UNFPA

Fact sheet

Armenia

Every Girl Counts

Son Preference
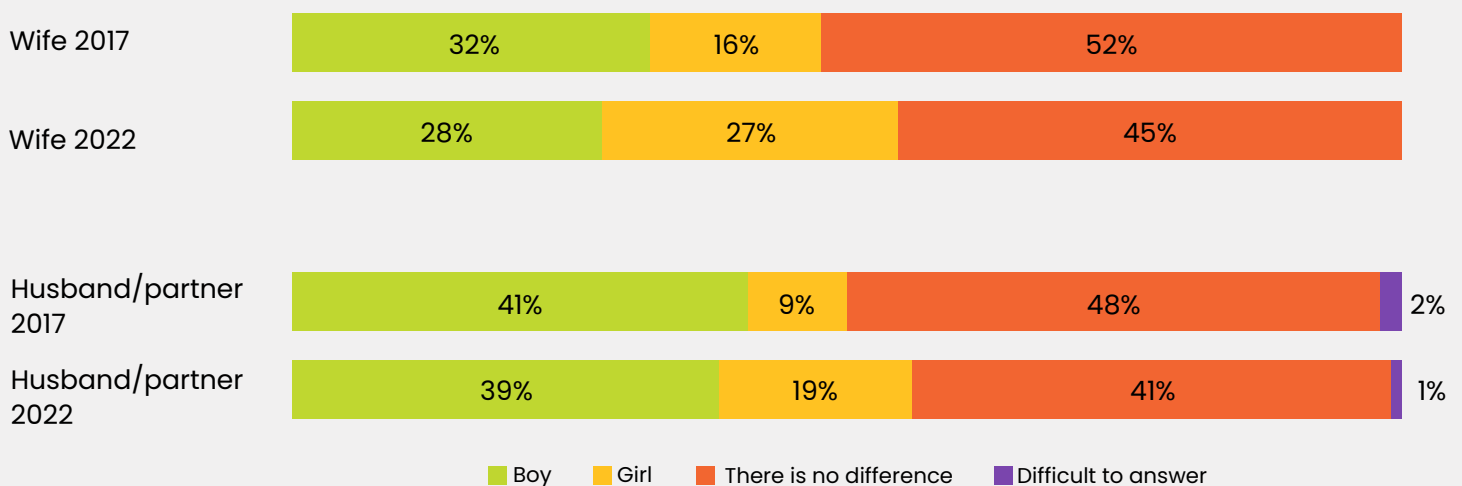and Daughter Aversion

November 2023

1. Background

Son preference and daughter aversion have predominantly been understood in terms of gender-biased sex selection, which has been identified and measured by the presence of a skewed sex ratio at birth (SRB).

Son preference and daughter aversion have predominantly been understood in terms of gender-biased sex selection, which has been identified and measured by the presence of a skewed sex ratio at birth (SRB). When the "natural" sex ratio of 105 males to 100 females skews even further towards males, it indicates a prevalence of prenatal sex selection in favour of sons. The most recent data from Armenia indicates a rise of a skewed SRB. While the factors behind these developments remain uncertain without further research, the rising SRB highlights an enduring preference for male children and a perception of the lower value of girls in Armenia.
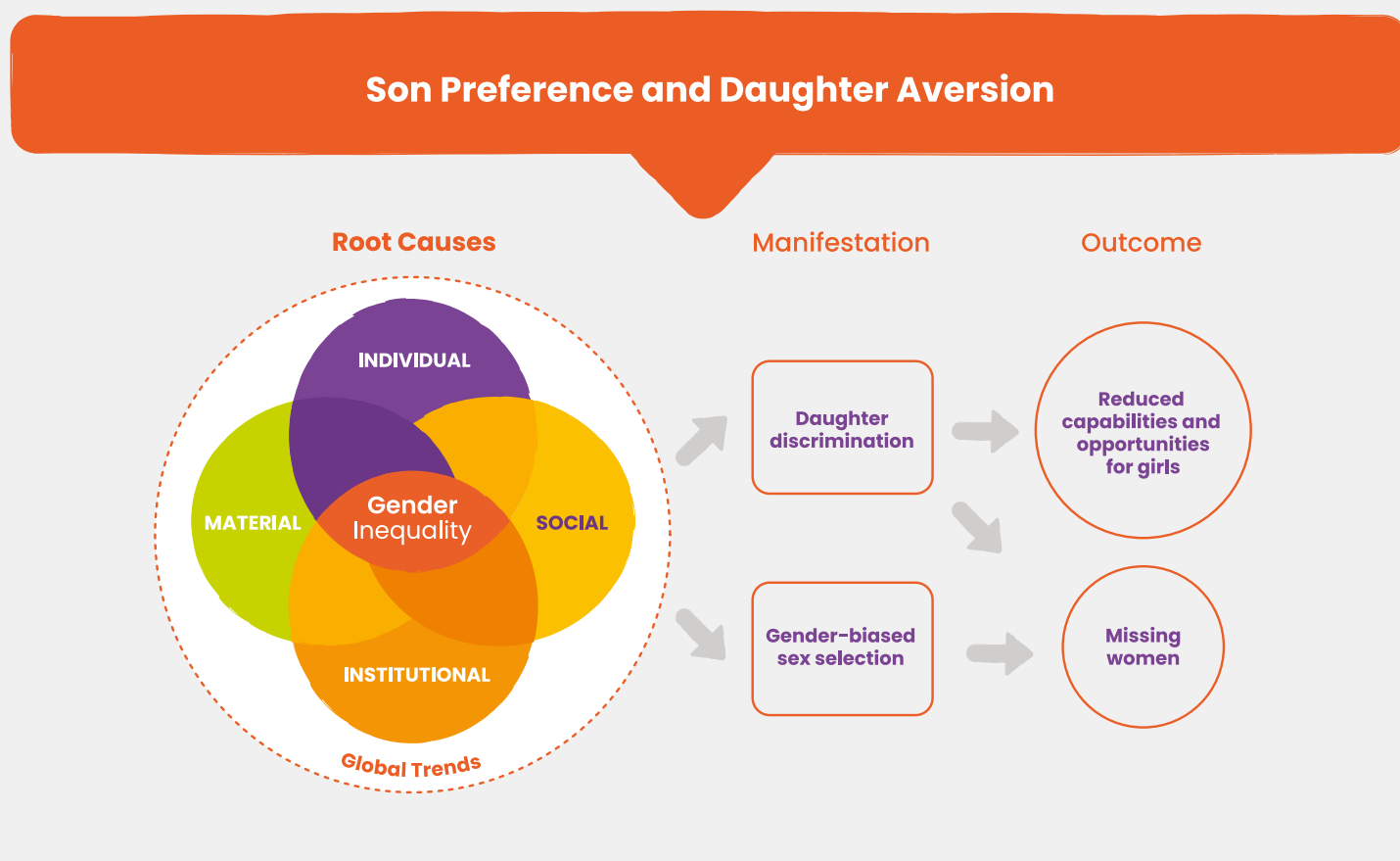
While women's preferences regarding the sex of a child are not overly skewed in favour of boys, the data highlights a strong preference for sons among men. The 2023 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) study, *Prevalence and Causes of Gender-Biased Sex Selection in the Republic of Armenia*, identified that in 2022, 28 per cent of women stated a preference for a son during their first pregnancy, while 27 per cent of women said they wanted to have a daughter (UNFPA Armenia, 2023). By comparison, 39 per cent of men said they would prefer a son, while only 19 per cent said they wanted a daughter (Figure 1). The preference for a son reduced from 2017 to 2022, while more parents expressed a preference for daughters or said they had no preference for either a boy or girl; nevertheless, the overall preference for sons remains high, particularly among men. The same study also revealed that socioeconomic issues, cultural norms and security concerns drive this preference for sons over daughters, within a wider context of gender inequality (UNFPA Armenia, 2023).

Figure 1:
Preferred sex of child during the first pregnancy

Source: UNFPA Armenia, 2023

Son Preference and Daughter Aversion

Root Causes | Manifestation | Outcome

INDIVIDUAL · MATERIAL · Gender Inequality · SOCIAL · INSTITUTIONAL · Global Trends

Daughter discrimination → Reduced capabilities and opportunities for girls

Gender-biased sex selection → Missing women

While the SRB can provide an overarching indication of son preference, it is critical to identify and understand the root causes of this so the issue can be addressed in a sustainable and systematic way. The SRB as an indicator does not, for example, reveal the number of couples who would prefer to have a son but do not necessarily choose to sex select. It also does not uncover the extent to which son preference impacts individuals as well as families and communities. Attitudes and beliefs that place a higher value on sons can profoundly impact the lived experiences of daughters who are raised in an environment where women are considered less valuable. The preference for sons can also have severe consequences for women who are pressured to have a boy or lack access to safe abortion procedures. In Armenia, sex-selective abortions are occasionally conducted at home using traditional methods, such as the pregnant woman lifting heavy objects or having someone walk on her back (UNFPA Armenia, 2023).

To gain an in-depth understanding of son preference in Armenia and its causes and consequences, this fact sheet goes beyond the use of SRB by adopting the UNFPA conceptual framework as the basis for analysis (Figure 2). The framework outlines the root causes, manifestations and outcomes of son preference. Son preference is a harmful norm stemming from gender-biased and patriarchal systems that assign and reinforce a higher social status to men and boys, thereby favouring male over female children. Daughter aversion is an attitudinal aversion to daughters stemming from the belief in the lower socially ascribed value of females, and is often seen as the counterpart to son preference. Harmful attitudes and behaviour towards daughters have a detrimental impact on their development across their lives. However, it is important to note that son preference and daughter aversion as attitudes do not necessarily lead to less parental care, poorer health or lower nutritional and educational outcomes for girls in Armenia.

The population pyramid presented in Figure 3 illustrates the demographic structure of Armenia in 2015 (represented by yellow and purple bars) and 2020 (outlined in orange). The relatively asymmetrical shape indicates an imbalanced gender distribution within the population. Notably, among the younger population (under 15 years old) there is a slightly higher proportion of males, which can be attributed to the higher SRB level during the early 2000s. By contrast, the population aged 25 and above comprises a higher proportion of females, indicating migration among the male workforce and greater life expectancy for women (as seen in the 65+ age groups). The gender distribution in Armenia remained unchanged between 2015 and 2020. In 2015, we observe a significantly smaller population in age groups below 20 years compared to the adjacent age group of 20–24 years. This reflects the continuous decrease in live births since 1995. Overall, these observations provide insights into how the persistent practice of son preference has continued to affect the evolving demographics of Armenia over 2015–2020.

Figure 3:
Population pyramid: Armenia 2015–2020
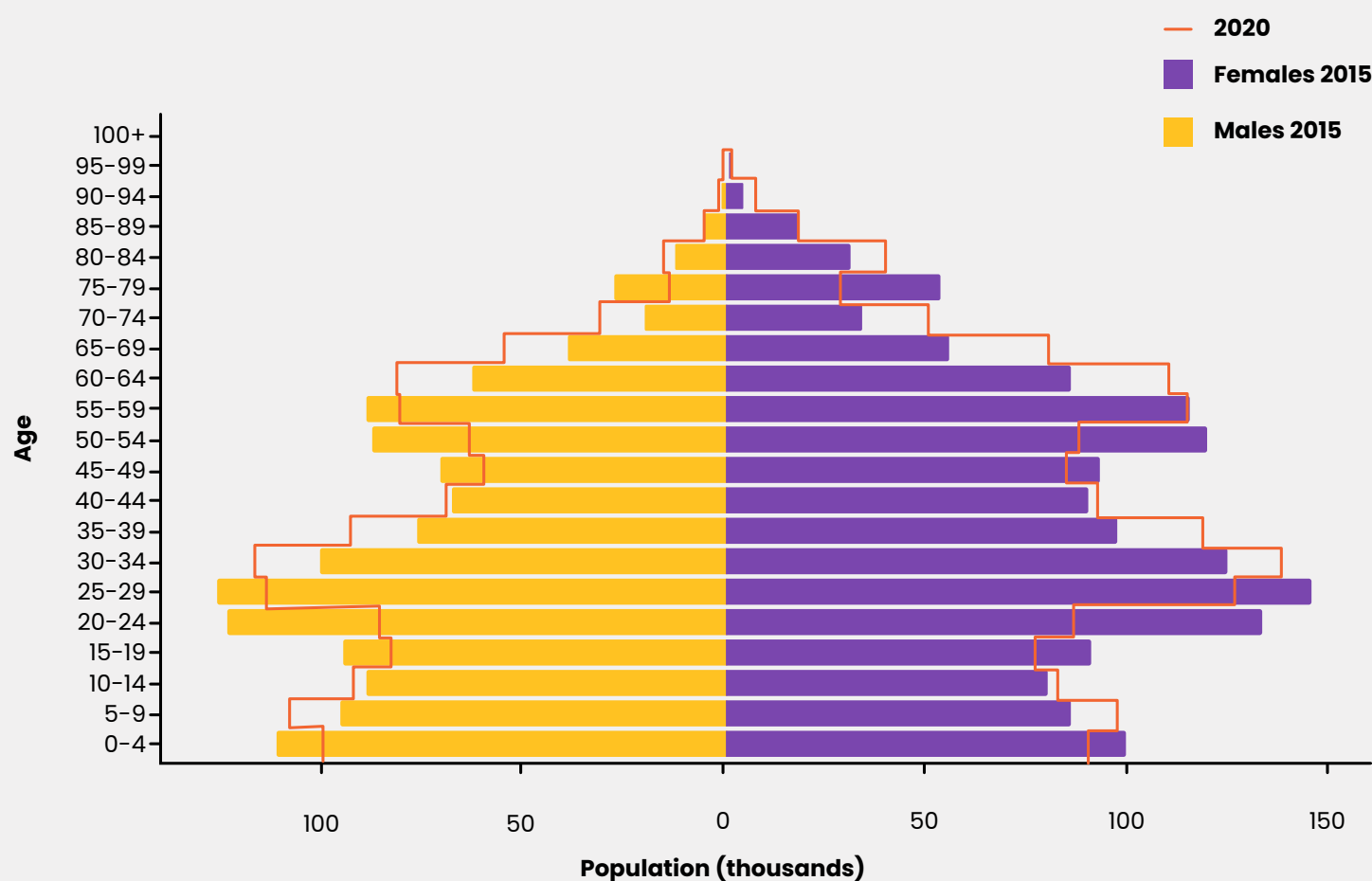
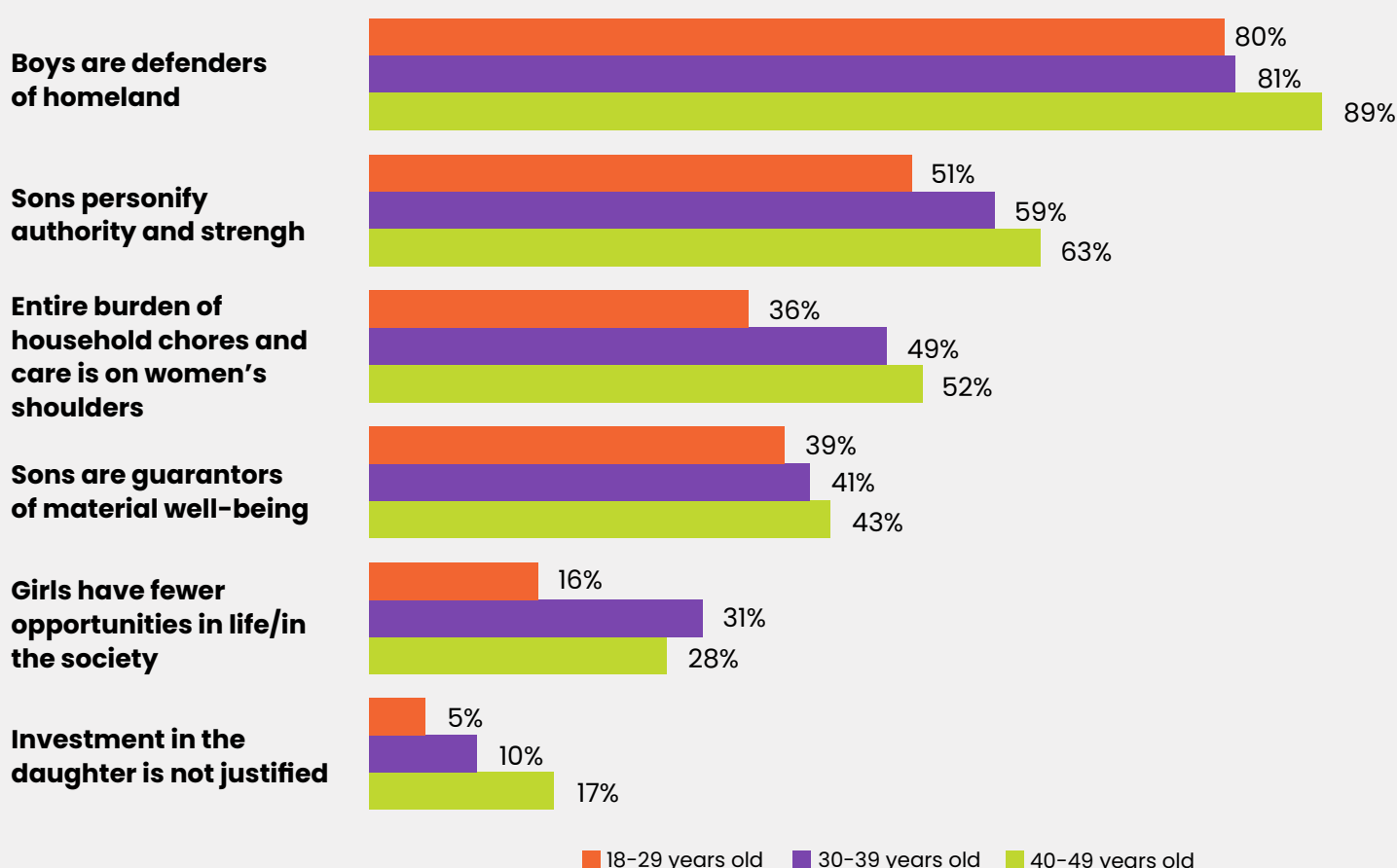Source: UN DESA World Population Prospects, 2022

2. Root causes

Son preference in Armenia is rooted in a complex combination of sociocultural and historical factors.

Son preference in Armenia is rooted in a complex combination of sociocultural and historical factors. To accurately understand and address the deeply ingrained preference for sons and aversion towards daughters, UNFPA has formulated a conceptual framework (Figure 2), adapted from Cislaghi and Heise's 2018 dynamic framework for social change. The conceptual framework highlights the individual, societal, material and institutional origins of son preference within broader contextual global trends which may influence the identified root causes. While these root causes are inherently intersecting, overlapping and dynamic, this fact sheet addresses them separately as a basis for analysis. Gender equality is positioned at the centre of the framework, in recognition that all root causes are influenced and sustained by unequal gender power relations.

Individual

Root causes at the individual level are personal beliefs which underlie perceptions of the importance of having a son in the family and the lower value of daughters. According to the 2023 UNFPA study (Figure 4), respondents predominantly desired sons for their perceived roles in preserving family lineage, inheriting family property and providing financial support. Moreover, sons are viewed as protectors of the homeland and symbols of authority and strength, while daughters are recognized as having fewer opportunities in life (UNFPA Armenia, 2023). As noted in the preceding section, several studies have found that husbands tend to show stronger son bias than their wives (UNFPA Armenia, 2023; Schief and others, 2021).

Reasons given for son preference in the family by age group, 2023

Reason	18-29 years old	30-39 years old	40-49 years old
Boys are defenders of homeland	80%	81%	89%
Sons personify authority and strengh	51%	59%	63%
Entire burden of household chores and care is on women's shoulders	36%	49%	52%
Sons are guarantors of material well-being	39%	41%	43%
Girls have fewer opportunities in life/in the society	16%	31%	28%
Investment in the daughter is not justified	5%	10%	17%

Source: UNFPA Armenia, 2023

Social

Social norms play a crucial role in influencing parents' gender preferences: 53 per cent of Armenians believe that sons are preferred among their community, while 18 per cent believe this preference is prevalent within their own families. Husbands show greater son preference than their wives, as they see having a son as a stronger reflection of their own self-esteem, reputation and image (UNFPA Armenia, 2023; Voskanyan, 2014). Women face pressure from their family and society to bear sons, with some women expressing the belief that having a son enhances their status within the family and household (International Centre for Human Development, 2018).

Material

In Armenia, men are seen as the main breadwinner in 75 per cent of families. This enhances the desirability of having sons for future financial support; they are seen as the guarantors of material well-being (UNFPA Armenia, 2023). Women in contemporary Armenian society experience economic insecurity and discrimination in the labour market, earning an average of 34 per cent less than their male counterparts (International Centre for Human Development, 2018). Sons' inheritance of family property contributes to the unequal distribution of socioeconomic resources between women and men, both generally and within the household. This strengthens families' desire to have sons as a means of ensuring that their property and wealth remain within the immediate family.

Institutional

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the absence of social safety nets meant families in the Caucasus region became heavily dependent on family networks for support (Guilmoto and Duthé, 2013). This has been a key factor in creating reliance on sons to provide financial and economic support for the family, particularly given the gender-unequal inheritance laws. Education levels also influence child preference: the 2023 UNFPA study discovered that individuals with higher education show notably less gender-biased attitudes towards the sex of their children, suggesting that a lack of education contributes to son preference in Armenia.

Global trends and contributing factors

Global trends such as demographic shifts, urbanization, digital technologies, inequalities and conflict have influenced gender preferences and families' fertility decisions in a country-specific way.

→ Conflict

Numerous conflicts have occurred in the South Caucasus, including the recent escalation of armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Such conflicts amplify son preference, given the predominant role of men in the military. Men are viewed as vital not only for maintaining the family lineage but also to ensure the survival of the nation and defend the homeland (Mavisakalyan and Minasyan, 2023; UNFPA Armenia, 2023). Research shows that Armenians who are concerned about conflict exhibit a 20 per cent higher son bias than those who are less concerned. During periods of intense conflict, communities closer to conflict centres have been observed to have a more skewed SRB than they had before the conflict (Mavisakalyan and Minasyan, 2023).

→ Declining fertility rates

While not a root cause in itself, a declining fertility rate heightens the pressure on women to have sons, indirectly bolstering son preference. Following a devastating earthquake in 1988 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the fertility rate in Armenia dropped drastically, from 2.5 births per woman in the 1990s to 1.6 by 2000 (Pinto and others, 2021). Before these events, families tended to have multiple children until they had a son. Families' preference to have fewer children in times of hardship makes it more challenging to ensure the birth of a desired male child (Dudwick, 2015).

→ Migration

In an effort to pursue better job prospects, men are migrating out of Armenia. As a result, there are certain Armenian communities with very few men. This can accentuate the preference for sons as a way to ensure support and protection for the family in the absence of the male breadwinner, particularly in the context of conflict (UNFPA Armenia, 2023).

3. Manifestations

Son preference in Armenia is largely understood and monitored through SRB, which measures any prenatal forms of gender-biased sex selection.

Son preference in Armenia is largely understood and monitored through SRB, which measures any prenatal forms of gender-biased sex selection. At the national level, from 2017 to 2021 the SRB was stable, at around 110 males per 100 females. These estimates are higher than the natural SRB of 105 males per 100 females. The SRB increased from 108 boys to 100 girls in 2021 to 112 boys to 100 girls in 2022. Data from the first quarter of 2023 indicates a slight decrease: 110 boys to 100 girls, compared to 111 boys to 100 girls in the same period of 2022. However, these recent national estimates are lower than 2014 estimates of 114 boys born in Armenia for every 100 girls (World Bank, 2015). Figure 5 depicts the annual SRB across Armenian provinces. It is important to note the significant subnational variation; for example, the SRB in 2019 ranged from 102 males to 100 females in Syunik to 129 males per 100 females in Gegharkunik.

Figure 5:
**Sex ratio at birth in Armenia at the provincial level, 2017–2021**
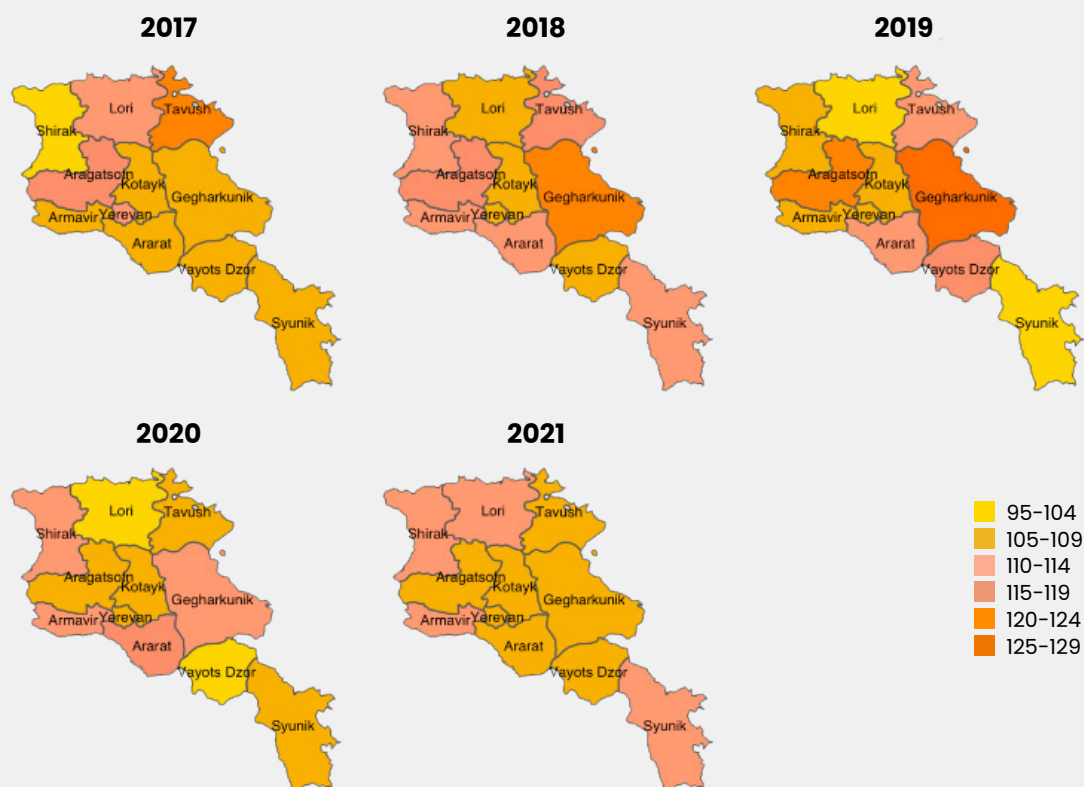
Source: National Statistical Service, Armenia, 2023

Despite a reduction in the sex-ratio imbalance for third and fourth births in Armenia since the early 2000s, this imbalance persists, suggesting that families continue to engage in gender-biased sex selection (UNFPA Armenia, 2012). The national SRB for third births decreased from 130 to 121 males per 100 females between 2017 and 2021. However, there is notable subnational variation: in 2019, the SRB for third births ranged from 101 males per 100 females in Syunik to 171 males per 100 females in Gegharkunik (Figure 6).

Gender discrimination is evident through the practice of son preference both before and after birth. This manifests in discrimination against girls, which has significant implications for women across their lives. For instance, when children are sick, parents may treat girls and boys differently. The 2005 Armenia Demographic and Health Survey (AM-DHS) reveals that among children who had symptoms of acute respiratory infection in the two weeks preceding the survey, boys were more than twice as likely as girls to be taken to a health facility (52 per cent to 24 per cent, respectively). The 2010 AM-DHS shows that boys were substantially more likely than girls to be taken to a health facility for treatment of diarrhoea (50 per cent to 35 per cent, respectively) and to receive oral rehydration therapy (National Statistical Service, 2012). That said, this finding has not been confirmed through the most recent AM-DHS (2015–2016), indicating that son preference and daughter aversion as attitudes do not necessarily lead to poorer health, education or nutritional outcomes for girls in Armenia.

Figure 6:
Sex ratio at birth for third births in Armenia at the provincial level, 2017–2021
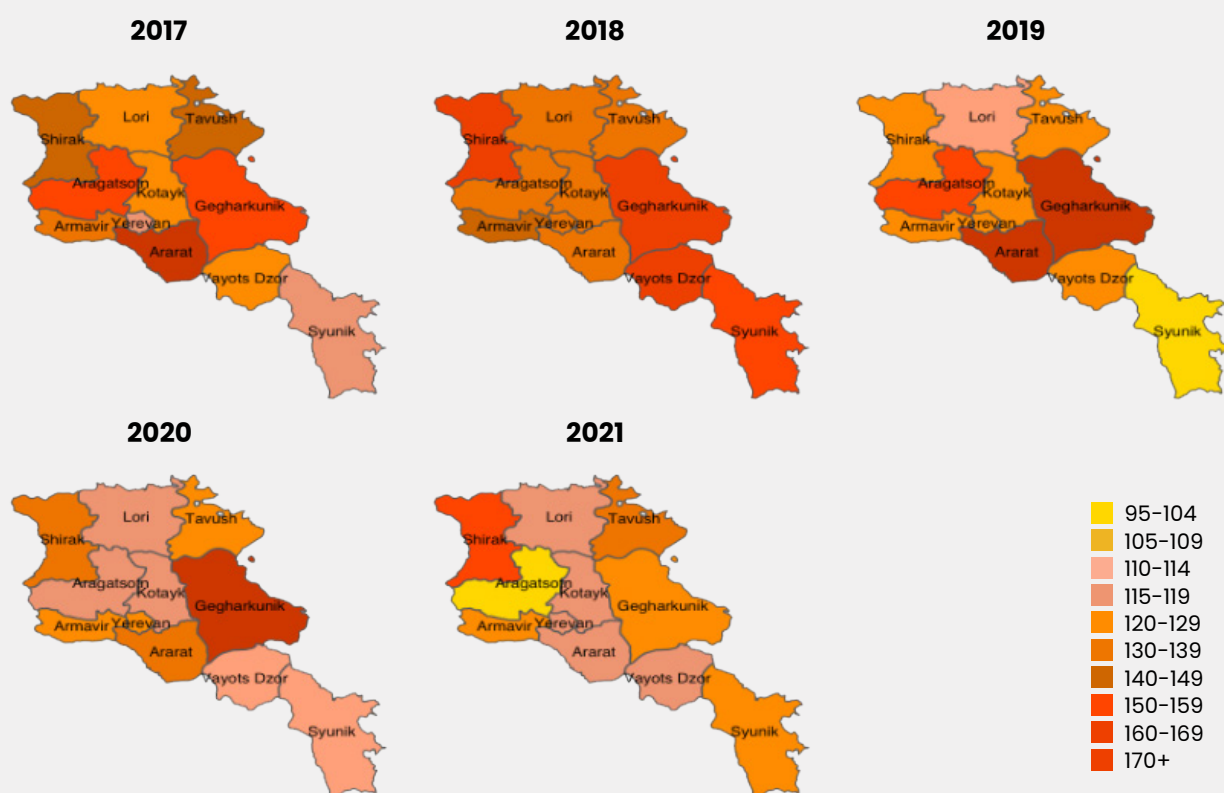
Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2023

4. Outcomes

Son preference has serious consequences for women and girls. One commonly discussed outcome is the phenomenon of missing female births.

Son preference has serious consequences for women and girls. One commonly discussed outcome is the phenomenon of missing female births. This refers to the girls who would have been born in the absence of son preference but were not born due to prenatal gender-biased sex selection. Using the annual SRB series and the total number of live births in Armenia, we estimated the number of missing female births per year. This number is the difference between the expected female births (assuming a normal SRB of 105 males to 100 females) and the observed number of female births. Figure 7 depicts the temporal trend of our estimations for missing female births in Armenia. Starting from the early 1990s, we observe a gradual increase in missing female births; this reached its peak in the year 2000, at 2,232 cases. However, from 2010 onwards there has been a noticeable decline in missing females, with the number reducing to 503 in 2021.
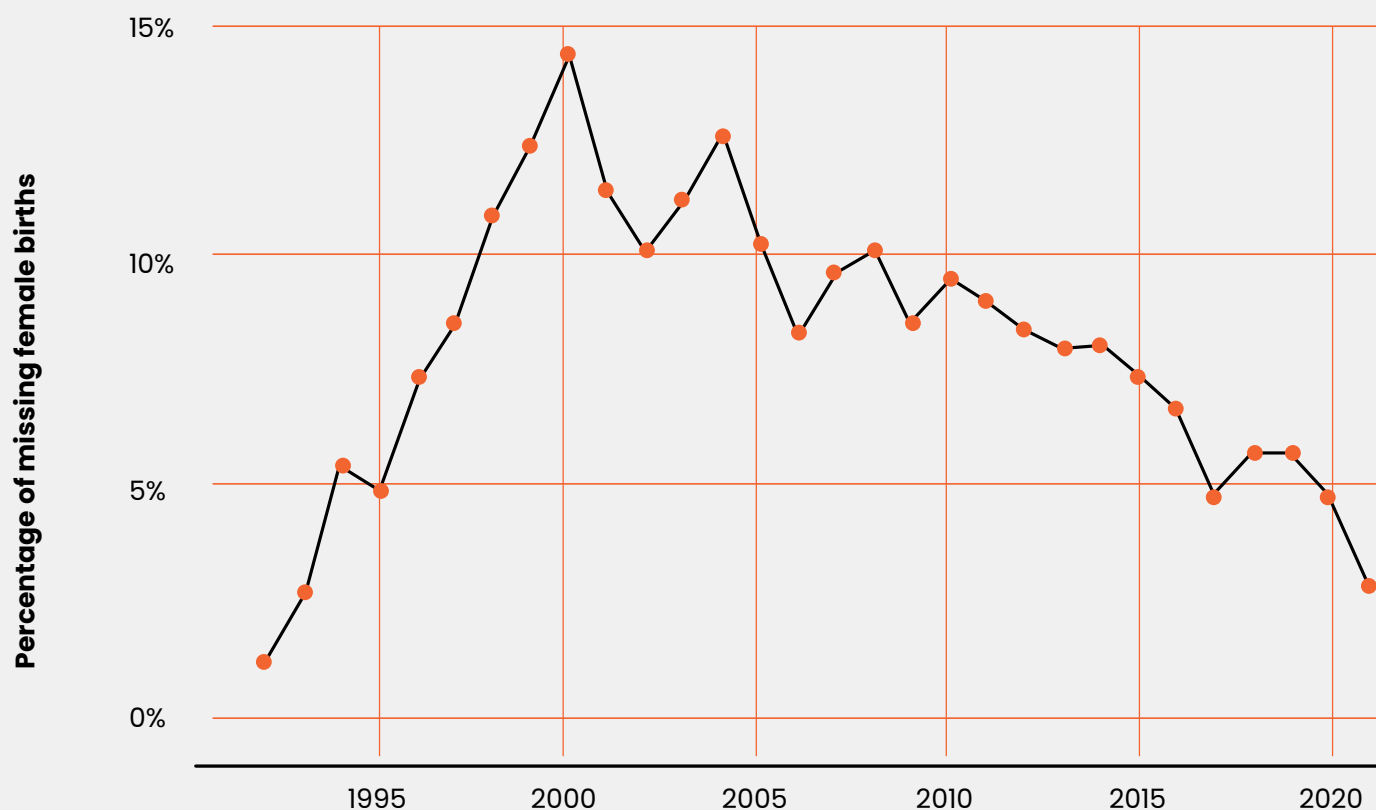
Figure 7:
Annual number of missing female births in Armenia between 1992 and 2021
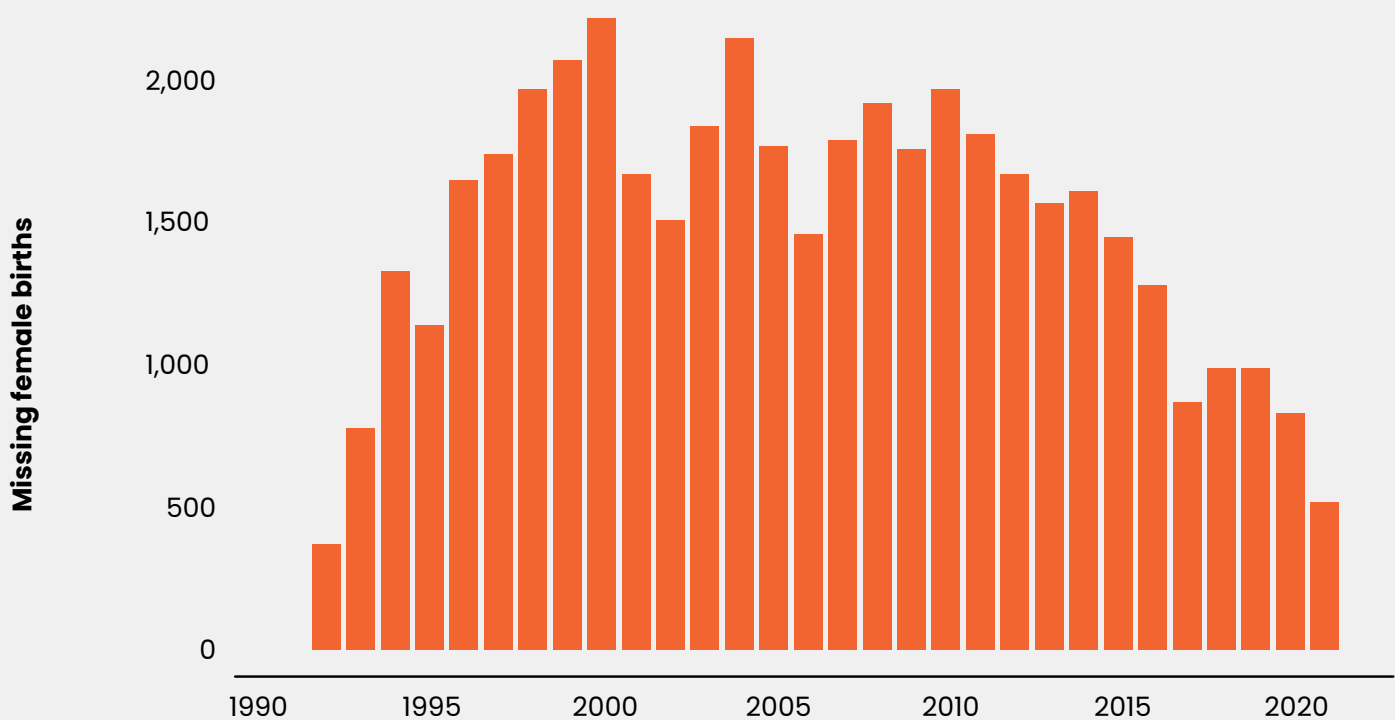
Source: Author's calculations, based on the annual sex ratio at birth and live births series from the National Statistical Service of Armenia, the UNSD Demographic Yearbook and the UN DESA World Population Prospects, 2022

Figure 8:
Missing female births as a percentage of observed female births between 1992 and 2021

Source: Author's calculations, based on the annual sex ratio at birth and live births series from the National Statistical Service of Armenia, the UNSD Demographic Yearbook and the UN DESA World Population Prospects, 2022

Figure 8 shows the annual number of missing female births as a percentage of observed female births. The data shows a decline in the percentage of missing female births, from 14 per cent of observed female births in 2000 to 3 per cent in 2021. This might indicate a decrease in the prevalence of son preference and a shift in societal attitudes and/or behaviours in Armenia since the year 2000.

5. Recommendations

1 ⟶ **Policy and programme implications of this research**

⟶ The conceptual framework can be used as a basis for analysis to: a) improve understanding of the intersections across the root causes of son preference; and b) monitor shifts in son preference as a result of programme interventions, including law and policy. Systematic mapping of the root causes and their interconnections can be used to pinpoint specific factors leading to son preference and the undervaluing of daughters. Grouping them into the different categories – individual, social, material and institutional – for various ethnic groups or regions will enhance the effectiveness of policy and programme design.

⟶ Understanding the impact of son preference on women and girls throughout their life course can strengthen the formulation of policies that support broader gender equality. Such an approach aims not only to rectify the immediate issue of son preference, but also to foster a society that values all genders equally.

2 ⟶ **There is a need for more data and research**
Further research and data are needed to better understand:

⟶ The consequences of son preference across women's life course, especially during the transition to adulthood and adult years of active engagement in the labour force.

⟶ The influence of the conflict on son preference, and how to transform harmful social and gender norms in the context of conflict and migration.

⟶ The role of social norms, including son preference and gender bias in inheritance practices, and their broader effects on women's lives and socioeconomic outcomes.

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