

Gender imbalance in China poses threat

By Justin McCurry and Rebecca Allison

LONDON: China, the most populous nation on Earth, could find itself dealing with the combined frustrations of as many as 40 million single men by 2020, because its one-child policy is creating a shortage of female babies.

In an unusually frank speech on China's looming demographic crisis, Li Weixiong, who advises the country's political consultative conference on population issues, said a cultural preference for boys was creating an artificial disparity between the number of boys and girls that represents "a serious threat to building a well-off society".

Mr Li said the dearth of women would lead to a dramatic rise in prostitution and the trafficking of women. "This is by no means a sensational prediction," he said.

The search for love is leading traditionally staid Chinese men down unfamiliar paths. There are reports of men placing ads in major newspapers begging women to respond. If the ads are anything to go by — with some ads emphasizing the possession of a good bathroom — the way to a modern Chinese woman's heart is a spacious apartment and a decent salary.

Wealthier men are reportedly taking their search beyond China's borders, a risky tactic given that many Chinese households have been less than welcoming to foreign brides.

Unmarried men with less money often have no choice but to turn to illegal brokers, who dupe rural women into moving to the city with bogus job offers.

The widespread introduction of ultrasound testing has enabled a much larger number of Chinese couples to choose to abort female foetuses in the hope that the next pregnancy will produce a son.

Mr Li said the gender ratio had stayed relatively normal up until 1982 — two years after the Chinese authorities imposed the one-child rule — at 100 girls born for every 108 boys. But by 2000, the ratio had shifted significantly to about 117 boys to 100 girls.

The disparity is even bigger in rural areas, where the boy-to-girl imbalance is estimated to be as high as 130 to 100.

Abortions are not the only cause of the imbalance. There is alarming evidence that the intense pressure on couples to make sure their only child is a boy has prompted a resurgence of female infanticide, despite official attempts to stamp out the centuries-old practice.

Rural families are said to be particularly tempted to kill female offspring, such is the pressure to produce a child capable of coping with the physical demands of farming and prevent cash-strapped farming households from being plunged even deeper into poverty.

In some cases, according to reports, other girls are hidden from the authorities, or die at a young age through neglect.

Even in urban areas, boys are generally preferred because they are regarded as more able than girls to provide for their families, care for elderly relatives and continue the family line.

The government, stung by accusations from child welfare groups that it is turning a blind eye to the practice of girl-killing, has allowed some provinces to grant couples permission to have more than one child provided they pay a fine to register each extra birth.

In some villages, local officials have placed dozens of posters bearing the message: "Daughters are as good as sons!"

Despite growing evidence of the enormous social cost of their one-child policy, officials in Beijing insist there are no plans to relax the measure, which they regard as the most important weapon in China's battle to keep its population below 1.6 billion until 2050.

Statistically, the policy has had some success. The communist authorities say it has prevented well over 300 million births since it was introduced in 1980 and is fulfilling its initial aim of ensuring that China can combat rural poverty and improve standards of living across the board.

According to the UN, China's population stood at 1.3 billion in 2003 but independent estimates believe couples with extra children are hiding them from census authorities, meaning the actual figure could be as high as 1.5 billion.

As the country's economy continues to grow and transform at an unprecedented rate, pressure to relax the policy looks likely to intensify if Mr Li's worst-case scenario of social unrest, exploitation of women and crime turns out to be correct.—
Dawn/The Guardian News Service.

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