

Perils of baby sex preference

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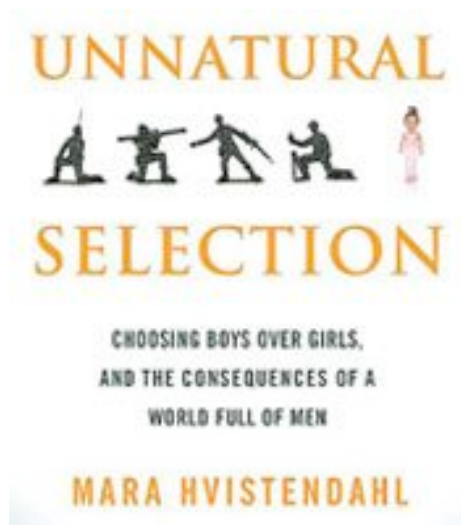
(Image: Keren Su/Getty)

In her book Unnatural Selection, Mara Hvistendahl argues that when a culture prizes baby boys over girls, the result is a dangerously lopsided world

IN SOME places, there's no greater danger to a baby girl than her own parents. For decades now, in swathes of Asia and pockets of eastern Europe, millions of female fetuses have been aborted and infants murdered for no other reason than their families wanted boys. In *Unnatural Selection*, science journalist Mara Hvistendahl explores the scale of this shocking phenomenon and questions why it exists.

It's a gripping read. Expensive dowries, honour and maintaining the family name are the main drivers behind the increasingly skewed sex ratios, but Hvistendahl makes clear that these factors alone don't capture the complex cultural and social environment that has created such a huge problem. It's so widespread, she writes, that by 2013 there will be six Chinese men for

every five Chinese women. And the same will be true in parts of India by the 2020s. She meticulously unpicks the alarming statistics in other countries too, from South Korea as far west as Albania and Armenia.



Coming from a family of sisters with our roots in India, as I do, Hvistendahl's book was a particularly disturbing read. At every stop in her journey she comes across entrenched sexism and violence against women, manifesting itself not only in infanticide, but also in tougher lives for women in regions where they are outnumbered. Rather than scarcity making them more valued, they increasingly fall victim to trafficking, kidnap and forced marriage.

Much of the book is also devoted to the part played - mostly inadvertently - by the west. She argues that US policies to control population growth in Asia in the 1970s and 1980s, aggressively implemented by organisations like the World Bank, created an abortion boom that exacerbated the problem. By 1977 in Seoul, for example, doctors were performing a record 2.75 abortions for every birth, partly because couples choosing to have smaller families wanted only boys.

Hvistendahl is slightly less convincing, though, when she starts drawing parallels between uneven sex ratios and mass social unrest. Although it's true that millions of bachelors who can't find wives might drive up crime figures, there isn't really enough evidence that this will spark testosterone-fuelled wars or some kind of societal breakdown in quite the ways she suggests. The reality isn't so bleak. Indeed, there is some comfort to be drawn from the fact that South Korea, which once had a depressingly poor birth ratio of 117 boys to every 100 girls, has returned to a near-even balance now that the country is wealthier and more women are entering the workplace.

Economic development does appear to help. But the story doesn't end there - advances in genetics may allow the wealthiest among us to select for desirable traits in the future, such as height, good looks or intelligence. For parents who think this might be a good idea, Hvistendahl's book beautifully explains how trying to conceive the "perfect" child will only lead to a more imperfect world.

Book Information

Unnatural Selection: Choosing boys over girls and the consequences of a world full of men
by Mara Hvistendahl

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