




Gender-biased sex selection in Georgia

Context, Evidence, and Implications



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Executive summary

This report proceeds from a growing concern about potential sex imbalances at birth in several East-European countries, following the United Nations interagency statement of 2011 on gender-biased sex selection (OCHR et al. 2011) and the report prepared the same year for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) on prenatal sex selection in Southeast Europe and in the Caucasus. The PACE resolution included a call to public authorities and international agencies to mobilize around the fight against sex selection through systematic studies of existing evidence and policy responses (Council of Europe 2011). This report is the first systematic study of Georgia and aims at providing an in-depth review of existing evidence on possible sex imbalances at birth. It draws on a variety of sources, ranging from existing socioeconomic and anthropological studies to recent statistical and qualitative evidence. In particular, it uses data assembled by a set of qualitative surveys conducted in Georgia in early 2014, as well as original microdata from Georgia's statistics office.

A brief overview of the international state of affairs helps to situate the issue of prenatal sex selection in a global perspective. Many countries in Asia and Eastern Europe have been affected by a rise in the proportion of male births over the last 25 years, primarily caused by growing recourse to sex-selective abortions. The most visible evidence of this is the rise in the average sex ratio at birth (the number of male birth per 100 female births) from 105 to 110-120. The evidence from these countries demonstrates that several factors are crucial for sex selection to take place. These preconditions particularly include the presence of a staunch preference for sons among families, the availability of modern sex-selection technologies and the pressure of low fertility.

Based on documentary evidence, it can be shown that the Georgian situation is in many respects similar to that found in countries with established prenatal sex selection. The features associated with high sex ratio at birth SRB are indeed found in Georgia since the 1990s. First, there has always been a latent preference for boys in Georgian society. This bias derives essentially from the strong need for a male heir felt by many Georgian parents. This insistence on a son is closely linked to the prevailing patrilineal system and to the role of sons in old-age support and in the perpetuation of the family line. In-depth demographic analysis shows that patrilocal coresidence is indeed a typical feature of the country's family system. A complementary analysis of fertility behaviour based on disaggregated census data also shows that the absence of a son significantly increases subsequent fertility. We see for instance that a third of the population has a third child only because of the absence of a son. In other words, Georgian families adjust their reproductive strategies to acquire a son. This fact probably demonstrates better than opinion surveys the central importance of sons in Georgian society.

This underlying need for a son has long been satisfied by a flexible fertility regime in which couples would continue child-bearing until they had a boy. But since the collapse of the Soviet Union, fertility has declined to reach its lowest levels, around 1.5 children per woman. This, in turn, led couples to resort to increased use of birth control, with abortion being the most common method of avoiding unwanted births since the Soviet period. The onset of the transition period accelerated the

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modernization of clinics and hospitals, and the importation of modern equipment since 1991 has dramatically altered the quality of reproductive services in the country. In particular, prenatal sex diagnosis became a routine procedure offered to pregnant mothers by private healthcare units. For the first time in the country's history, the combination of access to ultrasound and abortion has made prenatal sex selection possible and worthwhile, enabling Georgian couples to reduce the size of their families and to select its gender composition.

This report then embarks in a systematic review of the demographic evidence of sex imbalances. This requires a preliminary discussion of the nature and quality of statistical sources, particularly in view of the limited number of reliable sources available for the study of sex imbalances. The only exhaustive source is the 12-year old census data, which only sheds light on the period preceding 2002. The integrity of the birth registration system has severely deteriorated since the mid-1990s and it is only since 2005 that data are both available and of reasonably good quality. Individual demographic surveys are based on samples too small to offer a reliable source for evaluating birth masculinity. The lack of reliable demographic records is one of the principal reasons for the delay in obtaining accurate information about existing sex imbalances at birth.

Once all demographic sources are pieced together, the emerging picture depicts a rise in the sex ratio at birth since the early 1990s. This increase coincides exactly with the country's acquisition of independence, and with the subsequent fall in birth rates and emergence of modern tools of prenatal sex selection. Many Georgians opted for a selective fertility reduction, aimed at reducing the number of births without endangering the probability of having a son. The sex ratio at birth gradually increased from the biological level in 1990 to about 112-114 male births per 100 female births at the beginning of the 21st century. The SRB then plateaued for a few years at this level, but then appears to have begun to reduce. According to the latest figure, it is now below 110 male births per 100 female births. This level is significantly below that of Azerbaijan and Armenia, but it is too early to know whether the decline will continue.

One of the most salient features of the sex imbalance is its link with birth parity. The sex ratio of first and second births is only slightly higher than the normal level. High-order births are characterized by skewed SRB levels often reaching values above 140 male births per 100 female. It is usually after two successive female births that parents opt for a third birth and resort to sex selection. Recent data suggest that first and second births also contribute significantly to the overall sex imbalance at birth. A complementary analysis of the sex ratio also shed light on several differentials across social classes, regions, ethnic groups as well as urban and rural areas. Tbilisi and the more educated regions are notably less affected than rural and more traditional regions in which the presence of sons is a crucial element of family composition. High levels of birth masculinity closely coincide with more intense levels of son preference than previously evidenced. Yet, there seems to be no group in the country completely immune to prenatal gender discrimination.

The large qualitative surveys conducted in 2014 have provided the first extensive source on attitudes and behavior related to son preference. They demonstrate the very limited awareness of Georgian citizens of the presence and extent of sex imbalances at birth in their country. In addition, the surveys demonstrate the persistent need for sons felt across large segments of Georgian society. Participants in these surveys also explain how families try to respond to this demand for a son without overly increasing their family size. Selective abortion after the birth of daughters is, as

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expected, found to be the main tool for beating the biological odds. No other old or modern method of sex selection seems to have any sizeable impact on current birth masculinity. However, this may change as new technologies become available. The justification for this gender requirement is often expressed as an inevitable outcome of the Georgian (or Caucasian) mentality. Established customs and patriarchal norms exert considerable pressure on couples to produce a son. But apart from family traditions, the need for a son is strengthened today by the central importance of the family, which has become during the transition the major buffer institution able to withstand economic and political uncertainties. For many families, the absence of a son may represent increased vulnerability to the kinds of socioeconomic shocks that many in the country have experienced over the last twenty years.

Besides being a radical strategy of gender discrimination, prenatal sex selection will also lead to future population imbalances. The trend observed during the last ten years can be projected into the future and provide an idea of the lasting impact of recent sex imbalances at birth. We have contrasted different demographic scenarios—with or without sex imbalances at birth—and their consequences up until 2050. Demographic simulations assess the mounting effects of skewed sex ratio at birth in the future, demonstrating in particular a growing number of "missing girls" and "missing adult women". While it is difficult account for all potential demographic developments, the different SRB scenarios result in rather divergent evolutions in terms of the sex imbalances among adults—with a potential surplus of young men that only international migration would be able to alleviate.

This report provides the foundation for a larger debate within civil society on the issue of sex selection. It offers the first systematic inquiry of the long-disputed existence of sex selection in Georgia, leading to a reasonable estimate of the extent of the phenomenon and its variations across the country. Most probably, the main source of change will be the transformation of cultural attitudes resulting in a decline in son preference. The more quickly these transformations in gender attitudes take place, the smaller the overall consequences of sex imbalances at birth on Georgia's future demographic structures will be. The report concludes with a list of recommendations that emphasize, in particular, the need for better demographic monitoring of birth masculinity trends and differentials across the country, for more research to understand the changing context of son preference, for widespread dissemination of the findings of this research to raise awareness on the current situation, and for launching a policy dialogue with the main stakeholders regarding ways to address gender discrimination in the country.