

Panel Proposal

- 5th Congress of Asian and the Pacific studies 2015 -

Dates: 9 - 10 - 11 September 2015

Proposed panel title: Critical Assessment of Asian Population Policies from a Demographic and Gender Perspective

Name of the coordinator: Laura Rahm, PhD Candidate in Political Sociology, CEPED

List of speakers: Ngoc Luu Bich, Institute for Population and Social Science Hanoi; Sonya Davey, Cambridge University; Christophe Guilmoto, IRD/CEPED; Mallika Kaur, UC Berkeley; Sang-lim Lee, KIHASA; Bijayalaxmi Nanda, Miranda House Delhi University; Laura Rahm, CEPED

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

Summary of the panel (300 words):

Population dynamics in Asia have become the center of attention across the globe. The result has been an urgency to examine the trajectory of population policies in Asia which are characterized by a shift from earlier coercive policies to a rights-based approach flag-shipped by the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994. The aim of the panel is to critically assess population dynamics in select Asian countries from a demographic and gender perspective. To what degree have policies shaped the demographics of their countries; to which extent do the policies promote gender justice? The panel brings together researchers from across countries and disciplines with a focus on declining sex ratio and gender-biased sex selection.

The organization of the panel will be scalar, from the macro level of historical context to the micro level of local implementation. It will start with a theoretical and historic mapping of population policies, followed by an analysis of the recent demographic trends and masculinization of sex ratios. The panel will then critically assess particular policies and programs to counter sex selection from China to Vietnam, highlighting the significance and positioning of gender in them. An important aspect will be learning from the Korean "miracle", the only country that was able to balance skewed sex ratio at birth. Furthermore, discourses around gender-biased sex selection in India will be analyzed in order to capture dissonances, especially emerging from policy makers. The panel finally examines population policies from a feminist perspective - both in a local and global context.

The panel unifies diverse methodological tools (normative, historical, quantitative and qualitative in nature) from various disciplines (demography, anthropology, law, sociology, political science) across different cultures and countries (China, India, South Korea, Vietnam). By doing so, we provide a multifaceted, scalar assessment of population policies, which will be able to unravel the nuances of the issue in a more holistic fashion than individual disciplines can. It will stimulate greater debate, inform policy choices and revitalize the policy terrain on how to effectively counter gender discrimination.

Information on individual presentations:

Introduction to the panel

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

A short introduction will be given that aims to:

1. Provide a brief historic review of the trajectory of population policies in Asia with a focus on family planning, fertility control and the emergence of gender-biased sex selection fueled by access to modern reproductive technologies;
2. Provide a theoretical and conceptual framework that illustrates how population policies and socio-demographics interact (mapping of the state and society interstices);
3. Introduce the keynote speakers of the panel that come from different academic disciplines (demography, law, political science, anthropology, etc.) and cultural backgrounds (European, Asian, American); all experts in the field of gender-biased sex selection and policy assessment.

Personal note: I am very excited that the panel has attracted such a wide range of leading international experts. It shows the great demand for assessing population policies linked to demographic masculinization. In order to allow sufficient time for presentations and discussions, I would kindly like to ask if there is the possibility to split the panel in 2 sessions (one morning and one afternoon session).

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

Title of presentation: Declining Sex Ratio. Unpacking the Korean Miracle

Sang-lim Lee, Head of the Population Research Center, Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs (KIHASA)

South Korea is the only country in the world that was able to reduce skewed sex ratio at birth from high levels of 115 male per female births in the early 1990s to normal levels by the mid 2000s. This presentation will put the Korean "miracle" of declining sex ratios in the larger context of Korean population policies. It highlights the rapid demographic changes South Korea underwent since the early 1960s: namely rapid fertility decline, followed by two decades of skewed sex ratio at birth, and more recently ultralow fertility levels. Particular emphasis will be placed on the population policies introduced in the late 1980s and early 1990s to counter gender biased sex selection, and roles of key policy agents. Policies will be assessed from a demographic and gender perspective. What role did population policies (like sex selection bans) really play and to what extent were demographic changes linked to extrinsic factors, such as socio-economic development, changes in gender norms, or women empowerment etc. By reviewing 30 years of government data and statistics on gender preferences and fertility behavior, much of which is available only in Korean, we will unpack the Korean miracle of declining sex ratios. The critical assessment also allows unraveling which type of policy recommendations (if any) can be given to other affected countries that still struggle to counter prenatal gender discrimination.

Disciplinary field: Demography and Political Science

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

Sonya Davey, Gates Cambridge Scholar pursuing 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

Bodies Beyond Borders: Challenges to Developing a Global Feminist Perspective on "Choice"

Mallika Kaur, Professor at University of California, Berkeley, USA

Several parts of Asia have witnessed abortion, often synonymous with feminism, become an unlikely but fierce agent of patriarchy: sex-selective abortions have warped ratios against girls. Asian women have thus witnessed increased scrutiny as the world focuses on "missing girls." Now, Asian women in diaspora are also facing increased paternalism and policing, as sex-selection abortions are invoked to curb their reproductive rights.

This presentation will first discuss the issue of sex-selective abortions in Punjab and how the legal and non-legal responses remain largely ineffective because they view 'sex selection' as a shameful problem rather than a critical symptom. The paper will then turn its feminist lens to the reoccurring attempts in the U.S., including the legislation proposed in January 2015, to ban sex-selective abortions, and its impact on Asian women in the diaspora who must contend with the additional intersection of race with gender in a context with a strictly binary understanding of "choice."

Beyond borders, Asian women's rights continue to be threatened as their bodies continue to be viewed as domains of control. Forwarding the discussion on gender justice requires moving beyond the fixation on controlling women's bodies—by their own communities as well as communities that view these 'others' as needing protection.

Disciplinary field: Law and Gender

Contact:

For questions regarding the proposed panel, please contact:

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