**Summary of panel**

**Panel title:** Critical Assessment of Asian Population Policies from a Demographic and Gender Perspective

**Date:** September 9th 2015, 2.00-6.00 pm

**Conference:** 5th Congress of Asian and the Pacific studies 2015

**Place:** INALCO, 65 Rue des Grands Moulins, 75013 Paris (France)

**Name of panel coordinator:** Laura RAHM, PhD Candidate in Political Sociology, CEPED

**List of speakers:**

Ngoc LUU Bich, Institute for Population and Social Science Hanoi;

Georg BLUME, Die ZEIT;

Christophe GUILMOTO, IRD/CEPED;

Bijayalaxmi NANDA, Miranda House Delhi University;

Laura RAHM, CEPED;

Sonya DAVEY, Cambridge University (submitted paper, but did not attend).

**Key-words:** population policies, policy analysis, discourse analysis, demography, sex ratio, gender-biased sex selection, reproductive choices, gender, gender discrimination, feminist analysis, Asia

The information on individual presentations is presented after the French version of the summary.

**Summary of the panel**

The panel *Critical Assessment of Asian Population Policies from a Demographic and Gender Perspective* took place during the 5th Congress of Asian and the Pacific studies. It was held on September 9th, 2015 at the National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO) in Paris. It provided an interdisciplinary, provocative, and relevant discussion on Asian population policies with a focus on declining sex ratio and gender-biased sex selection. The panel brought together experts from diverse academic disciplines (demography, political science, gender-studies, anthropology, etc.) and cultural backgrounds (Asia, Europe). This allowed for a nuanced and multi-faceted view on the issue. It was divided into two sessions: in the first session presentations were held; in the second a round table discussion took place.

*Session A* (2:00-3:45 pm): Laura RAHM, PhD Candidate at CEPED and organizer of the panel, provided with her presentation *Population Policies in Asia: from fertility control to sex selection* an overview and introduction to the topic. She stressed that Asia had witnessed over 5 decades of efforts to lower fertility. By the mid 1970s most Asian countries had policies in place to prevent a “population crisis”. In the early 1980s with lowering levels of fertility a new demographic problem emerged: gender-biased sex selection or selective abortion of female fetuses. Christophe GUILMOTO, senior demographer at IRD/CEPED, provided insights about this phenomenon that has caused over 126 million women missing since the 1980s. His presentation titled *Context and implications of the current demographic masculinization of Asia* improved the audience´s understanding of the relevant factors behind the practice (son preference, low fertility and access to reproductive technologies). He highlighted some policy options that derive from this model (fertility relaxation, legal ban on sex selection, gender equity laws). Bijayalaxmi NANDA, Professor for Gender Studies and Political Theory at Delhi University, talked about *Policies countering declining sex ratio in Asia* highlighting their *contradictions, contestation, and challenges from a syncretic gender perspective*. Indian population policies have at times resorted to coercive means, infringing the reproductive rights of women. Current efforts to balance sex ratios focus on restricting the supply of sex selective abortions and regulating preconception and prenatal diagnostics (PCPNDT Act). Prof. NANDA argued for a more holistic approach of women empowerment. Simply restricting supply will not challenge traditional mindsets and family decisions. She argued for stronger female work participation, affordable housing for women, and gender-sensitive curricula in education.

Ngoc LUU Bich, Associate Professor and Director of the Institute for Population and Social Studies (IPSS) Hanoi gave insights on *Sex Selection in Vietnam: Policies and Effectiveness of Legal Regulations.* Vietnam is a newcomer in terms of skewed sex ratio at birth. While other parts of Asia including China, India and South Korea witnessed a depart of normal level of 105 male per 100 female births already in the 1980s, sex ratio increased much later in Vietnam, in the early 2000s. The country has witnessed a sharp increase in line with strong and proactive government response to curb the phenomena. Prof. LUU pointed out that policies not always reach local levels and are poorly enforced. She noted the political will to adjust policies and close implementation gaps by referring to the new population law that is expected for 2016. However, the new legislation may limit access to abortion, which causes concern among women´s right groups and international agencies. Young Cambridge scholar Sonya Davey had to unfortunately cancel her participation. Her paper titled *Discourse analysis of policy environment on sex selective abortions: Case study from India* provided however interesting findings on the role of the law and the perceptions of Indian policy makers in regulating sex-selection. These findings were discussed during the panel.

*Session B* (4:15-6:00): After a short break, we reassembled for a round table discussion. An additional guest speaker Georg BLUME, journalist and long-term Asian correspondent of Die ZEIT joined the group. A vivid and controversial debate emerged around the central questions of the panel: 1) Did population policies contribute to skewed sex ratio at birth and if so how? 2) Are current policies against sex selection effective in reducing sex imbalances and are they gender-sensitive? 3) What are ways forward for research and policy making? Christophe GUILMOTO claimed that fertility naturally declines when access to family planning is granted. For him government interventions are one among many aspects couples take into consideration when making fertility decisions. Prof. NANDA on the contrary stressed the central role of government and the need for a holistic approach of women empowerment. Prof. LUU pointed to insufficient support for parents in old age (pension schemes) as one cause why parents in Vietnam prefer sons as they are viewed to have higher earning potentials. Georg BLUME talked about first hand experience living with families who had aborted unwanted girls in Madhya Pradesh, India. He concluded that these decisions – whether abortion or infanticide – don´t come easy for families and particular women. A short outcry among the audience resulted, since the line between sex selective abortion and infanticide was not sufficiently drawn. Moderator Laura Rahm facilitated to clarify these and other aspects. The panel discussion also highlighted the South Korea trajectory, which is in fact the only country as of now to reverse sex ratio imbalances. Ms. RAHM shared insights from her extensive field research in South Korea and questioned some of the common beliefs about the effectiveness of policy intervention against sex selection.

Overall the panel provided a multifaceted and interdisciplinary assessment of population policies, which was able to unravel the nuances of the issue in a more holistic fashion than individual disciplines could have done. With the expected joint publication resulting out of the panel, we hope to stimulated a greater debate, inform policy choices and revitalize the policy terrain on how to effectively counter gender discrimination. The panel would not have been possible without the generous financial support provided by the Center for Population and Development (CEPED), Paris. We would like to express our thanks to Etienne GERARD, director of CEPED, and to Michelle COSTE, for her professional administrative support.

**Français - Résumé du panel « *Evaluation critique des politiques de population en Asie dans une perspective démographique et de genre* »**

Ce panel a eu lieu au cours du *5ème Congrès Asie et Pacifique 2015* qui s’est tenu les 9-11 Septembre 2015 à l’INALCO (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales), à Paris. Ce panel était constitué de communications interdisciplinaires stimulantes portant sur le déséquilibre de sex-ratio et la sélection sexuelle prénatale en Asie. Il était constitué d’experts de différentes disciplines (démographie, sciences politiques, études de genre, anthropologie) originaires d’Asie et d’Europe et a offert une vision riche et variée de ce sujet. Le panel était divisé en deux sessions : la première session était composée de communications des différents intervenants et la seconde a pris la forme d’une table ronde avec le public. Il a été entièrement conduit en anglais.

**Laura Rahm**, doctorante au CEPED et responsable du panel, a introduit la première session en présentant une communication intitulée « *Politiques de population en Asie : du contrôle de la fécondité à la sélection sexuelle*». Elle a expliqué que l’Asie est préoccupée depuis 50 ans par la fécondité de sa population et que depuis la moitié des années 1970, la plupart des pays y ont ainsi mis en place des politiques de population pour prévenir une « crise démographique » et diminuer la natalité. Au début des années 1980, alors que la fécondité baisse, un nouveau problème démographique voit le jour, à savoir la sélection sexuelle prénatale par ses avortements de fœtus féminins. **Christophe Z. Guilmoto**, démographe à l’IRD-CEPED, a démontré que ce phénomène est à l’origine d’un déficit d’environ 126 millions de femmes dans le monde en 2010. Sa communication, « *Contexte et conséquences de la masculinisation des naissances en Asie* », a résumé les facteurs à l’origine de cette situation : la préférence pour les garçons, pression due à la baisse de la fécondité et l’accès aux nouvelles technologies reproductives. Différentes initiatives peuvent en découler comme l’assouplissement de la politique de planification familiale, les législations interdisant la sélection sexuelle ou les lois d’équité de genre. **Bijayalaxmi Nanda**, professeure d’études de genre et de sciences politiques à l’Université de Delhi, a présenté une communication intitulée « *Les politiques pour lutter contre la sélection prénatale en Asie* », qui exposait notamment les contradictions, les contestations et les défis à relever dans une perspective de genre. En effet, les politiques de population indiennes ont parfois eu recours à des moyens coercitifs, mettant à mal les droits reproductifs des femmes. Les efforts actuels pour équilibrer la masculinité des naissances portent sur la limitation des avortements sexo-sélectifs et la régulation des diagnostics préconceptionnels et prénataux. La conférencière a plaidé pour une approche plus holistique de l'autonomisation des femmes allant au-delà des seules restrictions d'accès aux technologies pour affaiblir au contraire la préférence pour les garçons. **Ngoc Bich Luu**, professeure et directrice de l’Institut pour la population et les sciences sociales (IPSS) à Hanoi, a présenté « *La sélection sexuelle au Vietnam : Politiques mises en place et efficacité des réglementations législatives* ». Le Vietnam, où les déséquilibres à la naissance sont récents par rapport au reste de l’Asie, s’est distingué par la rapide réponse du gouvernement à ce problème par l’introduction de mesures pour lutter contre la sélection prénatale. Toutefois, les actions politiques mises en place n’atteignent pas toujours le niveau local et ne sont parfois pas appliquées. Si la nouvelle loi de la population prévue pour 2016 vise à adapter les politiques aux besoins, on note que la nouvelle législation risque de limiter l’accès à l’avortement, ce qui provoque l’inquiétude des groupes féministes et des organisations internationales. Enfin, une jeune chercheuse de Cambridge, **Sonya Davey**, qui a dû renoncer à sa participation, devait présenter une communication intitulée « *L’analyse des discours politiques sur les avortements sexo-sélectifs : le cas de l’Inde »*. Celle-ci apporte des conclusions intéressantes sur l’effet de la législation, ainsi que sur les positions des décideurs politiques indiens impliqués dans la régulation de cette sélection sexuelle prénatale.

**Georg Blume**, journaliste et longtemps correspondant du journal *Die Zeit* en Asie et récemment auteur de *Indiens verdrängte Wahrheit*, s’est joint aux panélistes pour la table-ronde constituant la seconde session. Un débat vif s’est installé autour des questions centrales du panel : 1) les politiques de population ont-elles contribué à déséquilibrer le sex-ratio à la naissance et si oui, comment ? 2) Les politiques actuelles de lutte contre la sélection sexuelle sont-elles efficaces et tiennent-elles compte des questions de genre ? 3) Quelles sont les pistes futures pour la recherche et la politique ? Christophe Guilmoto a souhaité minimiser le rôle des gouvernements dans les choix reproductifs des couples, une fois l’accès au planning familial assuré. A l’inverse, Bijayalakshmi Nanda a souligné le rôle central du gouvernement et la nécessité d’une approche holistique de l’autonomisation des femmes. Ngoc Bich Luu a indiqué que l’insuffisance des ressources des parents âgés du fait de l’absence de système de retraite était une des raisons pour lesquelles les parents vietnamiens préféraient avoir des fils en raison de leurs revenus potentiellement plus élevés. Georg Blume a parlé de son expérience de vie avec des familles qui avaient pratiqué des avortements sexo-sélectifs au Madhya Pradesh en Inde. Sa conclusion était que ces décisions, qu’il s’agisse d’avortement ou d’infanticide, n’étaient pas faciles pour les familles, en particulier pour les femmes. Mais certains dans le public ont réagi en soulignant qu’il ne fallait pas assimiler avortement sexo-sélectif et infanticide. La modératrice Laura Rahm a aidé à clarifier ces différents aspects, mettant notamment en exergue le cas de la Corée du Sud, qui à l’heure actuelle est le seul pays à avoir réussi à inverser le déséquilibre de sex-ratio à la naissance. Elle a fait part des premiers résultats de sa recherche en Corée du Sud remettant en question certaines idées reçues sur l’efficacité des interventions politiques contre la sélection sexuelle.

Ce panel, par son approche interdisciplinaire des politiques de population, a permis de mettre en lumière et de nuancer différents aspects de cette problématique de façon plus holistique. Grâce à la publication jointe prévue et résultant du panel, nous espérons nourrir un débat plus large, favoriser des choix de politique mieux informés et plus à même de lutter efficacement contre la discrimination sexuelle.

Ce panel n’aurait pu avoir lieu sans le soutien financier du CEPED. L’organisatrice tient en particulier à remercier Etienne Gérard et Michelle Coste pour leur soutien pour l’organisation et la gestion de ce panel.

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**Information on individual presentations:**

**Population Policies in Asia: from fertility control to sex selection**

Laura Rahm, PhD Candidate at CEPED and GIS Asie member, Paris, France

The presentation provided a theoretical and historic mapping of population policies in Asia. A focus was placed on family planning and the fertility control movement that had spread throughout Asia between 1950s and 1970s. In the early 1980s, as fertility dropped, gender-biased sex selection emerged in some Asian countries. The phenomenon is based on the strong desire for sons and fueled by the availability of modern reproductive technologies (e.g. ultrasound) that allow for prenatal sex determination. The presentation showed now government priorities, instruments and narratives around population issues had shifted over the past 50 years, from earlier coercive policies to a rights-based approach flag-shipped by the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994. The presentation concluded by raising the central questions of the panel and by opening the floor to the guest speakers.

**Context and implications of the current demographic masculinization of Asia**

Christophe Z Guilmoto, senior demographer at IRD/CEPED, Paris, France

The gradual rise of the sex ratio at birth observed since the 1980s in several countries from East to South Asia has challenged the optimistic scenario of Asia's demographic miracle (rapid fertility and mortality decline). As sex imbalances at birth in these countries have grown and are bound to create a large surplus of men in the decades to come, this unexpected demographic episode has also forced policy-makers to reconsider their stand on sex selection. This is an obvious challenge for governments who had earlier aggressively promoted fertility decline and are often averse to intervene in domains such as deeply-rooted family traditions or the booming private healthcare sector.

In this paper, we will provide an overview of the demographic processes that have led to this rise in the sex ratio at birth in several Asian countries and of the underlying sociological context that explains it. We will then discuss some of their likely consequences in affected regions. We will also introduce the debate on the role of policy intervention and its capacity to significantly alter discriminatory gender behavior.

Disciplinary field: Demography

**Policies countering declining sex ratio in Asia: contradictions, contestation, and challenges from a syncretic gender perspective**

Bijayalaxmi Nanda, Professor at Miranda House Delhi University, New Delhi, India

Declining Child Sex Ratio (CSR) due to gender-biased sex selection has been noted throughout Asia. While India and China’s CSR continue to be declining, South Korea has shown improvements in the past decades. Gender-biased sex selection refers to daughter aversion in society. It includes the unethical and illegal use of reproductive technologies like ultrasound, sperm separation etc. followed by selective elimination of females, pre or post-conception. This has led to a skewed CSR where the number of girls born is much less than boys. This paper will strive to examine the various policies that have been unfurled in these countries to counter gender-biased sex selection. The primary aim is to examine the elements of gender sensitivity in the policies and determine whether they contribute to gender equality. The theoretical framework of measuring gender equality and pointing out to the contradictions, contestations and challenges in these policies will be drawn from the rich and variegated range of feminist perspectives. A syncretic feminist approach would empower policies to counter population issues such as gender biased sex selection.

Disciplinary field: Sociology and Political Science

**Sex Selection in Vietnam: Policies and Effectiveness of Legal Regulations**

Ngoc Luu Bich, Director of IPSS at National Economics University, Hanoi, Vietnam

The sex ratio at birth (SRB) started to rise in Asian countries like China, Korea and India in the late 1970s when new technologies like ultrasound and amniocentesis allowed parents to know the sex of the fetus. In Vietnam, the increase of the SRB appeared in the late 20th century when the results of the 1999 Census showed that 107 boys per 100 girls were born. This problem became more urgent when SRB increased to 113.8 in 2013 and 112.2 in 2014.

Vietnam anticipated the problem by introducing legal regulations prohibiting sex selection with the 2003 Population Ordinance. The 10-year evaluation of the Population Ordinance shows that many people do not even know about the prohibition of sex selection in this legal document. It was not until 2013 that provisions for administrative sanctions of fetal sex selection were issued. Nonetheless, the disclosure of the fetus’ sex when performing ultrasound services at health care facilities is still popular and widely practiced. Currently, Vietnam is developing a 2016 Population Law that looks to close existing policy gaps and potentially restrict access to second trimester abortions. This presentation will highlight "gaps" in policy implementation and the limited effectiveness of legal regulations.

Disciplinary field: Political Demography

**Discourse analysis of policy environment on sex selective abortions: Case study from India**

Sonya Davey, Gates Cambridge Scholar pursing an MPhil at the University of Cambridge, UK. Sonya will be attending medical school with a focus on women’s advocacy in global healthcare.

The concept of sex selection and sex-selective abortion has been vastly studied in India. However, little analysis has been conducted on recent policies surrounding son preference and sex-selection. This study aims to investigate discourses surrounding key policy stakeholders including Indian government officials, activists, academics, and medical practitioners.

Additionally, the study aims to analyze the impact of policy implementation against sex-selection. Employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, this study (1) analyzes policy discourse through public statements in newspapers, reports, and semi-structured interviews with key policy actors and (2) attempts to quantify the impact of policies at regional and state levels through correlations between state policy implementation and sex ratios.

Disciplinary field: Anthropology

**Contact:**

For questions regarding the panel, please contact:

Laura Rahm

PhD Candidate in Political Sociology

CEPED UMR 196 (Université Paris Descartes - Ined - IRD)

19 rue Jacob, 75006 Paris, France

Email: laura.rahm@ceped.org; laurarahm@hotmail.com

Tel: + 49 163 3487134

Skype: laura.rahm