From gender inequality to prenatal sex selection: comparative analysis of son preference in Hai Duong and Ninh Thuận provinces, Vietnam

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1. Background

In Vietnam, deeply embedded Confucian patriarchal values continue to shape gender perception by both men and women. Chinese colonization from 111 BC until the mid-tenth century has had a profound impact on the culture and tradition of Vietnamese families (Long et al., 2000; Dalton et al., 2001, p. 7 cited in Hoang, 2005). Confucian ideology determines patriarchal authority in the family while the responsibility for maintaining family happiness is vested in mothers and wives. Accordingly, their roles are domestically-oriented: serving their husbands, bearing and rearing children, doing housework and looking after parents-in-law in their old age. Women are therefore thought to become men’s dependants throughout their life (Tran, 1996 cited in Long et al., 2000). Women are required to practice so-called Confucian “four virtues” (Tứ Đức) of hard work, beauty, fidelity, and passivity as well as the “three obediences” (Tam Tòng) to fathers, husbands and sons (Long et al., 2000, p. 32 cited in Hoang, 2005). Thus, Vietnamese Confucian tradition holds that a woman belongs firstly to her father, secondly to her husband, and lastly, upon her husband’s death, to her oldest son.

The strong preference for sons in Vietnam is grounded in this patrilineal and patrilocal kinship system. A husband often insists on producing more children until a son is born. Sons are essential to their parents because they carry on family line, the family name, perform ancestor worship, and take care of parents in their old age. Both men and women also prefer sons to daughters because they improve a woman’s status in her family and confirm a man’s reputation in the community, including his perceived masculinity. In contrast, men and women with no sons often suffer from strong pressure within the husband’s family, and experience humiliation within the community (Hoang, 2005). The phenomenon has resulted in an increasing trend of prenatal sex selection - using ultrasound to know the sex of their fetus, and to the abortion of unwanted female embryos.

The persistence of male preference (- the “demand factor”) combined with decreasing fertility rate (- the “squeeze factor”) and greater access to modern technology (-the “supply factor”), has resulted in a rapid increase in sex ratio at birth imbalance (Guilmoto, 2009). Sex ratio at birth imbalance (SRB) started increasing in 2005 from a normal biological level (105 male births per 100 female births) to a national sex ratio of 112 boys per 100 girls in 2011. The SRB exceeds 115/100 in 18 provinces out of 63 in 2011, eight provinces have an SRB higher than 120/100 (source: Vietnam Government Office for Population and Family Planning).
Considering the above, it has been concluded that the rising proportion of male to female births is directly linked to prenatal sex selection.

2. Methodology

The research into SRB imbalances relies on both statistical assessments and a sociological understanding of gender roles in the country in question. This research associates statistical analysis of the 2009 Population and Housing Census of Vietnam data, to a qualitative study carried out through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions in two specific sites:

1) Hai Duong province where the SRB has one of the highest imbalances in the country (121.3 in 2011\(^1\)),

2) Ninh Thuận\(^2\), a province with one of the largest concentrations of Cham people in the country, where SRB imbalance is becoming more pronounced (110.8 in 2009 compared with 113.4 in 2011).

The study includes 10 in-depth interviews and 4 focus group discussions per province, in both rural and urban areas, with women and men in childbearing age who have either sons or only daughters, as well as 4 in-depth interviews with heads of the ward and clan leaders.

3. Main findings from the survey in Hai Duong province

a. Son preference

- The root cause for son preference appears to be based on the ancestor’s worship, which can only be performed by male heirs. Different rules regulate the worship, such as dates, locations, and hierarchy of the different branches within the clan. Moreover, a woman who gets married will not be part of her family clan anymore. Therefore, only sons can inherit land from their parents, and a couple without a son will be considered to have ‘built a house for charity’.

- On the other hand, both men and women interviewed explained that daughters take good care of their parents – if not better than sons - when they are old or sick. Two interviewed women migrated respectively 3 and 5 years to work in Taiwan and help their parents financially. However, it seems almost inconceivable that parents would live with their married daughter and son-in-law.

- Couples who only have daughters get teased within the community and their extended family. Men are asked to sit at the ‘lower tables’ during parties, and women are

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\(^2\) The survey will be implemented in January 2013
‘encouraged’ to have a third or fourth child, and to try different methods to produce a son. Such methods include food diets (beef and beans), following the Chinese calendar which explains when to get pregnant in order to have a son, according to the age of the mother, or traditional medicines, mixed with rice wine, which will strengthen the ‘Y sperms’.

- Interviewed women feel pressured to produce a son ‘for’ their husband, and fear he might have sex with another woman in order to ‘deposit a son’.

- According to the census data, the sex ratio of first births - which are important in the relative contribution of different parities - is high. Indeed, several couples explained that having a son first is considered ‘insurance’ for grandparents to have at least one grandson, in order to continue the family line and perform the ancestor’s worship.

b. Prenatal sex selection

- The awareness raising campaign about prohibition of sex selective abortions and SRB imbalance consequences somehow seems to take into effect, as all the people interviewed have some knowledge about this issue, through mass media, Women’s Union and Farmer’s Union clubs (clubs for women/men with 2 children only, with daughters only, clubs to have a ‘happy family’, etc). Nevertheless, prenatal sex selection is considered to be a ‘family affair’.

- People working in population and family planning centers at a district and communal level, and heads of the ward share the idea that writing down the prenatal sex selection prohibition in the village charter (huong uoc), as well as making it a criteria to be labeled as a ‘cultural family’ (gia dinh van hoa), will help to prevent prenatal sex selection, and thus SRB imbalance.

- All the women interviewed who have been pregnant in the last eight years, as well as clients met in private clinics, confirm that doctors in these structures tell the sex of the fetus without any hesitation, despite the legal framework which prohibits any disclosure of the sex.

4. Regional disparities linked to different kinship systems?

Analysis of the census data showed that there are some regional disparities in birth masculinility. It appears to be higher in the North than in the South, and still non-existent in most of the Mekong Delta provinces. We postulate that these disparities depend on the intensity of son preference, which is linked to kinship systems, whether patrilineal or bilateral. Thus, two provinces are under study; if the kinship system in Hai Duong province appears to be strongly patriarchal, hence the necessity to produce a male heir who will perform the ancestor’s worship and carry on the family name, we postulate that the situation in Ninh Thuận province is somewhat different, as this province has one of the largest concentrations of Cham people in the
country, an ethnic group with a bilateral kinship system. Therefore, the need for sons is less prominent, as married daughters still belong to their family clan.

We used an indicator to show ‘revealed preference’ for sons: we calculated the parity progression ratios at parity \( n \) (i.e. the proportion of women with \( n \) births who have an additional birth) according to the sex of the previous children. If we look at parity 2, the results show that 35 per cent of women living in Hai Duong province have a third child when they have two daughters, whereas only 6 per cent of women with at least one son have a third child. However, in Ninh Thuân province the difference is much smaller: 46 per cent of women with two daughters have a third child, against 38 per cent of women with at least one son. These variations in fertility progression demonstrate different intensities in son preference, that we will intent to illustrate with a qualitative survey conducted in January 2013.

References


HOANG, L. A., “Gender relations, intra-household power hierarchies and social norms in migration decision-making in rural Vietnam”, University of East Anglia, UK, 2005


