News from Asia *continued*

Sex selection and family patterns across Vietnam

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IN GENERAL, while there are many local explanations for the emergence of prenatal sex selection, a more solid interpretative framework points to the combination of three factors: supply, demand and fertility decline. The supply dimension pertains to the introduction of affordable prenatal diagnosis technologies such as ultrasound, which allow parents to opt for abortion according to the gender of the foetus. The demand factor corresponds to the biased gender valuation system, usually manifested by a strong preference for sons over daughters. The preference for male offspring is clearly linked to the preponderance of the patrilineal kinship system and to living arrangements, farm labour, inheritance systems, and support to the elderly. The third factor pertains to the declining fertility level since the proportion of parents with no son automatically increases when the average number of children reduces.[1]

In Vietnam, it was only after the diffusion of the modern ultrasound technology in the country in 2005 that there was a rise in the sex ratio at birth – from 105 male births per 100 female births, to 112 today. As it is elsewhere, the sex ratio at birth in Vietnam tends to be higher among the higher socioeconomic groups and for higher order births. But what is more striking in Vietnam is the very unequal distribution of birth masculinity across the country: some regions such the Central Highlands still have sex ratio levels close to normal, while the masculinity of birth is more pronounced in the Red River Delta (Table 1). In fact, some rural areas of the Red River Delta exhibit elevated levels of sex ratios at birth, above 120 male births per 100 female births.

A preference for sons

What is the exact influence of the 'demand factor', i.e., the intensity of the preference for sons across Vietnam? The actual need for sons might be an important determinant of observed regional differentials in sex ratios. In the minority-inhabited mountainous areas, the frequency of sex selective abortions may have been inhibited because fertility is slightly higher and modern technology less accessible. In contrast, the lowland areas near the border with China and the Mekong delta region have relatively moderate fertility levels and a dense network of small towns and cities with many private healthcare clinics. As such, in these areas the supply factor and fertility decline may not explain much of the observed variations in prenatal sex selection. Son preference, which has been noted by anthropological studies of gender arrangements in Vietnamese families and by demographic surveys about the ideal Vietnamese family composition, is probably the main cause for these differentials. However, anthropological studies cannot provide a complete and measurable picture of the situation across the country because the studies are based on provinces close to Hanoi, an area much more influenced by Chinese Confucian traditions than the rest of the country.[2] There are almost no comparable anthropological studies on gender systems in other parts of Vietnam. More generally, qualitative studies fail to provide any measurable indicator of the actual *intensity* of son preference.

Absence of a son

For this reason, we decided to closely examine the fertility behaviour of Vietnamese couples and to look in particular at the impact of the absence of a son on family formation. The rich sample from the 2009 census (3.7 million households) provides an adequate dataset for exploring several dimensions of family systems. We observed that families that failed to have a son after two live births were indeed more likely to have a third child than families that already had a son. This variation is a clear testimony to the desire for a male offspring felt by many Vietnamese couples. Looking at estimates of son preference (see table below), we can confirm that the absence of a son has a sizeable impact on reproductive behaviour: it increases on average the probability of having another child by almost 60% in Vietnam. Yet, this son preference appears significantly larger in the Red River Delta, where sonless women are 2.6 times more likely to go for another pregnancy than other women.

How is the preference for son linked to family patterns and the strength of 'patriarchal' values? If we follow David Haines's hypothesis,[3] which stressed the unique position of kinship in Vietnam as a mixture of influences, we should expect to see traces of both East and Southeast Asian patterns. Using the same 2009 census dataset, we examined the post-marriage arrangements of children in order to differentiate between strictly patrilineal systems – when married sons and their wives often co-reside with their parents for a few years or more after marriage – and more bilateral or uxorilocal systems – in which married daughters and their husbands may also stay with their parents. The proportion of sons among co-residing married children served as a simple indicator of the strength of patrilineal and patrilocal practices (see table below). This analysis leads us to realize the vast gap between the strictly patrilineal North and the rest of Vietnam. Some provinces in Central Vietnam are even characterized by an equal share of sons and daughters residing with their parents after marriage. This is a typical 'Southeast Asian' feature, but it remains mostly undocumented by most anthropological research on contemporary Vietnam.

The Cham bias towards girls

The Cham people in Ninh Thuận province in central Vietnam is an interesting example of a mix influence kinship pattern. The Cham now represents only 12% of the population in this area, but it used to be the dominant group till the beginning of the 19th century. The majority of the Cham practice the *Bani* religion, which combines Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist influences. In their villages, most of the newlywed couples reside with the wife's family until they can afford to build new houses. According to the elders, "the tradition here is that the woman gets married to the man, not the other way around". It is the future bride's parents who initiate the marriage proposals. "If the family accepts, they bring him home to celebrate the wedding, and then he stays. He becomes a member of his wife's family clan." In addition, the youngest daughter in Cham families takes on the same responsibilities as the eldest son in Kinh families of the Red River Delta region. Commonly, youngest daughters and their husbands will reside with their parents to take care of them until they die and then inherit the 'main house', where the family altar is, to take responsibility for ancestor worship. In such situations, the last daughter will therefore inherit most of the family properties: house, animals, possessions, and farming lands.

Thus, we find in this area, marked features of gender preference, but biased this time towards girls. For instance, it is considered essential to have at least one daughter, preferably as the first child. It is seen as an 'insurance' and it reduces the pressure on the gender of future children. Interviewed mothers and fathers with only sons attest to being teased by friends and family during parties for not having daughters. However, many mentioned a solution to the absence of a female offspring: adopting a girl – usually a niece from the wife's family clan – who "can inherit property and take care of [them]." These daughters are either legally adopted and raised by the couple, or designated in a testament as recipient of the main house for worshipping. "I have many nieces, so now I don't have a concrete plan, but when I get older, I will consider whom I will give everything to", explained the father of 3 sons in An Phước village.

Another interesting feature of this society relates to the terminology used to designate grandparents and grandchildren in the Vietnamese language: 'nội' means interior/domestic and 'ngoại' means exterior. For the Kinh people, *'ôngbànội'* and *'cháunội'* refer respectively to paternal grandparents and grandchildren. But among Chams, these terms are used to name maternal grandparents and grand children instead. These are clear signs of a matriarchal kinship system. Yet, they are offset by several patrilineal practices. For instance, the family name is only transmitted from father to son, clan leaders are exclusively men and while ancestor worship is performed for family members in the wife's lineage, it is the husband who is in fact in charge of the rituals.

Gender and family systems

This brief exploration of Vietnam's situation has many implications. First, from a strictly methodological viewpoint, it shows that demographic information in the form of census micro-data can be exploited for in-depth analysis of gender and family systems, complementing anthropological sources and providing a somewhat unique systematic mapping of regional differentials. Second, son preference is indeed not at all uniform in its manifestation across Vietnam as the situation in Ninh Thuận illustrates. The close correspondence between kinship patterns, gender systems and sex imbalances demonstrates the deep-rooted character of sex selection, and could suggest that there may be other patrilineal societies where prenatal sex selection may emerge in the future when other conditions are met, especially after a decline in fertility.

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Regional characteristics of Vietnam's macro-regions[4]

Macro-regions	Sex ratio at birth	Son preference in fertility behaviour	Patrilateral co-residence
Northern Midlands and Mountain Areas	108.4	+69.0%	87.6%
Red River Delta	115.4	+161.0%	85.9%
North and South Central Coastal Areas	109.8	+60.0%	78.7%
Central Highlands	105.6	+30.0%	59.7%
South East	110.0	+38.0%	58.9%
Mekong River Delta	110.1	+43.0%	71.2%
Total	**110.6**	**+62.0%**	**75.2%**

Sex ratio at birth: male births per 100 female births (2009 census). The normal level should be close to 105.
Son preference in fertility behaviour: the impact of the absence of a son on subsequent fertility (average effect at various birth orders measured on 2009 census data). For instance, +69% means that parents without a son are 69% more likely to have another child than parents who already have a son.
Patrilateral co-residence: percentage of sons among married children co-residing with their parents (measured on 2009 census data). In bilateral kinship systems, this percentage is close to 50%.

Notes

1 UNFPA. 2012. *Sex Imbalances at birth. Trends, Differentials and Policy Implications,* United Nations Fund for Population, Bangkok; http://tinyurl.com/c3vmmar
2 UNFPA. 2011. Son Preference in Viet Nam: Ancient Desires, Advancing Technologies. Qualitative Research Report to Better Understand the Rapidly Rising Sex Ratio at Birth in Viet Nam, United Nations Fund for Population, Ha Noi; http://tinyurl.com/cugvk8a
3 Haines, D. W. 2006. *The Limits of Kinship: South Vietnamese Households (1954–1975),* Northern Illinois University: Southeast Asia Publications
4 Guilmoto C. Z. 2012. 'Son preference and kinship structures in Viet Nam', *Population and Development Review,* 38(1): 31-54