



UNFPA China Policy Brief Series

TOWARDS A NORMAL SEX RATIO AT BIRTH IN CHINA

Overview

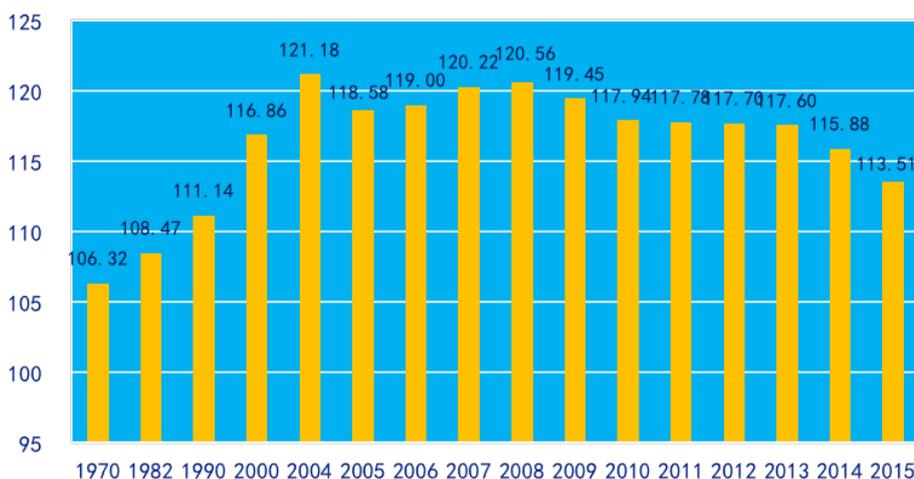
As an expression of a harmful practice, gender-biased sex selection (GBSS) in favor of boys is a symptom of pervasive social, cultural, political and economic injustices against girls and women (UNFPA Asia Pacific Regional Office (APRO) 2012). Patriarchal structures reinforce son preference and perpetuate a climate of violence and discrimination against women and girls in society. Declining fertility and rapid technology developments

that allow parents to know the sex of the fetus have exacerbated this practice. That is to say, there are three preconditions to the behavior of GBSS: son preference and fast fertility decline motivated the “need” for sex selection (as the “demand”), and sex selection technology makes it possible (as the “supply”).

GBSS leads to distorted levels of sex ratio at birth (SRB)¹. Analysis of data indicates that

in recent decades, imbalanced SRB favoring boys have grown in a number of South Asian, East Asian, and Central Asian as well as East European countries (Guilmoto, 2009; UNFPA APRO 2012). The trend has shifted geographically over time; thus it began in a number of Asian countries (the Republic of Korea, China and India) in the 1980s, followed by some countries of the Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia) in the 1990s, and has more recently been followed by Montenegro, Albania, and Vietnam.

Figure 1: SRB trend in China since the 1970s



Source: Official data from China Population Censuses and Population Sample Surveys

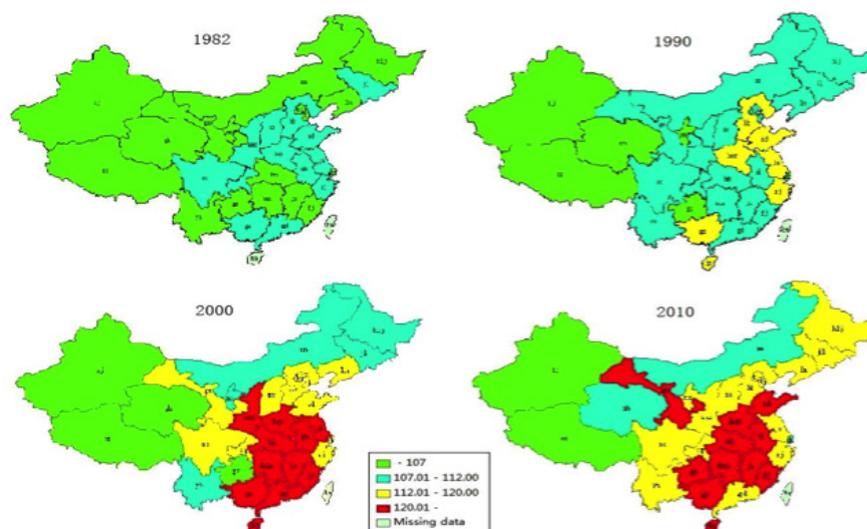
China has witnessed the most prolonged and significantly skewed SRB among the countries facing a similar challenge. An imbalanced SRB first occurred as a problem in China in the early 1980s. It exceeded 110 in the 1990s and reached an unprecedented 121.18 in 2004 (UNFPA 2016). In response to imbalanced SRB, the Government of China together with international partners and non-governmental institutions, have enacted various policy and intervention measures to curb the

distorted SRB. As per official data and statistics, the SRB in China has hit a plateau and consistently dropped for the last seven years - from 119.45 in 2009 to 113.51 in 2015 (Figure 1). Although the ratio has fallen, it is still higher than a normal ratio of 103-107. In terms of geographical spread, first observed in provinces such as Anhui, Henan, Guangdong, and Guangxi in the early 1980s, the skewed SRB has spread to all provinces in China, except Tibet, as per the 2010 census (Figure 2).

The skewed SRB increases with parity. The SRB has been higher for the second child than that of the first one, and is even worse for the third child (UNFPA China, 2007). However, the sixth national census of China in 2010 shows that SRB for the first child in families has risen significantly, which has never happened before, while that of the second child has dropped and the third and higher parity children has fluctuated (Li, Shang and Feldman, 2013). The SRB of the first child has increased from 106.5, 105.4 and 107.1 in 1982, 1990 and 2000 census to 113.7 in 2010 (UNFPA 2016). The figure is high both in urban areas and rural areas and in most of the provinces. The changing patterns imply that in the Chinese society, the main factors influencing son preference may be changing, hence calling for further studies to explore. For instance, the significantly increased cost of raising children may be encouraging families to seek ways to have a son as the first and only birth despite the revision of the one-child policy.

China's skewed SRB has a significant impact on the country's ranking on the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), which was created by the World Economic Forum in 2006 and presented

Figure 2: SRB in China by provinces, in 1982, 1990, 2000 and 2010



Source: China population censuses in 1982, 1990, 2000 and 2010

annually in the Global Gender Gap Report. According to this report, in 2013, China ranked 69 among 130 countries in the world. In 2014, China's ranking dropped 18 points to 87 among 142 countries. China dropped even further to 91 in 2015, 99 in 2016 and 100 in 2017 mainly because of China ranking the last on SRB² among all countries (World Economic Forum 2015, 2016 and 2017).

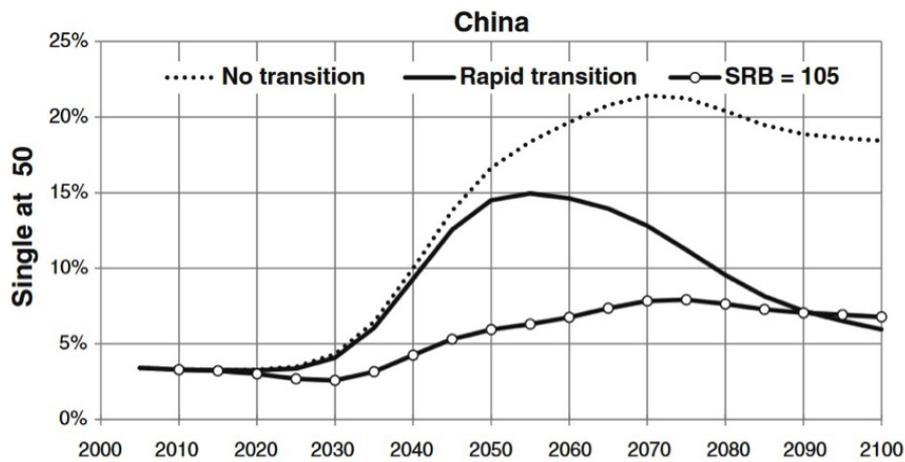
Consequences of the skewed SRB

Skewed SRB leads to an imbalanced sex structure of the population, which has significant demographic and social consequences, including: i) marriage squeeze, ii) potential insecurity, iii) serious consequences for men who cannot marry, iv) increase in trafficking and sex work, and v) longer term impact on population ageing because fewer women means fewer children, among others. Marriage squeeze is a phenomenon where men vastly outnumber women of marriageable age, with widespread

effects on the Chinese society, including further discrimination against women. According to predictions by demographers based on various models (Li 2007; UNFPA APRO 2012), demographic masculinization will lead to a growing population gap between young men and young women, with the number of prospective grooms³ exceeding that of unmarried women. According to UNFPA APRO (2012), projections show that in China and India, men will vastly outnumber women of marriageable age for over two generations. Marriage simulations also suggest that the number of single men trying to marry after 2030 might exceed the corresponding number of unmarried women by 50-60% in both countries. According to Guilamoto's (2012) projections from 2005 to 2100 based on three different scenarios for the SRB⁴, even if China's SRB were to return to normal by 2020—an ambitious goal—as many as 15% of Chinese men at age 50 would still not be able to find a wife by 2055 (Figure 3).

In a presentation made during the World Population Day on 11 July 2014 by the National Health and Family Planning Commission (NHFPC) in Shenyang, an estimated 30 million

Figure 3: Proportion of single men at age 50 according to three SRB scenarios, China, 2005-2100



Source: Guilamoto, Christophe Z. 2012. "Skewed sex ratios at birth and future marriage squeeze in China and India, 2005–2100." *Demography*, 49(1): 77-100.

young men will be involuntary bachelors by 2030. Such a significant surplus of men unable to marry (in China, referred to as “bare-branches”) will inevitably cause a marriage squeeze, followed by profound societal changes and consequences. Studies in China and India reveal an age gap between men and women at marriage and also show that women “marry up” (Kaur 2013; Kaur et al 2016 B). The age gap lessens the marriage squeeze because men can choose between women their own age and younger, but “marrying up” worsens it because women want to marry men who are older, better off and educated. Gupta et al. (2010) also argue that lower-educated men experience higher rates of bachelorhood while women favor men with better prospects, migrating if needed from poorer to wealthier areas. This explains why educated women and poor men are worst affected by marriage squeeze.

A few studies on the impact of sex ratio distortions in Asia have shown that men unable to marry locally tend to resort to the importation of brides from lower economic backgrounds, other ethnic groups,

or more distant regions (UNFPA APRO 2012). The skewed SRB may thus increase the possibility that single men in China seek foreign wives from neighboring countries, such as Myanmar, Vietnam, etc. Studies are ongoing to ascertain whether the increased pressure for foreign brides is creating a market for trafficked foreign women. Even voluntary foreign brides tend to be of lower socio-economic background, which puts them in a very vulnerable situation. Furthermore, despite the increasing trend of foreign brides, it may not be possible to meet the growing demand of bachelors in the highly populous and SRB-skewed China and India, as China already has a gender gap of 66 million and India a gender gap of 43 million—that’s a surplus of 109 million men (UNFPA APRO 2012).

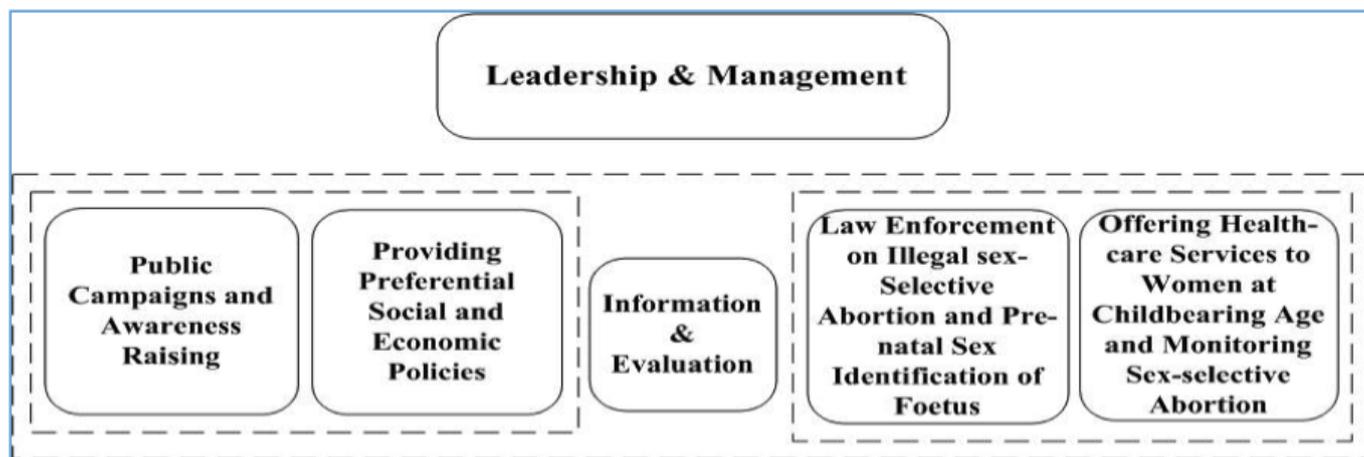
While some scholars conclude that rising sex ratio imbalances increase violence and crime as unmarried males are more prone to commit crimes (Edlund et al., 2007, 2010; Golley and Tyers 2012; Hudson and den Boer 2004, 2008); others argue that there is little evidence to support the hypothesis that low-status and

unmarried males pose a threat to social order on a wide scale (Hesketh et al. 2011; Kaur et al. 2016). In China and India such men do indeed have low self-esteem and are inclined to depression. While the current literature points towards a positive, negative or even insignificant relationship between sex ratio and crimes, it is certain that unmarried men will be largely drawn from disadvantaged and low-status groups of society. Evidence shows that the proportion of unmarried men will be highly concentrated in poorer provinces with low fiscal ability to provide social protection programs (Gupta et al. 2010; Sharygin et al. 2013). Such geographic concentration of unmarried males could be socially disruptive, hence there is a need to expand the coverage of government-financed social protection programs.

The loss of female population could also result in further decrease of fertility rate, which in turn will intensify population ageing, and become a heavy burden on future socioeconomic development in China, especially through the reduction of labor force (Li, Jiang, and Feldman 2006). One of the constraints to continued rapid GDP growth in China is the slowdown and eventual contraction of labor force, caused by low fertility. The economic consequences of low fertility and population ageing may be further exacerbated by imbalanced sex ratio at birth. The rise in the SRB further reduces the share of women of reproductive age and so further slows population and labor force growth (Golley and Tyers, 2012).

Sex ratio imbalance due to discrimination against women impacts the rights of girls and women, including their rights to life, participation and

Figure 4: The “2+2+1” Mechanism



development. Furthermore, the associated marriage market imbalance may drive an increasing pressure on women to marry and perform reproductive duties, which may stimulate mercenary marriage and trafficking of women and girls, and a rise in sex violence against women and girls. All of these are threatening to the safety of women and girls (Yang et al. 2012; Li and Jin 2012).

Government Response

China has been actively engaged in different initiatives to combat GBSS and SRB imbalance, especially since 2000. The central government, in collaboration with provincial governments, has amended regulations and laws to make sex identifying ultrasounds and sex-selective abortions as “two illegalities”⁵. A comprehensive governance response to address skewed SRB in China was instituted in 2006, when the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the State Council promulgated the “Decision on Fully Enhancing Population and Family Planning Programme and Comprehensively Addressing Population Issues”. In the same year, the State Council officially launched the nationwide

campaign “Care for Girls” to enhance the value of daughters in society and support families with girls. The “Care for Girls” campaign employed a “Five-in-One” mechanism, also referred to as the “2+2+1” governance model (Figure 4) (Li, Shang and Feldman, 2013).

This governance model includes a specific component on data collection and performance evaluation. After the government set a specific target within the 12th Five-Year Plan (2010-2015) for National Family Planning and Development, that is, to decrease the SRB to below 115 by 2015, the former National Population and Family Planning Commission established an assessment system to evaluate the performance of government entities on implementing policies addressing the imbalanced SRB.

Gaps and Opportunities

Although this governance model has made notable progress in bringing down the SRB, there is room for improvement.

Firstly, policy response to SRB issues is fragmented amongst different levels and departments of government. Social policy management of SRB issues thus needs to be coordinated amongst

different actors. Furthermore, there has been little systematic analysis of these policies and their implementation, which makes it difficult to improve upon them (Li, Shang and Feldman, 2013).

Secondly, the “Care for Girls” governance model does not address conflict between existing laws and policies and

local practices and also does not address key drivers of the practice like gender inequality. For example, gender discriminatory customary rules and regulations may result in hindering women’s equal rights to property and land inheritance, further exacerbating son preference in rural areas (Li 2015; Du, Li and Liang 2015).

Thirdly, the “Care for Girls” campaign focuses mainly on the causes of the skewed SRB, but does not address the consequences (Li, Shang and Feldman, 2013). For example, there are no policies addressing the social needs of bachelors or the potential increased vulnerability of women as they become scarcer in comparison to the growing male population.

Fourthly, the accuracy of SRB data has been an issue of concern (IPDS 2014). There is a discrepancy among administrative data on SRB collected from different sectors, e.g. from family planning, health, public security and education. Large-scale population migration in China further complicates the data collection. In addition, the strict performance assessment may have an impact on the accuracy of reported SRB data. For example, the targets set for performance assessment may have unintended consequences and lead to under-reporting. Thus, there is a need to further strengthen mechanisms to track precise SRB data in order to objectively assess the effectiveness of relevant policies and measures.

Fifthly, although leadership and management is a key component of “Care for Girls” Campaign, there is a lack of strong multi-sectoral leadership and synergized efforts to work on the intervention among government departments, CSOs and academics (Zheng 2012). Despite ongoing efforts and initiatives⁶, SRB is primarily being addressed by the health and family planning sectors, and lacks involvement of other important multi-sectoral mechanisms at higher levels and large scales, such as actors in women’s empowerment,

social services, education, and civil affairs. For example, unlike the Office of HIV/AIDS, which is under the State Council in China, until now, the national SRB comprehensive intervention office is placed under NHFPC and not under the State Council, which negatively impacts on its ability to mobilize multi-sectoral support and engagement (Zheng 2012). In addition, the participation of NGOs, civil society organizations and local communities is required to change people’s preference for sons (Li 2007). “Intervention without adequate support from the top and without active participation from the community would be neither effective nor sustainable” (Zheng 2012).

In a positive step, the Communiqué of the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC 2014) used the phrase “social governance” instead of the previously used “social management.” Thus, this linguistic shift indicates a greater willingness to engage civil society in the social sector and public services. This change in the government’s attitude towards civil society creates a window of opportunity for new interventions and partnerships with the social sector.

Starting from 1 January 2016, all married Chinese couples are allowed to give birth to two children, a policy approved by the National People’s Congress in December 2015. This is a further step following the 2013 adjustment of the fertility policy, a significant change in the direction of full compliance with the Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994. The hope is that this change in fertility policy will reduce the skewed SRB with increasing fertility rate.

However, experience in other countries without restrictive fertility policies contradicts this expectation. For example, Vietnam already has a two child policy, but still has a very severe sex ratio imbalance. A close attention needs to be paid to the impact of the new fertility policy on the SRB trend in China, especially given rapid changes in social and economic conditions.

The merger of the former ministries - Ministry of Health and the National Population and Family Planning Commission - into the NHFPC in 2013 created an opportunity to streamline the SRB data collection in family planning and health departments. A real-name registration system for new births by health departments has become a national policy⁷. This policy provides the government with real-time SRB data and data on population growth, among other issues. It allows a more effective monitoring of the SRB trend and provides a basis for well-informed policy-making to prevent GBSS and address skewed SRB (IPDS 2014; Li, Shang and Feldman, 2013). The issue of imbalanced SRB is addressed in the Program for the Development of Children (2011-2020) as one of the major objectives. Section 5 on children and legal protection includes comprehensive strategies and measures for normalization of SRB. Indeed, since 2011, the Chinese government has prioritized reducing the high SRB in national development strategies. According to the 13th Five-Year National Family Planning Development Plan (2016-2020) released by the NHFPC, China’s SRB is expected to be reduced to 112 by 2020.

Recommendations and Way Forward

Experience gained from efforts to address other traditional practices that are harmful to women has shown that long-term change can only be achieved when a broad range of actors is engaged in a concerted effort. The joint interagency statement by OHCHR, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women and WHO (WHO 2011) provides a series of recommendations for effective action. Based on consideration of the contexts of China, the following recommendations are derived therefrom as part of the way forward towards the normalization of SRB in China:

Supportive measures for girls and women

- Improve girls' and women's equal access to information, health care services, and employment opportunities; ensure their personal security and raise their awareness of self-determination.
- Ensure that high birth order girls (i.e. those born second, third or fourth in a family) have equal access to education and health services.
- Provide incentives for families with daughters only to increase the perceived value of girls, while longer-term efforts to change deep-rooted thinking and attitudes take effect.
- Provide measures to prevent and respond to gender-based violence including support to survivors of violence.

Legislation and policy

- Analyze the impact of laws and policies on gender equality and accordingly promote legal frameworks and socioeconomic policies that will sustain gender equity, and in particular encourage active participation from civil society.
- Formulate and implement policies and agreements (including village rules and regulations) targeting son preference, to ensure gender equality with respect to inheritance, dowry, marriage, land distribution, financing old age and other personal security issues, pension, individual safety, education and family name determination.

Strengthen evidence base

- To provide a sound basis for policy development and action, more reliable data are needed on the magnitude of GBSS. SRB data from a variety of sources need to be analyzed not only to provide a more comprehensive picture of the situation and its complexities, but also to study the interplay with socio-economic variables. The real-name registration system for new births by health departments can be strengthened to collect reliable data on SRB.
- All the determinants and consequences of skewed SRB must be addressed using different types of research, including qualitative studies that explore the contextual realities that underlie sex-selection motivations and practices, and their effects on different age and population groups.
- In monitoring and evaluating ongoing interventions, indicators for tracking change and impact should include not only the SRB but also other markers of gender inequality. Documenting and analyzing the reasons for the success and failure of specific and collective interventions must be part of this process.

Proper use of technology

- Promote ethical management on fetal sex identification and sex selection services using professional associations, with guidelines on the use of technologies being developed and promoted that proscribe the use of technologies by unqualified people.
- Particular attention needs to be given to engaging health care professionals to ensure that they are fully aware of the issues around sex selection, and are in a position to act responsibly and in accordance with guidelines.
- Avoid reinforcing gender discrimination – for example, women should be able to access health care without spousal authorization.
- Avoid reinforcing inequities – efforts to limit sex selection should not limit economic, social and/or geographical access to technology for health reasons by all individuals.
- Ensure women's access to safe abortion and related services - efforts to manage or limit sex selection should also not hamper or limit access to legitimate sexual and reproductive health technologies and services.

Advocacy, communication and community mobilization

- The social norms that govern son preference will ultimately have to change within families and within social networks. Thus, advocacy to change attitudes and behavior towards girls and women has to be a central part of work to redress gender inequalities manifested through sex-ratio imbalances.
- Use all available media channels to conduct advocacy and communication activities, build strong social support for the concept of the equal value of girls and boys.
- Encourage the broadest possible participation from civil society to ensure that the behavior change communication contents and activities are context-appropriate, reinforced with systematic and rigorous assessments.
- Complement national-level activities with mutually reinforcing activities at the local level in order to fully engage communities.

Endnotes

¹ Sex Ratio at Birth is a statistical indicator captured as the number of boys born alive per 100 girls born alive. In most countries, the normal sex ratio at birth varies between 103 and 107 boys per 100 girls, and a higher ratio is a sign of deliberate sex selection, rather than natural sex ratio

² This index shows the gap between men and women, not indicating level of development. Besides, the number of countries ranked is different from year to year, so the data from different years may be incomparable.

³ UNFPA recognizes that some people may not desire a heterosexual marriage, however in this paper, a heteronormative approach to male-female relations was taken because of the importance of marriage in

Chinese culture. In Confucian culture and the socialist value system, family is seen as a central and essential unit of society, which puts great pressure on Chinese men and women to marry. Furthermore, the purpose of our discussion of the marriage squeeze is to articulate the consequences of an imbalanced SRB on heterosexual men and does not assume that women's role in society is solely as a wife or as the possession of a man.

⁴ Simulations rely on three different population projections based on SRB parameters, namely the no-transition scenario, the rapid-transition scenario, and the normal-SRB scenario. These three scenarios lead to three different sets of age and sex distributions for the period 2005-2100.

⁵ The term "two illegalities" refers to illegal fetal sex identification and illegal sex selective abortion for non-medical purposes.

⁶ For example, since 2011, through its Country Programmes of cooperation with China, UNFPA worked with national partners in selected project sites to support comprehensive interventions that are gender-sensitive, incorporate multi-sectoral cooperation, and fully engage communities.

⁷ The real-name registration system was first introduced by the Hainan provincial government in July 2007, which requires newborns to undergo a real-name registration when mothers are in hospital after their delivery.

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About UNFPA

UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, is the lead UN agency for delivering a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe, and every young person's potential is fulfilled. Currently, UNFPA works with national partners on the UNFPA-China Eighth Country Programme (2016-2020), which aims to strengthen policy environment to advance universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, particularly for young people and vulnerable populations, to address gender-based violence and gender-biased sex-selection, and to promote integration of population dynamics in policy making and planning.

TOWARDS A NORMAL SEX RATIO AT BIRTH IN CHINA

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