

Report on
International Conference on
Female Deficit in Asia: Trends and Perspectives

Furama City Centre, Singapore
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Co-Organised by
CEPED, CICRED and INED, Paris, France

Hosted by
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In a context of rapid social and economic change, characterized most notably by rapid fertility decline and economic growth, several Asian countries are witnessing an exacerbation of discrimination against women from conception to adulthood. As a result, an almost simultaneous female deficit has emerged in regions of Asia over the last three decades, leading to a gradual masculinization of the population with no equivalent in past demographic history.

The conference held in Singapore offered participants the opportunity to discuss policy and methodological issues related to this growing female deficit in Asia by confronting issues and methods developed in a large variety of regional settings, from the Caucasus to Indonesia. The conference received special support from UNFPA, India, and was the first of its kind. It brought together about 58 participants from some 16 countries including China, India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, France, Netherlands, Canada, Sweden, USA, Vietnam, Georgia and Singapore. 27 papers were presented.

On the first day, Gavin Jones (ARI) and Brenda Yeoh (Asian Metacentre) welcomed the participants to this busy conference, which had actually received many more proposals than could be accommodated within the three days of the meeting.

There were five main sessions focusing on the different aspects of female deficit:

- * trends and differentials in gender discrimination
- * methods and models
- * Local perspectives
- * impact of gender imbalances
- * policy aspects (round table)

The first session focused on the trends and differentials in female deficits observed in Asian countries, from the Caucasus Region to Southeast Asia. What are the long-term trends in age-specific sex ratio levels? Seven papers from this session presented the situation in various countries and highlighted some of the common features observed across Asia. While some of the papers serve as an introduction to various recent data on falling sex ratios, some other papers focused on lesser known areas or data sources. There is obviously still a relative paucity of comparable statistics that can be used to describe and monitor the components of the current masculinization at work in Asian countries.

The second session (six papers) was devoted to methods used in accessing the extent of and trends in female deficit. The estimation of missing girls requires a systematic approach to its proximate determinants such as under-registration issues, measurement of illegal practices such as sex-selective abortions, estimation of excess mortality from survey data, etc. Spatial and statistical analysis of sex ratio differentials was also shown to offer a promising field for methodological developments.

The third session focused on local perspectives to gender differentials and combined demographic tools with a more qualitative approach of discrimination in its local context. Several research sites in China and India were selected leading to the presentation of eight different papers. This was to some extent the richest session as discriminatory practices can only be interpreted with reference to local kinship system and social and economic transformations. Many obscure or hidden dimensions of global deficit appear obvious once confronted to field-based enquiries in local settings.

Five papers were presented during the fourth session on the consequences of female deficit, which are felt already when sex discrimination has been going on for two decades or more, resulting in several gender imbalances in the marriage market. Papers presented in this session mostly referred to migration mechanisms as a complex response to recent changes in the sex composition. However, it was felt that the study of the impact of gender discrimination among adults is incomplete and should be further explored by systematic studies in local affected areas in countries such as China or India.

The final session was organized as a round table around three papers on the policy response in China and India to demographic masculinization, with reference to government policies and UNFPA campaigns. Scholars and policy analysts had an open discussion on the capacities and limitations of strategic interventions to curb discriminatory practices in different regional settings. It was followed by a regional synthesis prepared by some participants and a more general synthesis of the lessons learnt from the conference as presented by the organizers.

A volume is now being prepared under the editorship of the conference's organizers. The large number of papers presented (available for download on the CICRED website) and their quality illustrate to a large extent the work already done on the topic.