Compendium of Good Practices

Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Every Girl Counts
Addressing Son Preference and Gender-Biased Sex Selection

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

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<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<td>GBSS</td>
<td>Gender-biased sex selection</td>
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<td>ICPD</td>
<td>International Conference on Population and Development</td>
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<td>MTM</td>
<td>Men Talking to Men</td>
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<td>NAP</td>
<td>National action plan</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organization</td>
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<td>SRB</td>
<td>Sex ratio at birth</td>
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<td>UNFPA</td>
<td>United Nations Population Fund</td>
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<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children's Fund</td>
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<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
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Introduction

Son preference refers to families’ preference to have sons or to invest more resources in sons as opposed to daughters, often because of social and gender norms that attribute a lower value to girls. Gender-biased sex selection (GBSS) is an extreme manifestation of son preference. It can take place before a pregnancy is established, through modern techniques of sperm and embryo sorting; during a pregnancy, whereby families use sex-selective abortion to avoid having girls; and after birth, through infanticide or by discriminating against daughters through neglect, abuse and exploitation.

Son preference, the undervaluing of girls and gender-biased sex selection have individual as well as demographic consequences. Women may endure intense pressure from family members and communities to submit to entrenched social and gender norms to give birth to male children, often facing gender-based violence if they do not. Women pregnant with girls may be forced to undergo repeated abortions, with debilitating effects on their mental and physical health. Sex imbalances at birth will also have demographic consequences as societies create a surplus of men, which could lead to increased international migration for marriage, human trafficking, crime, gender-based violence and political unrest in severely affected regions as the society becomes masculinized (WHO, 2011).

Available statistics in a number of countries indicate that the sex ratio at birth (the number of male births per 100 female births) has been increasing since the 1980s above the standard biological level of 105 male births per 100 female births (UNFPA and World Vision, 2012). This can be seen especially in Asian countries such as China, India, South Korea and Viet Nam, as well as in the South-Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus regions. The sex ratio at birth (SRB) rose in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia almost simultaneously and continued in parallel for several years, reaching 115 in less than a decade in Armenia and Azerbaijan, though plateauing at a slightly lower level in Georgia. At present, Azerbaijan has now reached levels comparable to those of China, India and Viet Nam. As a result, the region is already missing an estimated 171,000 girls since the early 1990s, and there has been a growing surplus of men. Although a skewed sex ratio at birth is an indicator of gender-biased sex selection, it does not account for the prevalence of postnatal sex selection. Projections indicate that the latter will increase as countries progress through fertility transitions and engage in prenatal sex selection, and as skewed sex ratios at birth naturalize (Bongaarts and Guilmoto, 2015b, p. 427).
The total annual numbers of newly missing females attributable to elevated sex ratios at birth and excess mortality are presented in Figure 1. The decline in SRBs projected by the United Nations translates into a substantial decrease in the number of missing female births, which is expected to fall from 1.7 million in 2010 to an estimated 0.6 million in 2050. In contrast, the number of excess deaths is expected to increase substantially (Bongaarts and Guilmoto, 2015a, p. 258).

Research suggests that gender-biased sex selection occurs in a diverse range of countries, driven by harmful social and gender norms including son preference and daughter discrimination (UNFPA, 2020d). The practice has far-reaching negative consequences, as it endangers the health and rights of women and girls, perpetuates a culture of gender inequality and jeopardizes sustainable social development and stability.

There has been increasing awareness of and mobilization to end gender-biased sex selection in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region in the wake of a number of key milestones. The issue was raised in a resolution adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2011) and in a joint UN document on preventing gender-biased sex selection published the same year (WHO, 2011). Further, investment by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and other international agencies in data analysis, in-depth research and policy dialogue created new opportunities for knowledge-sharing, evidence-based interventions and technical assistance (UNFPA and World Vision, 2012). These developments have improved knowledge and fostered multi-stakeholder policy dialogue and
engagement among the media, policymakers, religious institutions and other civil society actors. In partnership with or supported by UNFPA, the governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have built a strong body of knowledge and research that can support further evidence-based policy and programmes.

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action, adopted by 179 countries in 1994, establishes a commitment to "eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girl child and the root causes of son preference, which results in harmful and unethical practices regarding female infanticide and prenatal sex selection" (UNFPA, 2014). More recently, the European Parliament Committee on Gender Equality and Women’s Rights and the Committee on Development adopted an important resolution on the 25th anniversary of the ICPD (European Parliament, 2021). The resolution reiterates the need to achieve zero gender-based violence and harmful practices against women, girls and youth and the importance of challenging harmful gender norms and stereotypes in order to achieve Sustainable Development Goal No. 5, on gender equality, and further advance the agenda concerning sexual and reproductive health and rights. These global efforts highlight the movement towards ending son preference and gender-biased sex selection as issues of global concern and provide an impetus for interregional collaboration and standard-setting.

UNFPA has been addressing the issues of son preference and gender-biased sex selection for more than 20 years. UNFPA’s 2020 State of World Population report indicates that more than 140 million females are considered missing today as a consequence of both prenatal and postnatal sex selection (UNFPA, 2020a). Given the importance and urgency of the issue, UNFPA recognizes son preference and gender-biased sex selection as harmful practices that should be eliminated (UNFPA, 2021).
Global programme to end son preference and gender-biased sex selection

In the first global effort of its kind, UNFPA partnered with the European Union in September 2016 to launch the Global Programme to Prevent Son Preference and Gender-Biased Sex Selection in Asia (Bangladesh, Nepal and Viet Nam) and in the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia). The Global Programme brought together governments, research institutions and civil society partners to generate evidence of and enhance knowledge about the magnitude of the problem and its root causes, and to develop human rights–based and gender-transformative responses.

In 2022, the Global Programme was rebranded as the Every Girl Counts strategy. This new programme identity reflects UNFPA’s focus on changing social and gender norms as the most relevant and sustainable pathway to ending harmful practices, including gender-biased sex selection. The new strategy fundamentally shifts the programme focus from an issue with demographic impacts to one that places harmful gendered and social norms at its centre. That is, UNFPA will now provide global technical support to countries where a strong son preference is reflected in extreme levels of discrimination against daughters but hidden by a normal sex ratio at birth. Today, besides the 6 countries that UNFPA supports through the Global Programme, UNFPA also monitors the situation of women and girls in another 18 countries in South-Eastern Europe and South and East Asia where son preference is observed (Chao and others, 2021).

The Every Girl Counts strategy aims to end son preference, gender-biased sex selection and daughter discrimination as a pathway to improving development outcomes for women and girls and achieving gender equality. Implementation of the Global Programme in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia has led to several successful examples of innovative and collaborative good practices in the region. This compendium of good practices in the South Caucasus identifies and highlights some of these practices for further scaling and replication in the future.
Sex ratio at birth: Male births per 100 female births (the main proxy indicator for prenatal sex selection).

Harmful practices: Discriminatory practices committed regularly over such long periods of time that communities and societies begin to consider them acceptable. Harmful practices are a violation of human rights that put women’s and adolescents’ sexual and reproductive health and rights at great risk.

Gender-transformative approach: An approach that tackles the root causes of gender inequality and reshapes unequal power relations; it moves beyond individual self-improvement among girls and women towards redressing the power dynamics and structures that serve to reinforce gendered inequalities.

Human rights–based approach: A conceptual framework for the process of sustainable development that is normatively based on international human rights standards and principles and operationally directed at promoting and protecting human rights. Under such an approach, development plans, policies and processes are anchored in a system of rights and corresponding obligations established by international law, including all civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, and the right to development.

Gender-based violence: Includes physical, sexual, mental or economic harm inflicted on a person because of socially ascribed power imbalances between males and females, and includes the threat of violence, coercion and deprivation of liberty, in public or in private.

Demographic resilience: The ability to address demographic change by analysing population dynamics, understanding their implications and developing policy responses that are based on evidence and human rights.

Bodily autonomy: The ability and right to make one’s own choices about one’s own body and future.

Empowerment of women and girls: A process by which women and girls gain power and control over their own lives and acquire the ability to make strategic choices.

Women’s economic empowerment: Increases women’s access to economic resources and opportunities, including jobs, financial services, property and other productive assets, skills development and market information.

Social norms: Unwritten rules governing behaviour shared by members of a given group or society. They are informal, often implicit, rules that most people accept and abide by.

Gender norms: Standards and expectations that women and men generally conform to within a range that defines a particular society, culture or community at a particular time (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016).

Positive masculinity: The expression of attitudes and behaviours (character strengths and virtues that any gender might have) that have been embodied and enacted by males for the common good, both individually and for the community.
Purpose of the compendium

The main purpose of this compendium is to share lessons learned and good practices for programming related to son preference and gender-biased sex selection that can be used by UNFPA Country Offices and implementing partners in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region. The compendium presents a wide range of successful efforts in addressing son preference and gender-biased sex selection in the South Caucasus region through innovative programming, policy, advocacy and communication activities.

It should be noted that this compendium does not replace programme evaluations. This document is neither a guide for programming, nor a reporting document nor a “how to” guide. While every effort has been made to identify and highlight a wide range of work successfully undertaken by the UNFPA Country Offices in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, the compendium does not cover every effort that has been undertaken to address son preference and gender-biased sex selection in the South Caucasus region.
Key pillars of good practices concerning son preference and gender-biased sex selection

The good practices described in this compendium reflect the key elements of the Global Programme, covering areas of programme management, policy, advocacy, changing social norms, capacity development and technical interventions in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The key pillars of these good practices are as follows:

1. Evidence generation and evidence-informed efforts
   Across the region, evidence solidified the specific entry points for programme focus, advocacy efforts and transformative changes, such as enhancing the perceived value of girls, which will accelerate progress towards ending son preference and gender-biased sex selection. A lack of data and evidence poses significant challenges in making the problem visible and compelling to policymakers, media, families and the general public.

1.1. Establishing and understanding the issue
   Evidence-informed and evidence-based advocacy relies on, firstly, establishing the existence of the problem, its main trends and the reasons for either the spread or the slow alleviation of the problem. This sort of advocacy is highly relevant in the South Caucasus region, as the expansion of evidence of the magnitude, causes and consequences of, as well as ways to address, son preference and gender-biased sex selection was critical to enhancing understanding on the part of national stakeholders. Evidence helped to equip them with the capacity to formulate and implement effective programmes and policies.

Good practice: generating evidence to reveal the prevalence of sex-selective abortions, the reasons for such abortions and public perception in Armenia

In 2010, UNFPA identified the potential prevalence of prenatal sex selection in Armenia, through an analysis of the official data on male and female births collected by the National Statistical Service. This analysis provided the grounds for the development of a report on the prevalence of and reasons for sex-selective abortions in Armenia (UNFPA, 2012), produced in cooperation with the Republic of Armenia Ministry of Health and the National...
Statistical Service. The study revealed the prevalence of sex-selective abortions in the country, as well as the main reasons for such abortions and the public perception of the issue.

The analysis of the statistical data indicated that, in the case of a first child, there was neither prenatal sex determination nor sex-selective abortion. From the second child on, both prenatal sex determination and sex-selective abortion tended to increase, causing concern in the cases of the third and fourth children, where the sex-ratio imbalance gives grounds to assume that sex-selective abortions may be used to ensure the desired gender of a child. The study indicated that parents were more inclined to have boys to support them when they are older, given the lack of a well-developed social security system in Armenia. Naturally, these norms and trends pose a potential threat of a demographic imbalance.

**Key findings: Armenia**

The research shows that GBSS is widespread outside the capital, particularly in rural areas. Giving preference to a child of one or the other sex is mainly viewed in the context of solving socioeconomic, cultural and security problems and is expressed by the manifestation of gender stereotypes. Thus, boys continue to be considered as guarantors of security and continuity of the family; and girls, as helpers and caretakers for the family and their parents. Continuous intersectoral cooperation and the promotion of engagement by various state and non-state actors with a vested interest in solving the problem have had a positive impact on reducing the sex imbalance. The health-care system, particularly primary health-care workers, can greatly contribute to the prevention of GBSS, a change in attitudes on the part of women and their family members, and the strengthening and implementation of legal regulations on GBSS, in particular with regard to the prevention of sex-selective abortions and the elimination of cases where such abortions are covered up.

**Key findings: Georgia**

Studies have demonstrated that gender-biased sex selection varies across different groups in Georgia: son preference becomes more visible as families have more children, and son preference also depends on the gender of a family’s existing children. As is common across the South Caucasus, there is a significant urban–rural divide in Georgia, with higher rates of son preference in rural areas and among families with low economic status. For these reasons, these studies also explored the social and economic drivers for preferring sons over daughters in the family.

The study enabled UNFPA to identify the specific nature of son preference and gender-biased sex selection in Armenia and the most compelling areas of intervention for programming, advocacy and public engagement to achieve impactful policy and change social norms. An example of an advocacy campaign supported by the study is the “Bavakane” campaign, covered in Section 4.
**Good practice: conducting research and analysis to identify key trends in sex ratio at birth and the most needed programme interventions in Georgia**

In Georgia, two UNFPA studies — on gender-biased sex selection in Georgia (UNFPA, 2015) and on trends in the sex ratio at birth in Georgia (Guilmoto and Tafuro, 2017) — provided foundational evidence and perspective for interventions in the country. These studies revealed that Georgian society is characterized by social norms that reflect a strong preference for sons due to its traditionally patriarchal structure. The importance of the family and the male line, coupled with the socioeconomic environment, has reduced the societal value of girls. Research also indicates that higher levels of son preference are found among Armenian and Azerbaijani families living in Georgia compared with Georgian families, with a more skewed sex ratio at birth in the regions with higher populations of ethnic minority groups: namely, Kvemo Kartli, Kakheti and Samtskhe-Javakheti. Based on this evidence, UNFPA prioritizes addressing the main social norms affecting the practice and delivering interventions at the national and local levels. In addition to national-level outreach, UNFPA focuses on the regions with relatively slower progress, such as Kvemo Kartli, Kakheti and Samtskhe-Javakheti, with campaigns such as “Do Not Differentiate: A Girl and a Boy Are Both Your Future”. Such campaigns particularly target young couples, especially those with two previous girls, in addition to the general public, youth and media, to further disseminate a message about increasing the value of girls and celebrating the equal value of both girls and boys.

**1.2. Evidence of the impact of a skewed sex ratio at birth**

The visibility of a skewed sex ratio at birth and an understanding of the reasons behind it are not always enough to mobilize key stakeholders to take action against son preference and gender-biased sex selection. In such circumstances, impact studies that shed light on the current and future projected consequences of a skewed sex ratio at birth play a key role in making a more compelling case for policy-level and societal action that can alleviate the problem comprehensively.

In 2015, UNFPA Azerbaijan developed population projections under five different scenarios, with the support of experts from the Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies, in order to present further evidence of the impact of the skewed sex ratio at birth on the future population structure of the country and to advocate for prompt governmental intervention to address the problem (Koç and Eryurt, 2015). According to the projections, there will be 12,000 to 15,000 more boys than girls born each year by 2050 if the sex ratio at birth remains high.

Irrespective of where they occur, son preference and gender-biased sex selection limit women’s choices, freedom and bodily autonomy. The sociodemographic impact related to a decrease in the number of women in the population leads to a series of human rights
implications, including other harmful manifestations and practices of gender-based violence such as child marriage and bride kidnapping. The consequences for gender equality are, therefore, far-reaching. The limited number of women leads to increased pressure on women to assume the traditional roles of mother, wife, etc., thus jeopardizing the progress that societies have achieved in terms of women's rights and bodily autonomy.

1.3. Evidence for key interventions and recommendations

Interdisciplinary research to address the perspectives of gender studies and behavioural sciences may reveal and clarify the mechanisms that have an impact on the formulation of particular gender roles in the South Caucasus. While the sex ratio at birth has shown some overall improvements in the region, systematic observations and analyses can help clarify whether these represent temporary fluctuations or trends towards normalization.

Good practice: generation of evidence to showcase and analyse links between social and economic factors with an improved sex ratio at birth in Georgia

In Georgia, similar to the other countries in the South Caucasus, deteriorating economic conditions coupled with a strong son preference and low fertility rates contributed to increases in the sex ratio at birth starting in the 1990s. This imbalance lasted for almost 15 years until 2004, when the ratio started showing a reverse trend, reaching almost normal levels in 2016. A socioeconomic policy analysis with regard to son preference and gender-biased sex selection in Georgia (UNFPA, 2019), conducted by the ISET Policy Institute, explored Georgia's positive rebound towards improving sex imbalances and the country's unique position in the region in terms of decreasing skewed sex ratios at the national level. The analysis investigated the various factors behind changes in the sex ratio at birth and explored the extent to which social and economic policies and interventions had had an impact on decreasing gender-biased sex selection by influencing family decisions regarding son preference and softening pressure on fertility choices.

The study suggested the following recommendations: apply a holistic approach involving social, economic and cultural domains; focus on promoting initiatives to further advance poverty reduction and strengthen social protection mechanisms to reduce the pressure on sons or families in general; strengthen gender equality.
and women’s empowerment; and overcome gender stereotypes and norms by encouraging families to recognize the equal value of both daughters and sons. Furthermore, addressing challenging cultural stereotypes that see daughters as less valuable or less beneficial than sons, which are often at the root of gender-based discriminatory attitudes and practices, should be prioritized in communication campaigns.

Based on the results and participatory process, the respective recommendations were elaborated, disseminated and validated through national forums involving representatives from civil society organizations, international organizations, policymakers, academia as well as the media.

### In-country policy and capacity development

UNFPA believes that the most effective way to end son preference and gender-biased sex selection is to address the root causes using gender-transformative and human rights-based approaches to change social and gender norms that have a negative impact on the value of women and girls. Laws and policies are essential mechanisms for achieving change. They can commit governments to increase gender equity, which will also enable daughters and sons to have more equal value in the eyes of their parents. Other policies, such as those relating to social protection and social insurance — for example, pensions and affordable health care — reduce the need for parental support on the part of children of either gender.

Where equal rights have not translated into equal opportunities for women, existing gender-equity laws must be revised and effectively implemented to bridge the gap between law and practice. Azerbaijan enacted a major law on guarantees of gender equality (for men and women) in 2006, with a focus on preventing gender-based discrimination and its negative consequences. In 2010, Georgia adopted a law on gender equality that also condemns gender-based discrimination. Governments lead by example when they show senior-level commitment to gender equality and promote women’s access to leadership positions.

Meanwhile, equal wages, the ability to inherit family property, and improved pension and social security schemes will strengthen women’s financial independence and social status.

UNFPA provides technical support for countries to formulate and implement sustainable national policies and national action plans (NAPs). These efforts also include creating the space and platforms necessary for multi-stakeholder collaboration and participatory monitoring of NAPs.

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<td>Countries and territories in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region have implemented national policies, programmes and strategies to improve gender equality and empower women following the adoption of the ICPD Programme of Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.</td>
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Good practice: supporting the development of a national action plan on addressing son preference and gender-biased sex selection in Azerbaijan


This success story demonstrates the importance of building advocacy and communication based on a robust foundation of research evidence and data. This is the first multisectoral and multi-stakeholder commitment on the country’s journey to ending son preference and gender-biased sex selection. For the implementation of the NAP, continued efforts are needed to ensure that civil society is proactively engaged in strategic interventions. These include the promotion of a common understanding of the issues concerning son preference and gender-biased sex selection and enhanced coordination between the Government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Good practice: partnerships for national and local integration of prevention measures, community engagement and outreach to the most affected groups in Georgia

UNFPA’s partnerships, policy dialogue and advocacy efforts in Georgia led to the integration of son preference and GBSS prevention measures in the country’s National Action Plan on Human Rights (2018–2020) and 2022–2030 Human Rights Strategy. The NAP focuses on responding to harmful practices, including gender-biased sex selection, by increasing awareness of the issues, working towards overcoming gender stereotypes and supporting women’s empowerment by creating an enabling policy and legal environment. Furthermore, UNFPA Georgia collaborates with the Inter-agency Commission on Gender Equality, Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, established by the Government of Georgia, by supporting the inclusion of measures on the prevention of harmful practices in the relevant national action plans. Partnerships at the local level ensure greater outreach and reinforced community engagement in local interventions. Such collaborations include capacity-building efforts for local municipalities with locally established Women’s Rooms (spaces where women can get reliable information on gender equality and reproductive health) and Gender Equality Councils (in the Kakheti, Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions), as well as local civil society organizations and activists. These partnerships enable UNFPA to reach ethnic minority groups and to implement communication and information campaigns to address son preference and gender-biased sex selection. An example of a campaign is a series of interactive information sessions held at the Municipal Women’s Rooms in 2018 that were delivered to young couples, including from ethnic minorities.

Insight
Participatory intervention strategies that include direct engagement and partnership with local representatives and community members enable sustainability of action and advocacy to address gender-based discrimination. The participatory process and institutionalization of knowledge and skills are key for successful policy work.
Tailored gender-transformative approaches based on human rights

The new Every Girl Counts strategy adopts UNFPA’s core approaches to accelerate the impact of programmes towards transformative results: all interventions are gender-transformative and human rights–based. The adverse effect of legal and policy frameworks on gender equality should be assessed and addressed to ensure that those frameworks are compliant with human rights commitments. In addition, laws and policies should be created that empower women and girls to exercise their rights and that hold institutions accountable for protecting those rights, including the right to live free of violence and discrimination and the right to bodily autonomy.

There has also been a growing appreciation within UNFPA of the necessity of applying a human rights–based approach to the programming process. This understanding has been shaped by the increasing consensus, as reflected in the various ICPD reviews, that to achieve ICPD’s full vision countries must change social norms, laws and policies to uphold human rights (UNFPA, 2020b). Particularly important are reforms that promote gender equality and women’s rights, and that help women gain greater control over their own bodies and lives.

Programmes should go beyond ad hoc tactics for engagement and use broader strategies to address the root causes of gender inequality. This translates into integrated efforts with related programmes and practices; a broader push towards changing gender norms; addressing the interconnectedness with other harmful practices such as child marriage; and integration with larger efforts to ensure the human, sexual and reproductive rights of women and girls.

Insight

All interventions should place the value of women and girls at the centre by transforming power relations embedded in social and gender norms that have a negative impact on their value at all levels.

Insight

Changing social and gender norms must be prioritized in programmatic and advocacy efforts against son preference and gender-biased sex selection in order to challenge deeply rooted gender discrimination and empower women and girls.

Good practice: facilitating multi-stakeholder alliances to monitor and enable policy progress in Armenia

UNFPA has an Armenian multi-stakeholder alliance, which started its development process in May 2013 at a conference to present the findings of a 2012–2013 study on sex imbalances at birth in Armenia (Guilmoto, 2013). The alliance enables stakeholders to collaborate and address son preference and gender-biased sex selection in a coordinated manner in order to fulfil Armenia’s international obligations, such as Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 1829 on prenatal sex selection. Using comprehensive and multifaceted engagement, the country demonstrated a decrease in its sex-at-birth ratio from 115 boys per 100 girls in 2013 to 110 boys per 100 girls in 2017 (UNFPA Armenia, 2018).
Integrated and comprehensive interventions will help keep the focus on the equal value of girls and boys, ensure inclusivity and enable the empowerment of all women and girls — including those with specific vulnerabilities and disabilities — as a key to transforming social and gender power relations, and encouraging the involvement of men and boys to achieve a sustainable transformation.

Additionally, programme implementation and advocacy in the countries of concern must address the specific cultural, religious and ethnic contexts in the South Caucasus, which demonstrate several attributes and trends that are unique to the region. These include the socioeconomic and demographic considerations unearthed by research in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia; the significant urban–rural divide at the national and local levels; and factors such as the impact of son preference, predominantly starting with the third child.

**Good practice: engagement of children and their families in communities of concern through community puppet shows in Armenia and Georgia**

Engaging children and their families is important for enabling sustainable and long-term changes in social and gender norms, and for combating harmful stereotypes that foster gender inequality. When children and young people engage with and speak their mind on issues of equality, positive role models and the intrinsic value of both girls and boys, they learn from the very beginning that they are worthy, capable and deserving of equal opportunities in life. In 2012, UNFPA Armenia created and promoted Ne, a character symbolizing the girl child, to advocate the equal value of children of both sexes. In the following years, the Country Office brought to life a puppet show, called Ne's Adventures, about the value of women and girls, which was staged in Yerevan and other regions of Armenia in partnership with World Vision, UNICEF and Save the Children. Thirty-three performances of the show have engaged more than 1,000 children across the country.

In 2022, UNFPA Georgia partnered with the Union of the State Professional Theatre and Aleksandre Chighvinadze, an award-winning playwright, to support the wide dissemination of a puppet show called Esma, for children and parents. The interactive puppet show, which was created specifically to address son preference, focuses on the importance of the equal treatment of boys and girls and creates a safe space for children and parents to reflect on existing norms. The use of puppet shows as a tool for changing social norms is

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**Key findings**

There are strong connections between gender-biased sex selection and harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation. These include gender inequality, sociocultural norms, sexual morals, marriageability and marriage customs, economic concerns, women’s safety, religious beliefs and political factors (Rahm and Kostenzer, 2018).
supported by a body of evidence that suggests that positive changes towards more gender-equal values are happening faster among the younger generation (UNFPA, 2020c); thus, exposing children to equal values at a young age is essential. In addition, given the cultural context prevalent among ethnic minority populations, puppet shows are a popular mode of entertainment; for this reason, this approach was well received and disseminated. Since its launch, Esma has reached more than 300 children and parents in both urban and rural areas in Georgia.

Good practice: hackathon to create innovative tech solutions to challenge discriminatory gender roles in Georgia

In 2019, UNFPA Georgia launched a hackathon called “The Future Is Equal”, in partnership with public and private sector organizations, including Silknet, the e-platform Saba, and Georgia’s Innovation and Technology Agency. During the event, on visualization and interactive storytelling around harmful practices, participants created 11 innovative digital solutions, mobile applications and digital campaigns in response to son preference and gender-biased sex selection.

Stemming from the hackathon, the campaign “Do Not Differentiate: A Girl and a Boy Are Both Your Future” took a further step on social media with a Facebook app and a series of illustrations for increasing awareness of son preference and gender-biased sex selection, which attracted wide public attention on social media. The Facebook app is structured in an experimental gaming format that invites users to join if they want to find out the gender of their future baby. Once they join and answer a few questions, the app generates results that include the message “Do not differentiate: a boy and a girl are both your future”, in addition to displaying statistics on the sex ratio at birth and on missing women.

"The Future Is Equal", a hackathon that took place in Georgia in 2019, resulted in the creation of 11 innovative solutions, apps and campaigns on the issues of son preference and gender-biased sex selection. © UNFPA Georgia/Gela Bedianashvili
Good practice: social experiment video to encourage online and offline public discussion and debate in Azerbaijan

In 2017, UNFPA Azerbaijan conducted a one-day public social experiment and survey, which was captured on video and posted on social media, to gauge public opinion about gender-biased sex selection and the value of the girl child in society. The experiment staged a family conflict, with actors playing a husband and wife who argued loudly in the streets. The man yelled at the woman, demanding that she have an abortion because he did not want a baby girl. He said he had called a doctor and made an appointment, and the woman begged him to change his mind. The majority of passers-by who intervened, including young men, sided with the woman. The video led to a further discussion and debate on son preference and gender-biased sex selection in the media as well as on social media (1news.az, 2017).

Campaigning with multi-stakeholder and multisectoral engagement

Awareness-raising campaigns and communication aimed at behavioural change are crucial instruments for addressing sex selection and altering traditional mindsets. Ideally, they should be led by high-level government representatives, elected members of national assemblies and other public figures and influencers. Successful advocacy campaigns often not only focus on subgroups of the population that show high levels of sex selection but also aim for multi-stakeholder and multisectoral engagement in order to ensure sustainable policy and societal change.

Advocacy campaigns are successful and lead to desired change when they are adapted and contextualized to specific audiences across multiple groups and sectors of stakeholders. In the South Caucasus region, UNFPA’s advocacy has been successfully adapted to groups such as men and boys; women and girls; the private sector; civil society as well as gender and human rights activists; community leaders and influencers such as faith-based organizations, health-care professionals and educational institutions, and media representatives; young people; and the general public for broad and comprehensive social change necessary for sustainable societal transformation. Such activities should be reinforced, however, by parallel efforts to change the legal and political climate to ensure concrete efforts in all sectors of society to bridge the gender gap.

Good practice: engaging stakeholders across target groups in Armenia with a multiplatform campaign supported by policymakers and celebrities

In 2019, UNFPA Armenia in partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Doping Creative Agency implemented a social campaign called “Bavakane” to shed light on the issue of son
preference and prenatal sex selection in the country. The message of the campaign highlights the fact that, in many Armenian families, when a second or third daughter is born, they name her Bavakane (which means "enough" in Armenian) in the hope that their next child will be a son. Launched on 11 October, International Day of the Girl Child, the campaign garnered nearly 13 million impressions and 2.6 million video views within a matter of weeks. Offline, the iconic Mother Armenia statue overlooking the capital city of Yerevan was coloured in red, bringing greater attention to the issue of undervaluing girls and prenatal sex selection. More than 70 media outlets, including those with the largest nationwide coverage, covered the campaign.

4.1. Men and boys

Men’s views in patriarchal societies heavily influence those of their households and communities. If a man is supportive of having daughters and granddaughters in his family, this reduces the pressure on the women of the household to bear sons. At the level of the community and broader society, the pressures to practise sex selection are reduced if men accept that children of both sexes can be valuable. It is also important to reach young men, as their views are constructed by social and gender norms that will be applied in their households once they marry and have children.
In order to engage men in responsible and meaningful fatherhood and caregiving and to promote gender-equitable behaviours and attitudes, UNFPA Azerbaijan launched its Papa Schools initiative in 2021 in three regions of the country. In 2022, this successful initiative expanded its geographical coverage to eight regions. Throughout the project, more than 600 fathers and fathers-to-be as well as 10 facilitators from the target regions were sensitized to the issues of gender equality, responsible fatherhood and parenting, the value of the girl child and so on. In addition to training sessions delivered by experts such as paediatricians and psychologists, the project also runs activities designed to strengthen interaction and emotional bonds between fathers and their children. Papa Schools Azerbaijan is a long-term course for fathers seeking to establish a space for the involvement of men and to contribute to the promotion of gender-transformative approaches at the national and local levels. To ensure institutional sustainability, the project links Papa Schools to local institutions and facilities that operate under government auspices.

UNFPA partnered with a local Georgian NGO, Care Together, to expand gender-transformative programming to the Samtskhe-Javakheti region through the MenCare campaign and using the Men Talking to Men (MTM) methodology for young men, which is aimed at transforming gender norms and stereotypes. Ninety-six young men of different ages and social and ethnic backgrounds have already taken part in MTM training sessions, and champions of change have been identified to mobilize more men for gender equality in the target regions.
Through information sessions, father–daughter meetings, book readings, etc., the value of girls has been promoted, especially among young men and future fathers. In the target region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, the campaign has reached around 300 men. It engages innovative tactics such as using children’s stories to promote equal relationships in the family and challenge gender stereotypes, widely distributing the gender-sensitive and age-appropriate children’s book *Luna* and the *Planet of the Fireflies* in ethnic-minority languages, and conducting book presentations and drawing workshops for fathers and their children in Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki, which have reached around 50 children and parents.

**Good practice: campaigns to highlight and encourage the bond between fathers and daughters in Armenia and Azerbaijan**

In the South Caucasus region, UNFPA has implemented campaigns and events targeting the participation of fathers and their daughters in order to create opportunities to celebrate and foster emotional bonding. In 2015, UNFPA Armenia partnered with the Mediamax Media Company and launched an essay contest called “My Daughter”, aimed at highlighting the value of the girl child and ultimately helping to address gender inequality and prenatal sex selection in the country. The contest urged fathers to participate and share stories of their special relationship with their daughters. The contest received 122 inspiring essays, three of which were selected as the winners and published online to further spread the message that daughters and sons are of equal value.

“I was young when I lost my sight, and only in my wildest dreams did I imagine that one day I would have a family and a wonderful daughter, Arpi. ... When I ask her what she will become when she grows up, she answers very decisively, ‘A mommy and a doctor.’ And when I ask, ‘Why a doctor?’ she answers in surprise, ‘Well, to heal your eyes.’”

— Hakob Karapetyan, essay contest winner

In Azerbaijan, UNFPA held a family festival called Fathers and Daughters in Baku and Ganja in 2018, and then a follow-up festival called Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters in Mingachevir and Lankaran in 2021. The festivals were aimed at enhancing the emotional ties between fathers and daughters through day-long entertainment and activities, such as puppet shows, hairstyling competitions, puzzles, face art, theatre, magic shows, dance performances and photo booths. These successful festivals were attended by over 3,000 visitors.
Good practice: engaging young adults and boys in Azerbaijan

During 2017 and 2018, UNFPA partnered with the National Assembly of Youth Organizations of the Republic of Azerbaijan to engage and mobilize 1,000 young adults and boys in 40 districts of the country to become more gender-sensitive and aware of the skewed sex ratio at birth, as well as its implications and consequences. Information sessions lasting a day and a half used community-based awareness-raising interventions to involve and motivate young men and boys who were already active in their communities to promote the value of the girl child among their peers.

4.2. Young people

Young people are the leaders of tomorrow, so shaping their opinions early on sets the stage for future social and gender norms that favour both girls and boys. In the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region, UNFPA collaborates with local partners to enhance youth outreach and engagement.

Good practice: using interactive theatre to engage young people in Armenia

In 2013, UNFPA Armenia co-produced an interactive play called Lawsuit over a Stolen Rainbow along with its long-time partner Theatre for Changes. The play tells the story of a rural woman who realizes that, in her marriage and all around her, men have privilege and power while women are expected to be silent and obedient. She then decides to become a man by stealing a rainbow because, in Armenian folklore, if someone passes under a rainbow, they become the opposite sex. When she is caught and tried in court, the audience of the interactive performance decides whether she is to be imprisoned or freed. The performance has toured Armenia, reaching more than 3,000 young people.
Good practice: youth engagement for changing social norms in Georgia

In 2022, UNFPA Georgia introduced the Youth for Social Change initiative in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region to mobilize, educate and strengthen the skills of youth to better advocate changes to social norms in their local communities. UNFPA promoted small-scale youth-led projects through training sessions and skill-building camps. As a result, 50 young people were trained and more than 400 young people were engaged through these youth-led local projects.

4.3. Faith-based organizations and religious leaders

Religious leaders can powerfully affect people's values and behaviours, especially in settings related to organized religions such as Islam and Christianity. These religions have formal leaders who make public statements and give their followers frequent sermons on values and behaviours.

In the South Caucasus region, UNFPA Azerbaijan has been working with religious authorities since 2015 to discuss these issues in their weekly preaching. Sharing messages during Friday public teachings, or khutbahs, at mosques can be an effective way to influence men and community elders. Since 2015, priests of the Armenian Apostolic Church have been talking about the equal value of girls and boys during community meetings and counselling meetings in their parishes, and they plan to include this message in their wedding ceremony sermons. UNFPA Georgia is working with religious leaders among minority groups to address harmful practices, such as child marriage and gender-biased sex selection, and to prevent violence against women. These leaders have been enthusiastic about spreading messages to their congregations about protecting girls and women from violence, which is essential for addressing the root causes of son preference and gender-biased sex selection.

Good practice: online and in-community engagement of target groups in Azerbaijan in collaboration with local faith-based organizations

Since 2015, UNFPA has collaborated with local faith-based organizations and religious leaders in Azerbaijan, covering 79 mosques attended by 4,500 followers. The main messages convey the standpoint of Islam on the value of the girl child through information sessions, meetings with imams and faith community leaders. The imams of the target mosques were sensitized to deliver speeches concerning daughters’ roles in families. UNFPA's continued collaboration with faith-based organizations includes working with the Theology Institute of Azerbaijan to develop and validate training resources on gender and Islam for the faculty and students.

Furthermore, the Men for Gender Equality virtual platform, developed by UNFPA Azerbaijan to reach the most conservative and marginalized groups of the population, features regular offline and online sessions with the participation of theologians and male activists to address harmful practices and alter rigid social norms.
and behaviours as well as gender stereotypes that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and violence. The platform also offers a compelling collection of resources on gender-transformative programming.

During a seminar called “Men talk for equality”, held in the Gakh region of Azerbaijan, men take part in exercises that challenge gender-based stereotypes, 2022. © UNFPA Azerbaijan

4.4. Media

The media at all levels, from national publications to local radio, have great power to shift social and gender norms, given their wide audiences. Pitching stories, particularly about people who chose to have girls and benefited from it, can present an alternative perspective to the norm of son preference. Training journalists from broadcast, radio, online and print outlets can result in gender-balanced and unbiased reporting. It can also expand the public perception of the negative impact of son preference and gender-biased sex selection. Identifying journalists who are more likely to cover such issues as well as those who are biased in their reporting can be valuable for ensuring sustainable change.

Good practice: media awards to promote coverage of prenatal sex selection in Armenia

In 2011–2012, UNFPA Armenia organized two special awards for media at the forefront of efforts to shed light on son preference and gender-biased sex selection. The first was a special award for the best media submission highlighting sex-selective abortions in Armenia, at the Na/Ne Media Awards, an annual media competition for coverage of gender-based violence, the activities and achievements of women in the political, economic and social spheres as well as the problems and challenges those women face. The second was a special award, won by Lilit Harutyunyan, for the best coverage of son preference and gender-biased sex selection as part of a radio and video reporting contest for stories related to women's issues in Armenia run by the Armenia office of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. These efforts subsequently led to the publication of a book called The Lost Balance: Son Preference in Armenia (2012), which attempted to voice and visualize the problem in the country.

Published in 2012, a report titled The Lost Balance discusses son preference in Armenia. © UNFPA Armenia
Good practice: capacity-building for traditional media, bloggers and influencers in Azerbaijan

To increase the capacity of media in terms of gender equality and to ensure gender-sensitive reporting, UNFPA has been building a strong partnership with social and conventional media since 2017. The first ever capacity-building workshops on son preference and GBSS for media representatives were held in 2017, with subsequent workshops help in 2018, 2019 and 2022. Hence, a handbook on gender-sensitive journalism in Azerbaijan was developed to provide a step-by-step guide on how to report gender-sensitive news, including the use of gender-sensitive visuals. The workshops, which brought together representatives from key media outlets and TV, editors-in-chief, bloggers, vloggers, social media influencers, etc., were aimed at analysing and challenging the media’s portrayal and representation of women in editorial content and programming, the confinement of women to the lowest positions in newsrooms, the use of violence against women to attract audiences and the lack of attention paid to discrimination against women in all sectors of society on the main news sites and in broadcasts. As a result, issues around GBSS and son preference were widely covered and stimulated intensive discussions and debates on social media, TV and radio.
References


