

[up against the wsj]

The Outrage of the Political Manipulation of “Missing Girls”

By John Miller

The Moral Outrage of “Missing” Girls

A feminist author inadvertently makes a powerful case against abortion.

Maria Hvistendahl struck a nerve recently when she released her new book, “Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys Over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men.”

Ms. Hvistendahl frets that misreading her feminism may lead to the “feminists’ worst nightmare: a ban on all abortions.”

The great irony is Ms. Hvistendahl’s great horror: her discovery that the men and women trying to build [an] America [that protects the unborn] are the people most likely to agree with her that 160 million girls aborted simply because they weren’t boys is a “moral outrage.” — *Wall Street Journal* op-ed by William McGurn, July 5, 2011

Millions of “missing girls” in Asia no doubt represent a moral outrage. But that hardly makes the case against abortion rights, which is what *Wall Street Journal* op-ed writer William McGurn concludes from his misreading of journalist Maria Hvistendahl’s disturbing new book on the topic.

Abortion coupled with fetal monitoring technologies has been used in recent years as an instrument for sex-selection that left Asia with 163 million fewer girls in 2005 than would have been alive if the continent’s ratio of boys to girls at birth was in the normal range, according to estimates by French demographer Christophe Guilmoto.

But the missing girls predate those new technologies. When Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen first reported 100 million girls missing from the population of developing countries, in 1990, the culprit was not abortion but instead infanticide and the neglect of girls deprived of their fair share of family resources.

Sen’s analysis of the question began with the observation that in some respects women and girls fare better as they become better educated, work more outside the home, and gain property rights, all of which are associated with economic development. But he also noted that economic development is quite often accompanied by a relative worsening in the rate of survival of girls.

That’s where Hvistendahl picks up the argument. She emphasizes that with economic development comes declining fertility, as large families are no longer the asset they had been in an agricultural era. Then, following demographer Guilmoto’s lead, she adds that son selection is

most common in rapidly developing countries with declining fertility rates.

Her conclusion is that son selection—driven by patriarchal bias and an economic calculus rooted in the disempowerment of women—substitutes for those additional births. Families select sons because with daughters they endure discriminatory inheritance rules and have a child with less access to gainful employment.

China offers a case in point. In 1980 the sex ratio at birth in China was 106 male births for every 100 female births, just at the top of the normal range of 104-106 to 100. But with fewer girls than boys surviving, the sex ratio for the entire population was distinctly abnormal. During the 1990s the sex ratio at birth climbed, reaching 120 to 100 by 2000 and remaining at that level as of 2004, adding to the millions of missing girls. No doubt the advent of ultrasound services played a role. But that's not the whole story. Simultaneously, with the acceleration in economic growth after 1979 plus the introduction of laws limiting family size, fertility rates over this period declined dramatically. At the same time, under economic "reform," China abandoned its earlier socialist commitments, leaving families to assume more of their educational and health expenditures. And smaller families meant Chinese parents had fewer children to support them in retirement.

The result of China's economic transformation, then, has been to underscore the pre-existing bias in favor of boys. Legal abortion and the spread of ultrasound services may have provided the means for more aggressively pursuing sex selection than in the past. But to find the motive, you have to look at social welfare policies and declining fertility rates in the context of rapid economic transformation—and at patriarchal oppression and the persistent economic disadvantages of women.

Outlawing abortion, as Hvistendahl emphasizes, is quite different from prohibiting sex selection. To curtail women's rights by making abortion illegal would disempower women, increase the economic incentives to select boys, and reinforce patriarchal biases—all outcomes likely to perpetuate the moral outrage of missing girls, not end it.

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Sources: Maria Hvistendahl, *Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys Over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men* (New York: Perseus, 2011); Christophe Guilmoto, "The Sex Ratio Transition in Asia," *Population and Development Review*, September 2009; Amartya Sen, "More Than 100 Million Women are Missing," *New York Review of Books*, December 20, 1990.

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