

‘We lose 1,400 girls a year. Who will our boys marry?’: Armenia's quandary

Sex selection may have been outlawed, but a shortage of women threatens the very survival of a country where boys are traditionally seen as an investment and girls as a loss

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Suzanne Moore in Yerevan

@suzanne_moore

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Children play at a school in Gavar, Armenia. In their class, there are twice as many male pupils as females. All photographs by Jodi Hilton for the Guardian

Sometimes it seems there are so many ways to destroy women that the methods become invisible to us. There are some women you will never see because they will never be born.

Amartya Sen talked of “missing women” in his famous [1990 essay](#) because of technologies that enable prenatal sex selection.

Most people are aware this happens in [China and India](#), but I am in Armenia, talking to a nervous woman in her early 30s. We are in the eastern region of Gavar, which is second only to China in the number of female foetuses that are aborted. Here, 120 boys are born for every 100 girls.

The woman, who has two young daughters, tells me her girls say: “Let’s go to church to light a candle to get a little brother.” They want a boy, she wants a boy, her husband wants a boy. This is why she has had nine or 10 abortions – she is not sure exactly, and is vague about a “vascular condition”, given as a reason to terminate the pregnancies.

She droops slightly when asked for more detail. “If I get pregnant again and it’s a girl ...” She trails off. She is not sure what she will do. She has heard of doctors in the capital, Yerevan, who could help her. Sex selection, for that is what we are talking about, [became illegal in Armenia](#) in 2016.

The woman says that if she gets rid of the next baby, she will not be sad. “My husband will be sad. He accuses me of eliminating all these children.” He is away for more than half the year working in Russia, as many Armenians are. “But,” she says defiantly, “in some years my girls will leave. I will be all by myself.”



A mother with a history of sex selection, photographed at a social centre in Gavar, Armenia

This is one part of what propels prenatal sex selection – a need to ensure the family lineage, and the belief that boys will provide in old age. Girls grow up, marry and leave. They move in with the husband’s family. Boys are an investment. Girls are a loss. This I hear repeated over and over again. It is hard to reconcile with the modern women – doctors, journalists and politicians – who are everywhere in Yerevan. Some of the biggest pressures on women to have sons come from other women: mothers-in-law.

Dr Hrachya Khalafyan, who runs the Sevan medical centre in Yerevan, was shocked when he first heard about Armenia’s sex imbalance. “We all were,” says Sevan, who instructs his staff that there can be no terminations on these grounds.

If the trends are not reversed, Armenia will have lost almost 93,000 women by 2060

Where once they used to have seven or eight children, women in Armenia today [give birth just once](#), on average. In the past, if the last child was a girl, she might be called the Armenian word for “Enough”, as if no one could be bothered to name her. Doctors now encourage women to celebrate carrying a girl, yet I hear the stories of what happens in “other places” where women are not allowed to be told the sex of their child at the 12-week scan. There are ways to find out, apparently, such as the pocket in which the doctor puts their pen – left for a girl, right for a boy.

Armenia really needs its missing women. “We lose 1,400 girls a year. In the long term who will our boys marry? How will we consolidate the Armenian

nation? We are only 3 million people. We have no right to such losses. There will be no mothers to give birth to girls,” says Khalafyan.



Dr Gayane Avetisyan performs an ultrasound on a pregnant patient at the Republican maternity hospital in Yerevan

The sex imbalance

“Son preference” is a euphemism, maybe, but a necessary one. Sex selective abortion has been steadily growing across the Caucasus and Asia (Armenia has the third highest rate in the world, behind China and Azerbaijan) and it will continue to happen as fertility levels drop. When green campaigners talk of population growth being the world’s biggest problem, they need also to factor in gender. When people have fewer children, they want boys.

Data collected in Armenia in 2010 started to bring home the sex imbalance: there were 115-120 boys being born for every 100 girls. Anecdotally, people talked of school dances in which boys were forced to dance with one another as there were so few girls.

In 2011, the UN population fund began its advocacy work around sex selection, and in 2017 it launched a global programme to prevent gender-biased sex selection. After initial resistance, the Armenian government backs the UNFPA campaign. The country is already seeing results. In 2014, the ratio was 114 boys for 100 girls; last year, the figure stood at 110 boys for every 100 girls.



Sunday mass at the Etchmiadzin cathedral, the mother church of the Armenian Apostolic church and a holy pilgrimage site for Armenians

Efforts by the UNFPA and humanitarian agencies such as Save the Children are proving successful because they look at the specific conditions that lead to pre-natal sex selection: contraception, emigration, men as the key breadwinners, inheritance, family lineage and conflict.

Conflict was an issue raised by the headteacher of a school in Gavar, where the classes have more boys than girls. Araxia Verdanyan says the impact of the war hangs over its people. Armenia is at war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. “Our soldiers are killed on a daily basis. We need girls to reproduce. We need boys to defend the border,” she says. Here a boy child is always another soldier.

Ministers explain the political strategy to raise the profile of girls. Contraception and health are promoted as priorities. All key professionals are trained in giving a positive message about girls. And a woman has three days to change her mind after she has requested an abortion at 12 weeks.



Varduhi Vardumyan from Tavush region, with her three day-old baby at Republican maternity hospital in Yerevan. The child, as yet unnamed, is her second daughter

I go to a puppet show, Ne’s Journey, performed by the Armenian Center of International Union of Puppeteers, in a high school where national folk tales are given a twist. It is the girl’s wisdom that saves the day. Girls defeat the demons and save themselves, too. The charismatic puppet master, Armen Safaryan, tells his young audience: “God decides whether we are girls or boys. Respect and love are contagious. I speak from travel and experience, and I treat men and women as the same. We are just beginning and we need our girls. We must end this murder.”

‘The word is your weapon’

Some of the most impressive work I see being done is in a seminary, by an amazing psychologist called Inga Harutyunyan. In a classroom in the Gevorkian seminary in Vagharshapat, in the complex of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, eager young priests are trained. These are highly educated young men.

Harutyunyan has established a relationship with the church. Privately, she tells me about ancient Armenian matriarchies and goddesses. But the key is in the way she talks to the priests. “You are clergymen,” she tells them. “The word is your weapon,” and then she gives them texts from the Bible that emphasise respect for women.



Inga Harutyunyan leads a psychology class in the town of Vagharshapat, where she teaches priests how to communicate with families about the value of girls

Getting the church on side, along with the government and civil society is quite something. This is the strategy in Armenia: to work with everyone; not to alienate any group, but to promote the value of girls and women right across the culture. And it's working.



Vahan Asatryan, of the International Centre for Human Development, says fertility rates are the key issue

"We are not 'girl averse', as they are in India," says Vahan Asatryan, a researcher at the International Centre for Human Development. He suggests the answer to ending sex selection lies in looking at the issue in specific contexts. How it works in Nepal, for instance, is different from what's happening in Vietnam.

He talks about fertility rates as the big issue. Everyone stresses this is about not being for or against abortion. Abortion, he repeats, is simply the mechanism by which sex selection happens. The right to abortion is an achievement of civilisation. Armenia allows termination up to 12 weeks without restrictions.

The introduction of ultrasound in the mid-90s has exacerbated sex selection across all the former Soviet republics, however.

The key to change is situating this debate at the very heart of Armenian society, to ensure the survival of the nation.

If the trends are not reversed, Armenia will have lost almost 93,000 women by 2060. That's an awful lot of potential mothers. Everyone talks of extending choice and opportunity for women. Interestingly, "no one is blamed for what is happening ... Everyone is part of the solution," says Asatryan.

"We can't change gender stereotypes in two years, but we can look at the data. We can talk about human rights."



Hasmik Margaryan with her daughter Vika, born four days earlier, at the maternity ward in Sevan

At a conference to advance gender equality and combat prenatal sex selection in Tsaghkadzor, a ski resort, community workers, activists and doctors from across the country share their experiences. Many men blame women for the sex of their own children, not realising that the Y chromosome responsible for the male sex is transferred from the man's genome.

I have coffee with Margaret, a young women who works with children with disabilities. She believes everyone has a right to life.

She loves all children, she explains. She tells the women she works with: "You know when you want your husband to buy you an expensive handbag and you persuade him to? Well surely you can do that with a baby? Talk to him, tell him you want to have a girl. Persuade him. Tell him you want her to live."