



# **Policy Recommendations for China's Response to Gender-Biased Sex Selection and Son Preference**

**based on UNFPA conceptual framework  
on son preference and daughter aversion**

# Policy Recommendations for China's Response to Gender-Biased Sex Selection and Son Preference based on UNFPA conceptual framework on son preference and daughter aversion<sup>1</sup>

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## I. Background

Gender-biased sex selection (GBSS) involves the use of various techniques or methods to control the gender of offspring before or during pregnancy. The direct consequence is an imbalance in sex ratio at birth (SRB), measured by the number of male infants per 100 female infants. The normal range for this ratio is 103 to 107. When the ratio surpasses this range, it is generally indicative of a prevalent tendency to prefer son in prenatal sex selection.

The academic community commonly employs the "Three-Factor Drive Model" to explain the skewed SRB. The driving factors include son preference, declining fertility, and the availability of convenient techniques that enable sex selection. Son preference is an intrinsic factor, while declining fertility creates pressure on the quantity of offspring, prompting individuals to transition from desiring sufficient sons to specifically desiring male offspring. Techniques such as ultrasound testing and induced abortion provide feasible means for sex selection.

However, this model has certain limitations. Firstly, it fails to fundamentally analyze the root cause of son preference — gender inequality. Secondly, the model only explains the behavior of pre-natal sex selection, neglecting the analysis of post-natal favoritism towards son. Lastly, the model focuses on micro-level individual factors without considering societal influences. A comparative analysis of these three factors reveals that addressing the root cause behind son preference is essential to reducing sex selection and discrimination against girls. Firstly, existing research indicates that prohibiting the use of sex selection techniques is largely ineffective and may even yield adverse effects (Das Gupta, 2019; Kumar and Sinha, 2019). Restricting women's access to information or services also violates their rights to sexual and reproductive health. Secondly, the decline in fertility is an inevitable outcome of modernization and cannot be reversed. To date, no theoretical framework has been developed to systematically analyze the non-structural factors contributing to sex selection and son preference.

In 2023, a team of experts from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) formulated a conceptual framework (Figure 1) based on the social change theory, with an aim to explain the reasons behind GBSS and son preference from a gender equality perspective. This framework serves as a basis for intervention measures. Also, UNFPA advocates for countries with skewed SRB to adapt this framework to their specific contexts and formulate more effective intervention measures. This paper will first introduce this framework, analyze the reasons behind the son preference tradition in China using this framework, review China's response policies, identify policy shortcomings, and propose relevant policy recommendations.

## II. Framework Description

The framework initially delineates between causes, behavioral manifestations, and behavioral consequences, highlighting that different behaviors lead to varied outcomes. A comprehensive analysis of the causes is conducted within the framework, distinguishing between different dimensions. These



causes contribute to people's perceptions and attitudes toward boys and girls, subsequently manifesting in their behavior. It is crucial to emphasize that the existence of cognitive and attitudinal factors does not necessarily translate into actions; in other words, attitudes such as a preference for son or disdain for daughter may not necessarily result in sex selection or favoritism toward son.

## 2.1 Root Causes

Drawing inspiration from the **social change theory developed by Cislighi and Heise (2018)**, this framework categorizes root causes into four types: **individual, societal, material, and institutional**. Individual factors refer to personal beliefs and views on gender equality, male dominance, and related ideologies. Societal factors encompass gender norms, cultural norms, and social norms within a given level of development. Material factors involve the unequal distribution of socioeconomic and material resources between males and females. Institutional factors pertain to regulatory systems upholding unequal power relations, such as laws, policies, and religious rules. These four categories are not mutually exclusive but rather intertwined, interacting dynamically. The interwoven factors are visually represented in the framework as a floral pattern, earning it the moniker "flower model."

The overlapping of the "petals" signifies the intersection of the influences of the four types of factors. Gender inequality, positioned at the center of the flower, serves as the core of the framework and acts as the root and foundation for all four categories, exerting a decisive impact on each factor.

Social change theory posits that if you are attempting to alter societal norms or conventions, one must place these norms within a broader context. This societal context includes factors such as modernization, demographic transitions, population migration and urbanization, cultural shifts, and the legal environment. Therefore, the analysis of causes cannot be limited to these four factors, instead it must be integrated with a grand societal backdrop.

## 2.2 Behavioral Manifestations

A pivotal aspect of this framework is the distinction between two forms of expressions of son preference: fetal sex selection, and postnatal favoritism towards son. Fetal sex selection can occur both pre-conception and during pregnancy, involving techniques such as gender-selective artificial insemination or embryo implantation, and gender-selective induced abortion (Rahm, 2022). Postnatal favoritism towards son manifests when parents, intentionally or unintentionally, allocate more family resources to the male offspring. This behavior can be either lethal, leading to excessively high female mortality, or non-lethal, resulting in disparities between son and daughter in spheres such as mental and physical health, development, and education.

The occurrence of fetal sex selection and postnatal favoritism towards son can happen concurrently or independently. The prevalence of either behavior is linked to factors such as desired family size, the availability of sex selection techniques, and the societal environment. Additionally, it correlates with the intensity of individuals' preferences for son and the degree of disdain and discrimination towards daughter. Compared to postnatal favoritism towards son, sex selection exhibits a more pronounced preference for son and disdain for daughter, sometimes even materializing in the form of ending female

lives to achieve the desired gender preference. In situations where sex selection techniques are accessible, choosing to have a daughter but favoring son after birth signifies an acceptance of female offspring, albeit with limited resources disproportionately allocated to the preferred male offspring. When sex selection techniques are unavailable, son preference is likely to directly translate into postnatal favoritism towards son, potentially leading to more severe consequences, including instances of trafficking or drowning and abandonment of female children.

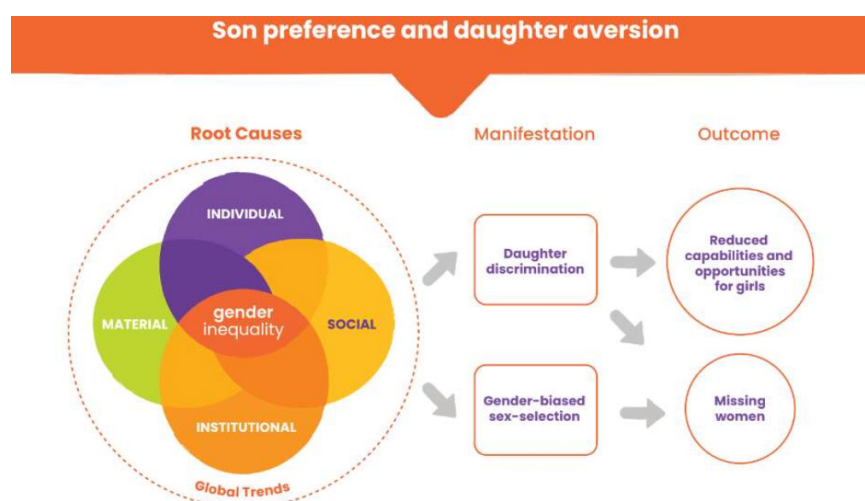
Both behaviors are influenced by the number of children a family has. In families with a higher number of children, son preference can be realized through multiple births, making postnatal favoritism towards sons more prevalent. However, as the number of children decreases to one or two, fetal sex selection becomes more likely.

These two behaviors are interconnected and mutually influential. Son preference after childbirth places females in a disadvantaged position, impacting their education, health, and career development relative to males. This further solidifies stereotypical impressions of lower female status, potentially prompting couples to choose male fetuses over female ones to enhance their societal standing, creating an inescapable negative cycle. Fetal sex selection pushes up SRB, exacerbating marriage squeeze. While it may lead to further violations of women's rights, such as human trafficking, it can also elevate women's bargaining power in marriage, and alleviate the status gap between the two sexes, thereby reducing son preference.

## 2.3 Outcomes

The outcomes of gender-biased sex selection primarily manifest as distorted and elevated SRB, resulting in a long-lasting surplus of males over females — an observed phenomenon known as the "missing females" phenomenon (Bongaarts and Guilmo, 2015). Postnatal favoritism towards son results in the allocation of more resources and opportunities to male offspring, placing girls at a disadvantage in terms of health and overall development. This disparity is particularly evident in abnormally high female infant and child mortality rates compared to males.

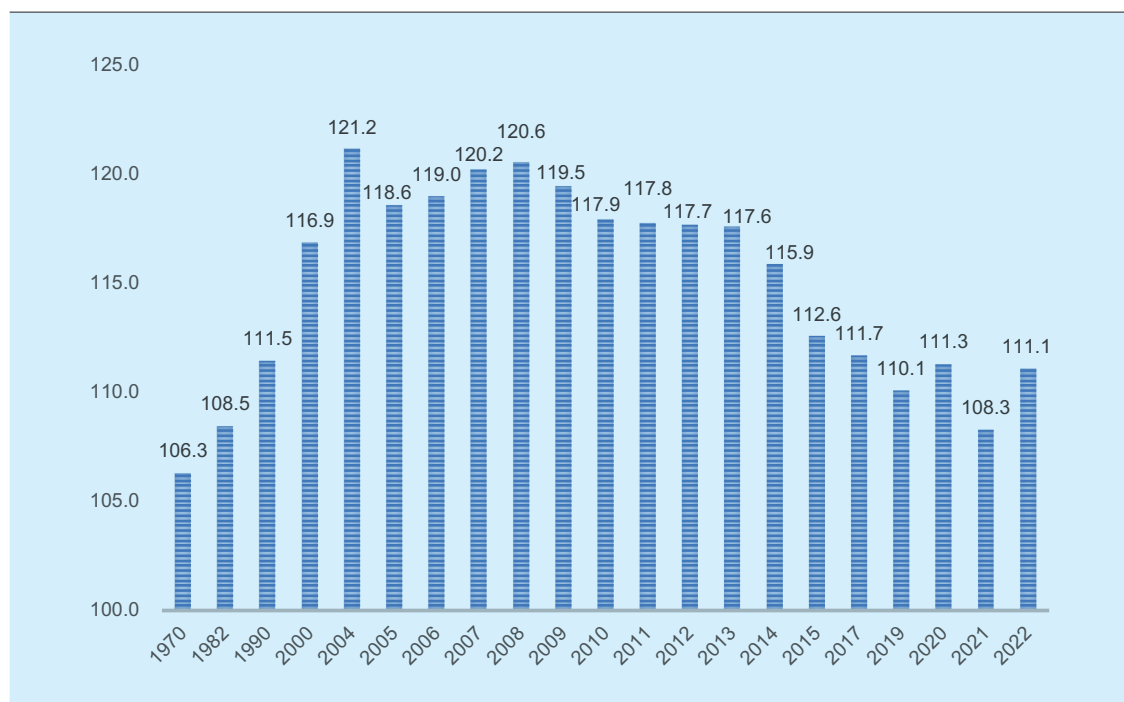
Figure 1: Overarching Conceptual Framework for Son Preference and Daughter Aversion



### III. Analysis of the Current Situations in China

China presently grapples with the coexistence of fetal sex selection and postnatal favoritism towards son. However, the former poses a more severe and far-reaching challenge. China has maintained an abnormally skewed SRB for the longest period globally, exceeding normal range since the 1980s. For more than ten years at the beginning of the 21st century, China consistently recorded the highest SRB globally. After a decline post-2009, the ratio has experienced slight fluctuations, reaching 111.3 in 2020 and slightly decreasing further in 2021, only to rise again to 111.1 in 2022. Despite this slight decrease, the ratio remains elevated, comparable to levels in India and Vietnam.

Figure 2: SRBs in China, 1970-2022



Sources: population censuses; population sampling surveys; Statistical Data on Women and Children in China 2018; Statistical Communique of the People's Republic of China on the Development of Health Undertaking in 2019; "Decade in Numbers" report (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Data for 2022 comes from the 2022 Statistical Communique of National Health Commission on the Health Undertaking.

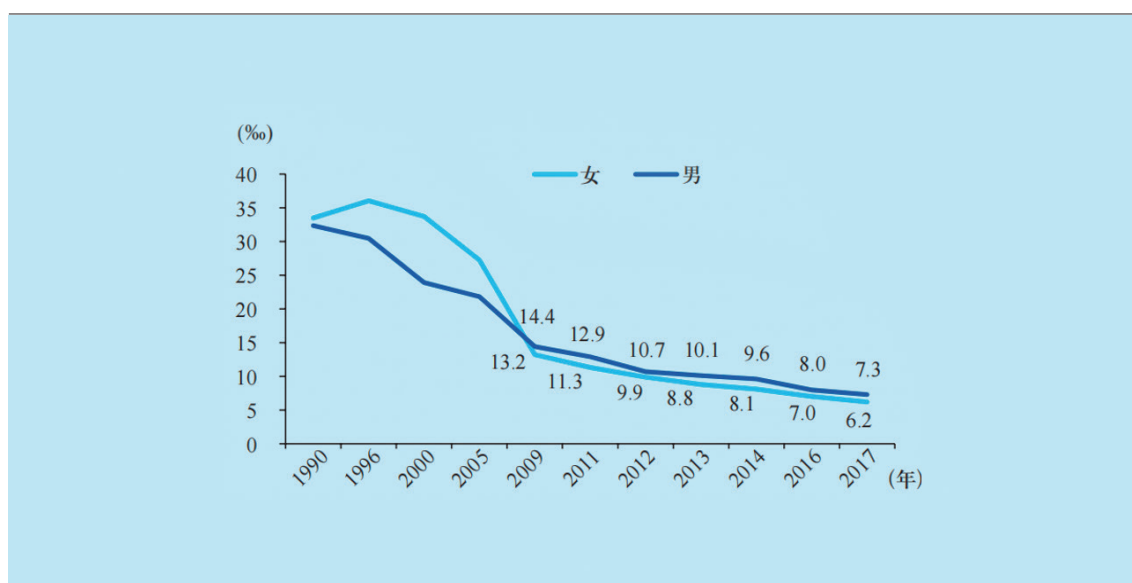
The primary driver behind China's skewed SRB is fetal sex selection. The number of unborn female infants terminated through induced abortions is huge. It is estimated that the cumulative total from 1970 to 2020 reached 25.68 million (Chao, 2021).

Although postnatal favoritism towards son still persists, it is gradually diminishing with economic development and social progress. In the late 1990s, a noteworthy reversal was observed in infant and under-five mortality rates, where females experienced lower mortality compared to males. However, in



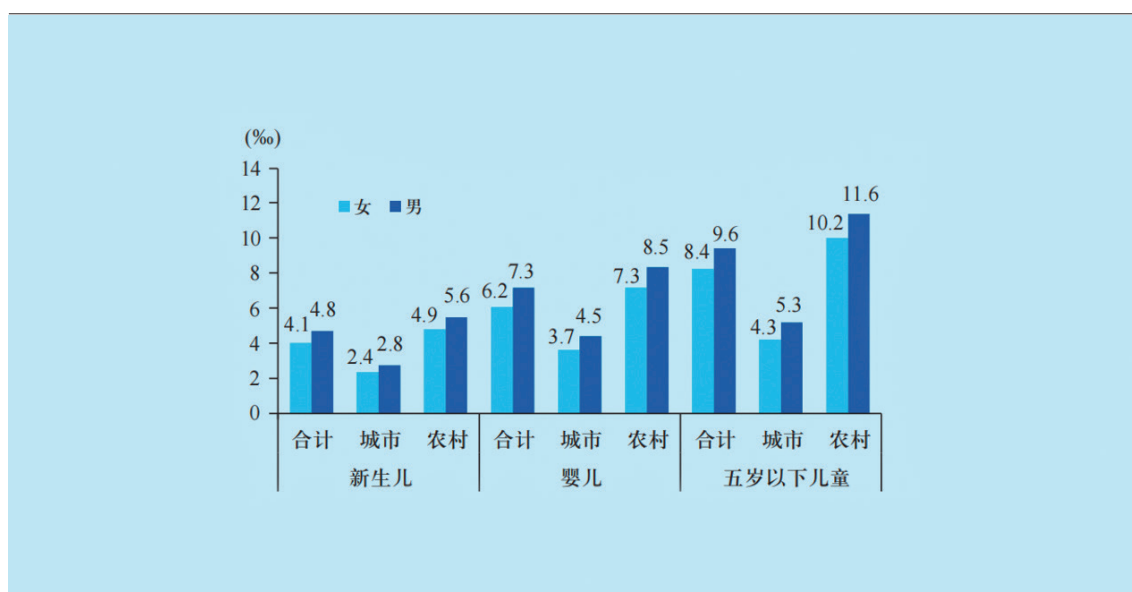
recent years, a return to the conventional pattern has been noted. Since 2009, the mortality rate for female infants has consistently been lower than that for male infants. In 2017, the mortality rate for female infants stood at 6.2‰, surpassing the rate for male infants by 1.1 per thousand points. Specifically, in rural areas in 2017, the mortality rate for female children under five was 10.2‰, exceeding the rate for male children by 1.4 per thousand points. Even in urban settings, mortality rates for children under five exhibited a trend of "lower for females, higher for males" in the same year. In Figure 3 and Figure 4, dark blue line and bar refer to baby boy and light blue ones refer to baby girl.

Figure 3: Infant Mortality Rates by Gender, 1990-2017



Source: National Health Commission

Figure 4: Under-Five Mortality Rates by Area (Urban/Rural) and Gender, 2017



Source: National Working Committee on Children and Women under State Council, National Bureau of Statistics, UNICEF, An Atlas of Social Indicators of Children in China (2018)



Gender differences in vaccination, health examinations, and compulsory education have become insignificant. Almost all girls undergo compulsory education, with higher education even witnessing a phenomenon where female students outnumber males.

Table 1: Gender Composition of Different Education Levels in Various Years (%)

Year	High School		Diploma		Bachelor's Degree		Master's Degree		Doctoral Degree	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
2000	/	/	/	/	/	/	36.1	63.9	24.0	76.0
2002	/	/	47.0	53.0	41.0	59.0	/	/	/	/
2010	/	/	52.4	47.6	49.7	50.3	50.4	49.6	35.5	64.5
2011	/	/	52.2	47.8	50.4	49.6	50.9	49.1	36.1	63.9
2015	/	/	51.4	48.6	53.1	46.9	52.2	47.8	37.9	62.1
2016	/	/	51.2	48.8	53.4	46.6	53.1	46.9	38.6	61.4
2017	/	/	50.8	49.2	53.7	46.3	49.9	50.1	39.3	60.7
2018	50.8	49.2	50.4	49.6	54.0	46.0	51.2	48.8	40.4	59.6

Research indicates that parents do not significantly favor son over daughter in terms of health and education investments during their children's growth stages. Even in families with both son and daughter, parents show no difference in extracurricular educational investments between son and daughter (Liu Wen, Yu Jia, Xie Yu, 2021). However, the study also shows that the allocation of educational resources in agricultural households is still significantly biased towards boys. Moreover, the son preference tradition, deeply rooted in history, remains a prevailing mindset and behavioral trait that is challenging to entirely eradicate at present. Even if it is not reflected in education and healthcare, it is still reflected in numerous nuances in daily life. For instance, there is a heightened emphasis on the nutritional needs of son or intentional efforts to broaden son's experiences. Traditional gender roles also play a role, with a particular focus on cultivating daughter's domestic skills. These behaviors underscore gender distinctions, yet but existing statistical indicators do not include indicators for these behaviors.



## IV. Factors Contributing to Fetal Sex Selection and Son Preference in China

In accordance with the research framework, gender inequality stands as the root cause behind both fetal sex selection and son preference. This inequality manifests across individual, societal, cultural, material, and institutional dimensions, all unfolding within a specific socio-economic context.

China finds itself amid a comprehensive and profound societal transformation spurred by processes of modernization, encompassing economic development, societal shifts, and cultural evolution. This transformation is evident in heightened productivity and changes in production methods, urbanization coupled with increased migration, and the surge of diverse, egalitarian cultural ideologies.

In recent years, China has experienced the onset of a second demographic transition, disrupting conventional expectations regarding marriage and traditional family structures. This is characterized by an increase in divorce rates, delayed ages of marriage, a rise in cohabitation, delayed marriage age and declining marriage rate. The ongoing decline in fertility rates has led to a squeeze on reproductive space, creating a demand for fetal sex determination. The advancement of fetal sex determination techniques has made fetal sex selection feasible. Over the past four decades, population migration and urbanization have elevated the status of women, altered the value placed on children, and reshaped public opinion, thereby diluting the preference for male offspring in rural residents. The shift of industrial development from one driven primarily by manual labor to one driven primarily by technological progress has reduced the gender income gap caused by differences in labor productivity and physical strength in the traditional economic model, thereby reducing the economic basis for gender inequality. Globally, there has been a surge in the cultural tide of free, diverse, and egalitarian ideologies. People are gradually moving away from overly emphasized collectivism and familial values entrenched in traditional beliefs, placing greater emphasis on individual rights and freedoms. These changing values profoundly impact individual reproductive decision-making.

Within this ongoing process, there is a convergence and intermingling of traditional and modern elements. Old traditions and ideologies persist while new concepts and phenomena emerge, continuously infiltrating the realms of established traditions and beliefs. The influence of these two forces varies among different demographic groups. The current primary reproductive age group, individuals aged 20 to 40, has been influenced by traditional values and culture during their socialization, but they are also more receptive to new ideas, reflecting a blend and mixture of tradition and modernity.

Against the backdrop of societal transformation, the factors influencing gender preferences exhibit complexity and contradictions. The table below presents a detailed analysis of the specific factors underpinning the preference for male offspring and how these factors exert influence. The boundaries between personal, social and material factors are often blurred. Thus, the table below attempts to display this overlapping.



Table 1: Analysis of Factors Shaping Son Preference and Influencing the Favoritism towards Son

Category	Intensifying Son Preference	Mitigating Son Preference
Personal Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Identification with traditional gender roles</li> <li>✓ Lack of autonomy for women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Higher levels of education leading to gender equality awareness</li> <li>✓ Ever-improving autonomy over women's bodily rights and reproductive agency</li> </ul>
Social Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The practice of patrilocality prioritizing the care of the husband's parents</li> <li>✓ Men taking on the breadwinner role</li> <li>✓ Women shouldering greater burden of household and child-rearing responsibilities</li> <li>✓ Tradition of sons providing for aging parents</li> <li>✓ The custom of male offspring being responsible for carrying on the family lineage, inheriting the paternal surname, and continuing the genealogical records</li> <li>✓ Shifts in industrial structure reducing reliance on physical labor</li> <li>✓ The prioritization of male offspring in inheriting family wealth</li> <li>✓ Societal pressure and public scrutiny in communities where having a son is considered a matter of prestige</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The practice of living with and caring for both sets of parents after marriage</li> <li>✓ - Equitable division of household duties</li> <li>✓ Rise of individualism and non-interference in others' private affairs</li> <li>✓ Substantial dowries, subject to specific discussions on who actually benefits from the dowry</li> </ul>
Material Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Men enjoying higher economic status</li> <li>✓ Gender-based pay gap and significant income disparities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Equal access to social security for both genders</li> </ul>
Institutional Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ "Selective Two Child Policy"</li> </ul>	<p>Fundamental national policy of gender equality and relevant institutional measures in employment, education, and family</p>

## 4.1 Personal Factors

A global surge in the cultural tide of free, diverse, and egalitarian ideologies has shifted societal values towards a greater emphasis on individual rights and freedom, diminishing the prominence of collectivism and prioritization of family values. People are increasingly tolerant of diverse lifestyles and inclined towards personal pursuits. These shifts in values have led to varying reproductive aspirations within each family, with a reduction in uniformity in the gender preferences for children.

The continuous rise in individuals' levels of education and the ongoing progress of egalitarian ideologies have contributed to these changes. Educational attainment, economic capabilities, and autonomy shape individuals' perceptions of gender differences and roles. These factors also determine whether there is a preference for male offspring -- even to the extent of resorting to aborting female fetuses to have a son within a given number of children allowed. Presently, the younger generation in China has seen a significant boost in their levels of education, and gender equality perspectives are also gaining traction. The traditional goal of perpetuating family lineage is no longer the ultimate objective of young people's procreation decisions. Notably, with the heightened education levels of women, their self-awareness has increased, leading them to reject traditional gender roles and strive for bodily autonomy and reproductive agency. They exercise greater control over decisions regarding childbirth, timing, and the number and gender of children. They are less likely to be swayed by the traditional notion of procreation for the sake of ancestral continuity, as promoted by their husbands and older generations. Additionally, an awareness of the health risks associated with induced abortions and a deep sense of respect and affection for infant lives contribute to a decreased likelihood of women, particularly young women, opting for abortion based on gender preferences (Tang and Hou, 2024).

Still, we must acknowledge that in certain rural areas in southern Fujian and southern Zhejiang, as well as among certain ethnic minorities and older generations, gender stereotypes and a preference for male offspring persist due to differences in education levels and experiences (Shi Beibei et al., 2017), as individuals hold the belief that the practical and symbolic value of male offspring surpasses that of female offspring, and having male offspring brings more prestige. Some couples, unwilling to have more children, are willing to accept the health risks of abortion in order to achieve the goal of having a boy through sex selection.

## 4.2 Social Factors

The prevailing societal practice of patrilocality remains predominant. Patrilocality stands as a significant manifestation of patriarchal authority, resulting in women integrating into their husbands' families after marriage, thereby being unable to contribute to their natal families on an equal footing with their brother(s). In present-day China, patrilocality still constitutes the majority, with smaller families often residing closer to the husband's home. According to Xie Qi's research in 2010, the ratio of couples choosing uxori-locality (residence with or near the wife's family) to patrilocality was approximately 1:7. This underscores the persistence of gender inequality in contemporary Chinese marital residence patterns,



leading to reduced communication between women and their natal families and diminishing the likelihood of providing care for their aging parents after marriage. (Xu Qi, 2013)

Population migration and mobility contribute to the downsizing of family units. Over the past four decades, China has shifted from the sparsely migratory "local China" to the extensively mobile "migratory China." The urban population has significantly increased, fostering a heightened frequency of migration and movement between cities. This has led to the emergence of a "nuclear" lifestyle in urban areas, accompanied by a notable reduction in external interference in private lives. Against the backdrop of declining birth rates and urbanization, family sizes are progressively shrinking, with the separation of parents and children becoming more commonplace. The trend of post-marital "living separately" is on a rapid ascent, with an increasing number of couples choosing uxrilocality. The phenomenon of post-marital "dual residence" has also emerged. Living independently, especially not cohabiting with in-laws, to some extent liberates women from the constraints of being solely identified with their husbands' families. It allows them the freedom to care for both sets of parents, thereby mitigating the preference for male offspring within the family structure (Yang Fan, 2014).

Certain social norms and customs that favor males over females persist, such as the practices of relying on sons for elderly care and having sons inherit family wealth. For instance, the belief persists that only male offspring can carry on the family line, inherit the paternal surname, and continue the genealogical records, with families lacking male descendants considered unable to pass on their bloodline. This tradition significantly influences provinces like Guangdong, Fujian, Jiangxi, Hubei, Henan, and others. With the rise of private enterprises and the resurgence of family-oriented values, some entrepreneurs also desire male heirs to inherit family wealth (Li Huiying, 2012). While legal provisions explicitly dictate equal inheritance rights for sons and daughters, the wealth distribution preferences among the elderly are gradually shifting from the traditional male-centric inheritance to an egalitarian inheritance. Despite legal clarity, in rural areas, among the Han ethnic group, individuals with lower educational levels, those engaged in income-generating work, and those maintaining more economic and caregiving interactions with their children, along with families with four or more children, older individuals who prefer cohabiting with their sons, and those who adhere to the "raising sons to support in old age" concept, there still exists a preference for male-centric inheritance in property distribution (Xiong Xiaoxiao et al., 2020).

The old Chinese saying "raise a son to provide for your old age" is still relevant today, but it has taken on a new form. Studies have found that elderly people with only one child are more likely to prefer to be cared for at home, while those with only one daughter are more likely to prefer to live in an elderly care institution. Elderly people from non-only-child families with sons are more likely to prefer to live with their children, while elderly people with two or more daughters but no sons are more likely to prefer to live at home. This shows that having children still has an effect today. Elderly people with only one child are more likely to be able to live at home when they are old, while elderly people with two or more children raised children in order to live with their children in their old age (Tao Tao and Liu Wenli, 2019). However, the establishment and gradual improvement of the social pension security system have shifted part of the caregiving responsibility from families to society. The reduction in the number of children has made the idea of relying solely on family for elderly care increasingly impractical. As social security becomes a major economic support for elderly care, the demand for sons to provide elderly

care decreases. Conversely, the value placed on daughters for emotional support, companionship, and caregiving increases.

Bride price is a traditional custom in the Chinese marriage system, initially designed to compensate the daughter's family for the investment in raising her and the perceived "loss" incurred by "giving away" the daughter. It functions as a wealth transfer from the families of the groom to the families of the bride. In this context, exorbitant bride prices can increase the economic burden on the groom's family, potentially suppressing the preference for male offspring. The practice of demanding exorbitant bride prices would compel parents to utilize the bride price received for their daughters to offset the bride price paid for their sons, thus leading parents to view their daughters as instruments of exchange and commodities. In current practices, the ultimate destination of the bride price and its amount also exert an impact on the preference for male offspring. In certain provinces, a portion or even the majority of the bride price is returned to the groom's family in the form of dowry, transforming the bride price from a benefit for the daughter's family into a wealth transfer between the groom's father and son, ultimately benefiting the son's family. This diminishes the gains for the daughter's family and eases the economic burden on the groom's family since, small families become the ultimate beneficiaries. (Han Ling 2010).

In the private sphere, males typically hold a dominant position in family power dynamics, often seen as the family's economic pillar and decision-maker. In the context of gender roles where "husband acts as bread-winner and wife as house-keeper," women undertake a greater share of unpaid labor, such as childcare and household chores. According to the "2018 National Time Use Survey Report," women spend an average of 2 hours and 6 minutes on household chores each day, compared to 45 minutes for men. Regarding the time spent on accompanying and caring for children, women spend an average of 53 minutes per day, while men spend 17 minutes (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2019).

### 4.3 Material Factors

With the emergence and widespread application of artificial intelligence and big data, technological advancements have supplanted physical labor, becoming the primary driving force behind industrial development. The digitization of industries has led to changes in production methods and business models, rendering the differences in labor productivity and physical strength less crucial. In non-agricultural sectors, the gender gap in income-generating capabilities has noticeably narrowed compared to traditional agricultural economies, to some extent diminishing the preference for male offspring among people (Yang Fan, 2014).

The equal access of men and women to social security enables women to achieve basic survival and improve their quality of life. It ensures that women, like men, have access to insurance, protection, and support in various aspects such as education, healthcare, reproduction, elderly care, and employment. This mitigates the various forms of gender inequality arising from biased attitudes towards males and females, both at an individual and societal level. Furthermore, it helps elevate the social status of women to a certain extent, promotes gender equality, and diminishes the biased preference for son or aversion towards daughter.



Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that gender inequality still pervades various aspects of public life in China, encompassing labor participation, occupational segregation, promotion opportunities, and wage disparities. Constrained by gender roles, family responsibilities, institutional discrimination, and barriers in the labor market, the labor force participation rate for men in China is around 78%, while for women, it is only 58%. Without any restrictions, there is a significant wage gap between men and women, with women earning an average of 77.5% of men's wage income (Liu Aiyu, 2022). Women are more likely to encounter the "glass ceiling" phenomenon in terms of career advancement compared to their male counterparts. The 2017 Report on Chinese Women in the Workplace by Zhaopin.com revealed that women invest more time in promotion but have a smaller chance of securing promotion opportunities. (Zhaopin, 2017) Moreover, in public sectors or elite workplaces, women are notably underrepresented in leadership positions, with men holding more power and authority.

#### 4.4 Institutional Factors

"Gender equality", a fundamental policy of China, has profoundly established the societal standing of women. The Chinese government has consistently regarded "gender equality" as a basic national policy, leading to the establishment of the National Working Committee on Children and Women under State Council to coordinate and promote women's progress. The All-China Women's Federation, as a mass organization under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), is responsible for implementing the basic national policy of gender equality. The 18th, 19th, and 20th CPC National Congresses have consistently included "adhering to the basic national policy of gender equality, safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of women and children" in their governing principles. The Fourth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee has emphasized the need to adhere to and improve systems and mechanisms that promote gender equality and the comprehensive development of women. This commitment is complemented by the construction of a comprehensive legal framework comprising over 100 laws and regulations, such as the Anti-Domestic Violence Law, Law of Succession, and the revised Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women, thereby safeguarding women's rights and interests. From legal policies to concrete actions, from women's economic and political participation to gender equality within the family, the Chinese government stays committed to ensuring the rights of women and elevating their status across various dimensions.

However, it is imperative to acknowledge that some institutional designs lack a gender perspective. For example, the "Selective Two Child Fertility Policy" implemented in some provinces from 1984 to 2015 had significant implications. While rural areas widely implemented the policy allowing families with only one daughter to have a second child and families with boy are not allowed to have any more children. This recognized the difference between boys and girls and facilitated gender-selective practices within the policy's permissible scope. China's distinctiveness lies not only in the extent of gender imbalance and fertility squeeze but also in the evident "gender blindness" or "gender shortsightedness" of the fertility policy. Hence, during the process of demographic transition, rather than weakening, the preference for male offspring has been legitimized due to the tacit approval of the fertility policy (Yang Juhua, 2012).



Secondly, certain policies, initially beneficial to women, have failed to fulfill their intended purpose or have even had adverse effects due to misalignment with the overall societal context. For instance, the unilaterally implemented policy of extending maternity leave by the government could potentially exacerbate the challenges women face in securing employment. In predominantly male-led households, government-issued childcare allowances might primarily benefit men, indirectly reinforcing women's dependence on their families (Peter, 2018). Women often face the repercussions of "motherhood penalty" after childbirth, including exiting the job market, experiencing reduced positions, diminished career opportunities, and decreased income. The gender-discrepant retirement age system, against the backdrop of women's longer life expectancy compared to men, may lead to the squandering of women's human capital and labor resources, undermining their ability to cultivate long-term advantages in the workplace. These phenomena result in lower labor participation rates and incomes for women, with expectations for their daughters' future earnings falling below those for sons.

## V. Current Status of China's Policy Interventions

### 5.1 Status of Policy Interventions

**Firstly, interventions and governance strategies have been put in place to address son preference.** Over the past few decades, burgeoning socio-economic development has facilitated the dissemination of gender equality consciousness and the modernization of lifestyles, gradually altering the societal-economic foundation underlying the prevalence of son preference. Given that unequal gender relations are a core factor in fostering son preference, governance and interventions targeting son preference primarily revolve around promoting gender equality. **In addition to top-level designs aimed at protecting women's rights, China has conducted publicity, education, and targeted actions, along with enacting inclusive policies, all geared towards mitigating son preference.** Initiatives such as "New Marriage and Childbearing Culture for Every Household" campaign in 1998, the "Care for Girls Action" in 2003, and the "Dream Fulfillment Volunteer Action" in 2014, focus on propagating ideas of gender equality, diminishing son preference, and guiding shifts in public perceptions. Furthermore, China has rolled out three consecutive anti-trafficking plans since 2008 and four consecutive national human rights action plans since 2009 (in which a section dedicated to women's rights has been established), and emphasized the development of female party members in the National Rural Revitalization Strategic Plan.

In inclusive policies, there is a particular emphasis on empowering women and female-led families. In the education sector, initiatives like the "Girls' Education Assistance Program" are dedicated to helping girls from economically disadvantaged families to pursue higher education. In the economic and employment domains, measures have been taken to standardize recruitment practices, promote gender equality in employment, elevate the retirement age for female cadres at or above county and section level in



government agencies and public institutions, as well as for women holding advanced professional titles, and provide labor skills training for families with only daughters. Some provinces are also experimenting with introducing paternity leave to promote male participation in childcare. In terms of property rights, measures are in place to protect the land contracting rights, collective property rights, and equal inheritance rights of rural women. Regarding health, building upon the foundation of basic public health services, there are efforts to expand the “two-cancer free screening” program for rural women, distribute health welfare packages for girls, and increase the frequency of health checkups for girls. In the social security sector, comprehensive efforts are made to merge maternity insurance and basic medical insurance for employees to safeguard the rights of women after childbirth, and, in some provinces, parents of only daughters are given priority in the access to government-run nursing homes.

Secondly, measures are implemented to regulate the use of gender identification and sex selection techniques, with severe penalties for acts that endanger the right to life of female infants. Since 1986, Chinese government departments have repeatedly prohibited and penalized “illegal fetal sex determination and sex-selective abortion” practices in multiple laws, such as the Law on Maternal and Child Health and the Population and Family Planning Law. These practices involve the illegal use of ultrasound technology and other means for non-medical sex determination and sex-selective termination of pregnancy. In practice, specific efforts include reinforcing education and awareness campaigns targeting medical professionals, and exerting strict control over the provision of fetal sex determination and pregnancy termination services. Additionally, China prohibits infant abandonment or drowning in the Marriage Law, prohibits the drowning and other harm to infants in the Law on the Protection of Minors, and regulates adoption practices in the Adoption Law.

## 5.2 Shortcomings in the Current Policies

Over the past two decades, the Chinese government has prioritized addressing the gender imbalance in the newborn population, employing a range of measures and ensuring the implementation of policy initiatives through assessments and accountability mechanisms. These efforts have, to some extent, diminished son preference and facilitated a steady decline in SRB. However, the persistence of son preference and traditional biases towards males over females will not disappear entirely in the short term. As new challenges and issues continue to emerge in tandem with socio-economic development, further discussions and solutions are necessary. Within this framework, this section will now analyze China's current policy interventions from multiple dimensions, including governance path, policy intensity, policy system, and policy implementation.

**Firstly, in terms of governance path, there is a notable emphasis on institutional development for gender equality in the public domain, but progress in advancing gender equality at the individual and family levels has been relatively slow.** Sex selection occurs at the individual and family levels, and despite ongoing institutional developments for gender equality, the phenomenon of son preference remains pronounced in the cultural customs within the “private” domain of families. Firstly, economic development does not inherently drive cultural change, as individuals are embedded in cultural customs,

and shifts in cultural attitudes tend to lag behind. Secondly, decision-making within families is more influenced by social moral norms. While legal systems can promote gender equality in public service provision, it is challenging to penetrate family dynamics and disrupt the unequal distribution of resources within households. Although laws stipulate equal inheritance of family property between sons and daughters, actual practices may vary based on customary norms. In provinces where the preference for male offspring persists, such as Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan, many traditional customs still uphold male biases, such as only sons being eligible for ancestral rites and participation in certain rituals. These instances represent entrenched gender discrimination, often deeply concealed and challenging to address directly. Traditional marital residence patterns and customs related to sons providing elderly care, established over history, cannot be eradicated with a simple government decree.

**Secondly, in terms of governance methods, there is a lack of effective interventions, and the existing measures are not precise enough.** For example, policies addressing gender inequality in families are relatively singular. Although policies promoting male involvement in parenting, such as paternity leave and parental leave, have been introduced, paternity leave is less than two weeks and parental leave for males is only 10 to 15 days per year, not to mention the absence of accompanying incentive measures to encourage men to take the leave. The extremely low uptake of paternity and parental leave also indicates that these policies have not achieved the expected results, failing to genuinely promote equal male participation in parenting. Efforts to promote women's employment and reduce gender discrimination in employment have also been in place for many years. However, they have not fundamentally addressed the fact that enterprises bear the majority of childbearing costs, leading companies to reduce the employment of women to cut costs. Governance of exorbitant bride prices solely focuses on their excessive amounts and advocates for simplified weddings but overlooks the purpose and destination of bride prices. Advancing changes in social and cultural customs requires prolonged, subtle propaganda efforts and cannot be solely achieved by enacting laws or launching specific actions. Some gender equality campaigns are too general, lack specific carriers, and do not cater to the media consumption habits of demographic groups in peak fertility.

**Thirdly, in terms of governance content, there is a slight inadequacy in adapting to the dynamic changes in the situation.** Current society exhibits factors both reinforcing and weakening son preference, a reflection of the mixed characteristics of old and new in the transitional period. New phenomena continue to spring up, encompassing coexisting trends of de-familialization and familism, along with the simultaneous influence of conservative gender views and extreme feminist ideologies. The manifestations of son preference are also continually evolving, displaying diverse characteristics. Meanwhile, various techniques for fetal sex determination and sex selection continue to emerge. Governance measures are somewhat slower to respond, failing to promptly curb factors that promote son preference and not timely encouraging or disseminating new phenomena conducive to diminishing son preference.

**Fourthly, in terms of organizational safeguards, the collaboration mechanism among various departments remains underdeveloped, lacking robust organizational support for mainstreaming gender equality and cracking down on "illegal fetal sex determination and sex-selective abortion."** In spite of the relatively sophisticated network of All-China Women's Federation, advancing gender



equality is not solely the responsibility of All-China Women's Federation. A gender perspective should be integrated into all policies through gender budgeting, gender statistics, and gender assessments. Currently, there are still gender blind spots in many policies, and there are instances of violating women's rights in policy implementation, thus holding back the mainstreaming of gender equality. Moreover, China's SRB continued to decline in the past years. Many believe that with socio-economic development, it will naturally decrease to the normal range and does not entail special interventions. Due to limited manpower, the work of the crackdown on "illegal fetal sex determination and sex-selective abortion" cannot be carried out in many places, and there is a lack of necessary organizational and personnel support for the governance of SRB.

## VI. Policy Recommendations

1. Deepening the understanding of the persistently skewed SRB and recognizing it as a crucial indicator for measuring gender equality and women's development in China. While China's SRB has reduced to the 110-111 range, it remains abnormally high. Given China's vast population, this still translates to the abortion of nearly 100,000 female fetuses annually. The global gender gap index considers SRB as a fundamental health indicator, emphasizing its significance in assessing gender equality. Depriving females of the right to life is more heinous than infringing on their other rights. The ongoing decline in SRB should not lead to a neglect of discussions and governance efforts in this regard.
2. Strengthening interventions at the individual and family levels to further advance gender equality in these spheres. Firstly, we must maintain gender sensitivity and adeptly identify and report instances of gender inequality. Secondly, we must expedite the transformation of traditional customs and practices in areas such as marital residence patterns, elderly support, inheritance, and domestic roles, addressing gender inequalities concealed within families. Thirdly, we must comprehensively review village regulations and community agreements to eliminate gender-unequal content, incorporating assessments related to family civility and gender equality into rural revitalization efforts. Fourthly, we must advocate for increased male involvement in family life across different age groups and family types, fostering care for spouses and unbiased nurturing of children. Fifthly, we must keep a watchful eye on real-life instances of son preference, especially addressing potential discrimination or violence against girls in families with both son(s) and daughter(s).
3. Further elevating the levels of education for women and promoting gender equality in employment and the workplace. Seizing opportunities presented by China's resolve to implement the "Outline for Women's Development in China 2021-2030," "Outline for Children's Development in China 2021-2030," and the "Three-Child Policy", all as fertility support policies, we must introduce family-friendly measures in workplaces, balance employees' work and family life, and reduce discrimination against women in employment, promotion, and post-maternity reemployment. We must promote gender equality education in schools to instill respect for both genders in children and minimize gender stereotypes. Also, Women's access to different forms of employment should be promoted, especially to reduce the impact of childbirth

on women and enable them to enjoy economic independence.

4. Enhancing advocacy strategies. Firstly, we must utilize personal narratives and local stories to narrate the tales of women's development in the contemporary era, avoiding gender stereotypes and constructing an image of modern women as self-reliant and empowered. In coastal provinces such as Guangdong and Hainan, we must identify local female role models, like diving champion Quan Hongchan, who hails from a rural background. Secondly, we must design engaging activities tailored to the 30-40 age group in the locality, such as disseminating information through widely popular channels such as short videos, official accounts, or by leveraging the influence of public figures. The contents should be relatable, emotionally resonant, and focused on real-life scenarios, encouraging interactive participation.

5. Ratcheting up the monitoring of son preference data. We must develop standardized, internationally comparable questions or scales to gauge the extent of son preference, and incorporate these questions or scales into nationwide sample surveys, special surveys, or the population registration system to obtain authoritative and representative data on the current extent of son preference in specific provinces. This will facilitate the formulation of targeted interventions based on the severity and realities in different provinces. The design of indicators should take into account various manifestations of son preference.

6. Innovating governance methods and promoting targeted and effective policy measures. For instance, we can advocate transforming bride prices into the endowment insurance for the elderly parents of the bride or the insurance for the newlyweds. We can also promote the use of the mother's surname, or advocate for a living arrangement where the couple resides with both sides' families after marriage.

7. Keeping cracking down on "illegal fetal sex determination and sex-selective abortion". We must promote multi-departmental participation in governance, with institutions such as the National Working Committee on Children and Women coordinating the integration of resources and assigning responsibilities among various law enforcement departments, thereby setting up a comprehensive coordination mechanism for publicity, law enforcement, and supervision. We must continue our public education on the harms of induced abortion to women's health, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding women's reproductive health. We must remain vigilant against sex selection in the use of assisted reproductive technologies, strengthen customs inspections, and limit accessibility to abortion pills and sex determination techniques and services, particularly in provinces with pronounced son preference along the southeast coast. Also, we must work with media departments such as the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television to ban the dissemination of advertisements or information related to fetal sex determination and induced abortion.

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