and Circumstances

A confluence of contributing factors

Circumstances are similar throughout the region:  
**economic disruption** marked a heightened reliance on  
kinship relations and affected fertility choices

*“After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the number of people giving preference to male babies increased, because parents are afraid of problems as the result of unemployment and poverty. They need sons to support them and protect them.”*

(elderly man in a rural community)

# Circumstances are similar throughout the region: **economic disruption** marked a heightened reliance on kinship relations and affected fertility choices

- The collapse of the Soviet state severely affected economic life:
  - Economic disruption and hardship
  - Weakening of state support systems
  - Women's role and opportunities in the labor market changed
- Families cope with economic insecurity by:
  - (i) Reducing the number of children
  - (ii) Turning more to informal institutions (e.g. family) to cope with daily economic and other challenges
- These circumstances combine with underlying **patriarchal social structure** in all three countries of the South Caucasus: extended families with many sons are better placed to face these difficulties.



# Traditional **social norms** in the region are at the bases of sons' instrumental and symbolic value...

*“We need a son so that smoke continues to rise from [our] chimneys”*  
(adult urban woman)

## Instrumental and symbolic value of sons

- **Take care** of parents in older age, usually both financially and non-financially
- **Protect** their family, sisters and the family honor: *“the sister said she had a brother, the brother did not say he had a sister”* (rural woman)
- **Carry** the name and the bloodline; will also continue family business and maintain its property

# ...social and gender norms also prescribe the role and value of daughters

*“Daughters are brought up to serve somebody else”  
(young rural woman)*

## Daughters as a liability

- They typically **move** into their husband’s home and take care of his parents
- **Risks and costs** associated with bringing up girls: *“If a boy gets arrested [...] you will pay and set him free. Do you think it is more difficult than having a daughter who has behaved immorally and has left a big stain on your name, your personality, your house?”* (rural man)
- Many women (and some men) argue that they would rather have boys because girls face more **hardships and lack control** over their own lives

# But **relationships and expectations** from sons and daughters are **changing**

*“If I were young, I would have said [I preferred having] a boy, but now in my age I say a girl. Because a daughter is more caring than a daughter in law today.”*  
(Older urban man)

- **Challenges to patrilocal system and traditional norms** are emerging and daughters-in-law are less submissive, especially in less traditional regions: *“Today, they don’t take remarks well”*
- **Migration** has shaken up traditional gender roles
- **Daughters play a significant (and increased) role** in caring for elderly parents, which is still not fully recognized
- Women are increasingly **claiming their rights to inherit** their share of family property

# Pressures to have at least one son come from society as much as from personal preference

*“If a family does not have a son it becomes an object of discussion in society” (NGO worker)*

Son preference is strongly conditioned by **community pressure**

## ➤ On **MEN**

- Having sons is viewed as an expression of masculinity: *“only a true man brings a boy to this world”* (young urban man)
- Not having at least a son makes object of scorn, making them feel *“ashamed”* by *“disappointed families”* and neighbors *“making fun of them”*.

## ➤ On **WOMEN**

- A woman’s status in the family and within society rises when she has a son
- Social condemnation for failing in their obligation to their husbands.

# From son preference to sex selection

*“Son preference translates into pressure on women to get pregnant until they conceive a son. [...] As hard times have caused families to reduce family size, more husbands and their parents have pressured their wives to terminate pregnancies rather than give birth to girls.”*

*(N. Dudwick 2014)*

# The context for **fertility decisions** within households is often marked by abuse and ignorance

- **Fertility decisions** are most frequently taken by husbands, and wives will comply because *“a woman [...] has no other viable option”*
- Women and men share the values expressed in son preference, but **women are less significantly less willing** to produce a son at all costs
- Reproductive choices are often made on the basis of considerable **ignorance** regarding:
  - sex determination (“calculations”, “herbs”, women seen as genetically responsible for determining the sex of the fetus); and
  - health risks of multiple (late) abortions

# Women are vulnerable to pressures and violence in response to their inability to deliver a son

*“Women undergo violence by their mothers-in-law or husbands. If violence stops, the number of abortions would decrease.” (Urban man)*

- Sex selective abortions happen very often in a context of **pressures and violence** from husbands and mothers-in-law

*“[My husband told me] you should not come home without aborting if it is a girl. Otherwise, he would punish me.” (elderly rural woman)*

- Women have **limited ways to respond** to such pressures
  - Resources for women affected by domestic abuse are limited
  - Divorce is rarely a viable option for women experiencing pressure to abort or violence for not delivering a son due to:
    - Property law and practice leaving women with no place to go
    - Economic dependence on their husbands
    - Social stigma

# Perceived Consequences



# Are people **aware** of the phenomenon?

*“When I heard of this problem on TV, I didn’t attach importance to it; I consider it something accidental. What worries me is that birth rates have decreased.  
(Older urban man)*

- People are generally aware about the practice of sex selective abortions, but less so about skewed sex ratios at birth and the link between the two
- People cite as their main sources of information skewed sex ratios at birth (i) TV programs and discussions, and (ii) their own observations

# Are people **concerned** about it?

- Relatively few respondents expressed concern over the likelihood of large negative consequences witnessed in other regions; they claim that outmigration of men and their more frequent violent deaths at an earlier age *“will balance things up”*
- About half of the respondents did express some kind of specific concerns
  - Depopulation and falling fertility in general
  - *“The son who remains single will not be a useful descendant”*
  - Health risks linked to repeated abortions at a late stage of the pregnancy
  - Moral issues related to abortion, but abortion is viewed as understandable in present circumstances of economic hardship

# Policy Options

# Field research allowed us to explore the feasibility and chances of success of different policy options

**Evidence from fieldwork and international experience indicate that these are likely NOT to be effective:**

- **Banning abortions** or preventing doctors from telling parents the **sex of the fetus**
  - It is widely acknowledged that people would “*always find ways*” to terminate pregnancies, endangering women’s health even more
  - Modern technology already provides easier ways to go around these
  - They would foster corruption among health practitioners

*“Abortion cannot be banned, because when they have planned it, they will do it whether in the cellar or in the hospital.”* (urban man)

*“People should understand that [abortion] endangers one's health and contradicts with moral norms. Anyhow, if they don't realize all this they should at least have the abortion with the help of doctors, otherwise if they do it at home they will get a number of complications.”* (young urban woman)

# (continued)

**Evidence from fieldwork and international experience indicate that these are UNLIKELY to be effective:**

- Providing public **financial incentive** on the birth of daughters
  - A significant share of the people supported financial incentives for children (not just girls) to raise fertility overall
  - Many respondents add that increased economic prosperity overall would help
- Increasing pensions and providing greater **old age security** for the elderly
  - Some believe it could ease some pressure, but very few think it would be enough to counter son preference.

# Policy approaches more likely to succeed address the fundamentals of gender equality

- **Large and well-targeted media and education campaigns**
  - Promote the value of girls and women
  - Raise awareness on the consequences of sex selection
  - Target men as much as women (including present and future mothers-in-law)
- **Increase women's economic independence and access to assets**
  - Promote women's access to better paid jobs
  - Raise women's awareness of their rights to parental property, and encourage them to take the necessary steps to ensure they don't remain without a home
- **Protect women from domestic violence and abuse**
  - Provide greater protection and resources in case of abuse and divorce
- **Promote education on reproductive health and sexuality**

*“[Actions] should not be concretely focused on having/not having a child. Whatever is done, wherever it commences, the core should be the same: increasing the importance of women’s role.”*

*(young woman in Yerevan)*

Thank you

