

Fact sheet

Azerbaijan

Every Girl Counts

Son Preference and Daughter Aversion

November 2023



1. Background

Son preference is a significant issue in Azerbaijan, sustained by harmful gender and social norms.

Son preference is a significant issue in Azerbaijan, sustained by harmful gender and social norms. This is reflected, for example, in data on the fertility choices of men and women in the 2018 International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) (UNFPA Azerbaijan and others, 2018). Both male and female survey respondents said they preferred to have a larger number of boys than girls (Figure 1). Men showed a stronger preference than women for a larger number of boys: 41.5 per cent of men showed a preference for a greater number of sons over daughters, compared to just 18.3 per cent of women who shared this preference. By contrast, 17.5 per cent of women preferred to have more daughters than sons, a preference shared by only 6.0 per cent of men. Despite this preference for sons, more than half of Azerbaijanis aspired to have a gender-balanced family with an equal number of sons and daughters (UNFPA Azerbaijan and others, 2018).

Azerbaijan is a patriarchal society where women occupy a lower societal position and men have more decision-making power. Daughters are perceived as burdens and “birds of passage”, as they are expected to move away from their biological family after marriage into their husband’s family. They are also perceived to have limited capacity to provide financial support to their parents in old age, given their low socioeconomic status. By contrast, sons are seen as custodians of the family lineage, performers of key roles in family ceremonies, such as funerals, and the primary providers of financial support for parents in old age (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu and others, 2014). While this demonstrates a deep system of patriarchy, data on attitudes reflects a desire for greater gender equality. The 2018 IMAGES survey reveals that 78.9 per cent of men and 87.7 per cent of women agree that more efforts are needed to promote gender equality (UNFPA Azerbaijan and others, 2018). However, this desire for change does not relieve women of the immense societal and familial pressure to bear at least one son to continue the family lineage.

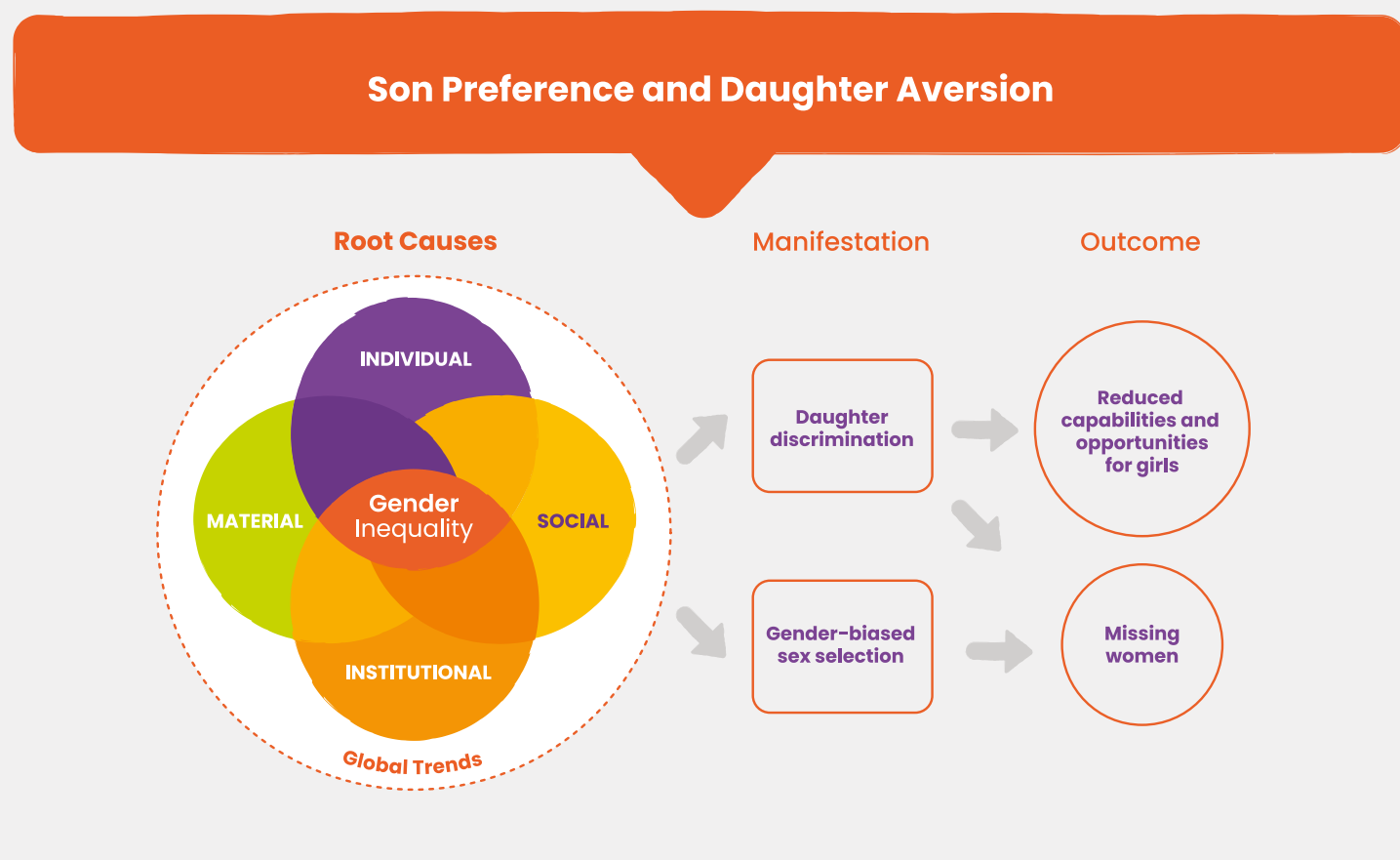
Figure 1:
Family planning – preferred number of children by sex (mean/standard deviation)

	Men mean (SD)	Women mean (SD)	Difference
Preferred number of sons	1.72 (0.71)	1.43 (0.63)	*
Preferred number of daughters	1.25 (0.61)	1.36 (0.67)	**

Note: *means significant difference at the $p < .001$ level, ** means significant difference at the $p < 0.05$ level

Source: UNFPA Azerbaijan and others, 2018

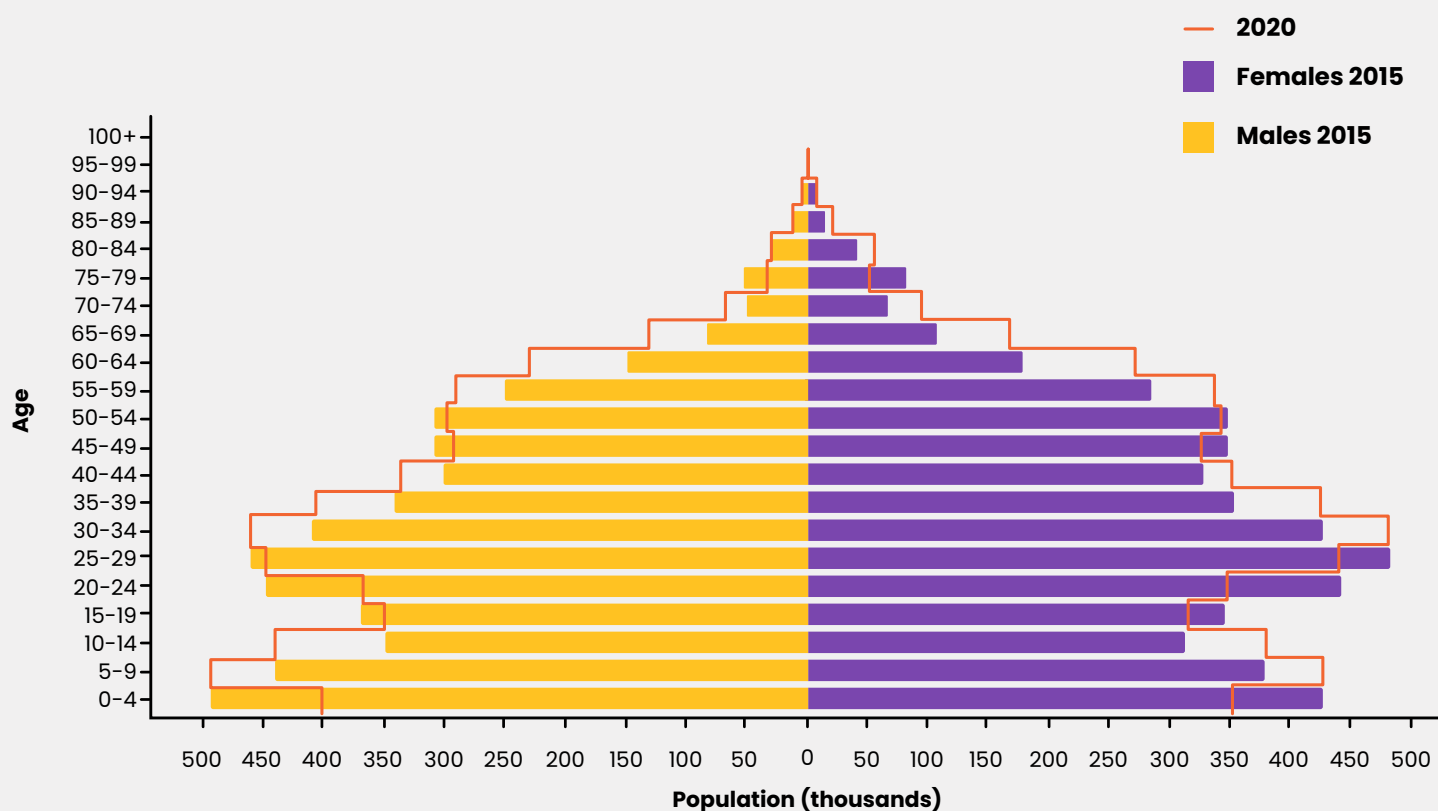
Figure 2:
UNFPA conceptual framework on son preference and daughter aversion



This fact sheet extracts and applies research and data relating to Azerbaijan to better understand the context and impacts of son preference. It outlines the underlying causes of son preference, identifies the ways in which son preference manifests and explores the consequent impacts on girls and women. The analysis is conducted using the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) conceptual framework on son preference and daughter aversion (Figure 2). The framework outlines the root causes, manifestations and outcomes of son preference. This approach acknowledges that in order to sustainably address son preference, an analysis of sex ratio at birth (SRB), which has been used as the primary measure for monitoring gender-biased sex selection, is insufficient. SRB can only measure sex selection before birth, which means it cannot be used to understand the full extent of manifestations and impacts of son preference. For example, there may be couples with a preference for sons who do not choose to sex-select, but instead discriminate against their daughters, impacting their life course. Attitudes and beliefs that place higher value on sons can profoundly impact the lived experiences of daughters who are raised in an environment where women are considered less valuable than men.

The population pyramid presented in Figure 3 illustrates the demographic structure of Azerbaijan in 2015 (represented by yellow and purple bars) and 2020 (outlined in orange). The relatively symmetrical shape indicates a balanced gender distribution within the overall population of Azerbaijan. Notably, the elderly population (aged 65 and over) comprises a higher proportion of females, indicating greater life expectancy for women. By contrast, the younger population (under 20 years old) demonstrates a notably higher proportion of males, which can be attributed to the higher SRB levels during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The gender distribution in Azerbaijan remained unchanged between 2015 and 2020. In 2015, there was a significantly larger population in the age groups below 10 years compared to the adjacent age group of 10 to 15 years. This reflects the increase in live births between 2005 and 2010. The reduction in the population aged 0–4 between 2015 and 2020 reflects the decline in live births since 2015. Overall, these observations provide some insights into how the persistent practice of son preference has continued to affect the evolving demographics of Azerbaijan over 2015–2020.

Figure 3:
Population pyramid: Azerbaijan 2015–2020



Source: UN DESA World Population Prospects, 2022

2. Root causes

Son preference in Azerbaijan is rooted in a complex combination of sociocultural, political and historical factors.

Son preference in Azerbaijan is rooted in a complex combination of sociocultural, political 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 Cislighi 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 beliefs which underlie perceptions of the importance of having a son in the family and the lower value of daughters. As seen in Figure 4, according to the 2018 IMAGES survey, the main reasons for preferring sons are to ensure the continuation of the family lineage and support for parents in old age (UNFPA Azerbaijan and others, 2018). These personal attitudes on the importance of sons are far more significant for men than for women. By contrast, more women than men view raising a daughter as a "salt's burden", an idiom implying that raising a girl is a heavy, costly responsibility, meaning "the charge of raising a girl is as hard as carrying salt" (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu and others, 2014).

Figure 4:
Attitudes about son preference in Azerbaijan

	Men (%)	Women (%)
It is important to have a son to carry on the family name or lineage	85.7	73.4
It is important to have a son to take care of you in your old age	53.8	33.2
Having a daughter is a financial burden/loss	48.5	44.6
A daughter's burden is a salt's burden	48.9	54.6

Source: UNFPA Azerbaijan and others, 2018

Social

Azerbaijan is characterized by a traditional patriarchal family structure where women are controlled by their fathers and other male family members, and after marriage are seen to belong to their husbands. In the “patrilocal” kinship system, women leave their family home to live with their husband’s family. This social system affects the way in which attitudes manifest within communities and families. Once married, women are under strong pressure from their family and society to bear a son; if no son is born, women may face intimate partner violence, threats of divorce or of being forced to share the household with another woman (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu and others, 2014). The birth of a male child can increase a woman’s security and influence within the household, which may lead to women having sex-selective abortions as a means to augment their standing and power (Pearce and others, 2022). For men, having a son is viewed as a sign of their own masculinity and a source of honour for the family, in a culture where honour holds supreme societal value (Pearce and others, 2022).

Material

The traditional view of men as primary breadwinners persists in Azerbaijan (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu, 2014). Men are expected either to engage in the local labour market or migrate to other countries to secure employment (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu, 2014). Women are seen as responsible for household duties, and decisions regarding their work outside the home are predominantly made by men (UNFPA Azerbaijan, 2018). Women’s unpaid workload and lower earnings make it challenging for them to provide financial support for their parents, rendering them less valuable in this regard. Moreover, inheritance and land rights predominantly pass through male heirs, further limiting women’s economic autonomy (UNFPA Azerbaijan and others, 2018).

Institutional

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, a lack of social safety nets in the Caucasus meant families became heavily reliant on family networks for support (Guilmoto and Duthé, 2013). A continuing lack of effective social security schemes means that parents remain dependent on their sons’ support once they stop working. Religious institutions in Azerbaijan also play an important role in influencing son preference and the attribution of higher value to sons than daughters: for example, only a son (or a close male relative) is permitted to carry their parent’s body during funeral rites (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu and others, 2014).

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.

→ **War and conflict**

The recent escalation of military conflict over the Karabakh region has exacerbated the phenomenon of son preference. Conflict leads to the glorification of men as the main agents protecting the nation, further reinforcing their status and authority within both families and wider society (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu and others, 2014).

→ **Declining fertility**

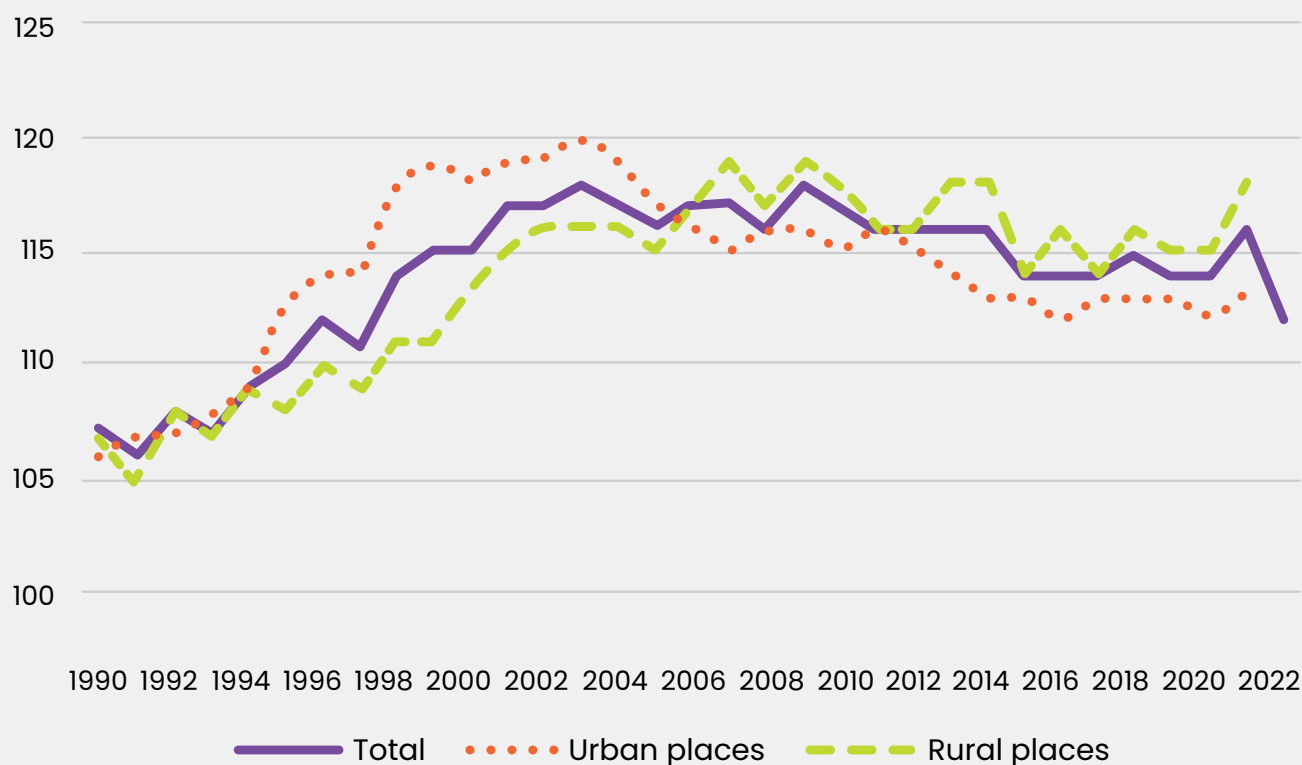
Following the independence of Azerbaijan in 1991, there was a significant dip in the fertility rate. The national total fertility rate of Azerbaijan dropped from 4.7 births per woman in 1970 to 2.8 in 1990 and 1.7 in 2022 (National Statistics Office of Azerbaijan, 2023). Before independence, families had sufficient economic resources to have multiple children until they had a son. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, limited economic resources led families to reduce the number of children they had, making it more challenging to ensure the birth of a desired male child (Dudwick, 2015). While not a root cause in itself, low fertility heightens the pressure on women to have sons, indirectly bolstering son preference.

3. Manifestations

Son preference in Azerbaijan is manifested by the country's skewed SRB, which is illustrated in Figure 5.

Son preference in Azerbaijan is manifested by the country's skewed SRB, which is illustrated in Figure 5. The SRB increased steadily from 107 male births per 100 female births in 1990 to 117 by 2001. It then remained around this level for about 10 years, which represents an excess male birth rate of 11 per cent. Although a slightly descending trend is observed after the early 2010s, levels of SRB are still well above the normal level of 105 boys per 100 girls, making Azerbaijan a country with one of the highest SRB levels in the world (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu and others, 2014, p. 29). The SRB slightly increased from 114 boys in 2020 to 116 in 2021, then went down to 112 in 2022. Figure 5 also depicts the SRB in urban and rural areas of Azerbaijan. It can be seen that until 1994, urban and rural SRB were at the same level. Starting in 1995, the SRB in urban areas overtook that in rural areas for a decade. From the mid-2000s the SRB in urban areas began to decline gradually, while the ratio in rural areas stayed high. The SRB has been lower in urban than in rural Azerbaijan since 2006.

Figure 5:
Sex ratio at birth in Azerbaijan, 1990–2022



Source: National Statistics Office of Azerbaijan, 2023

In addition to the urban–rural difference, SRB in Azerbaijan also exhibits significant regional variation, with the lowest values of 101–102 boys to 100 girls in Absheron and Lankaran, and the highest values of more than 140 in Ganja–Gazakh, Guba–Khachmaz and Shaki–Zaqatala (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu and others, 2014, p. 30). By analysing data from a survey conducted in 2011, Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu and others (2014) also show that SRB is higher among women with either a basic or a higher education. As seen in other countries where son preference prevails, the SRB in Azerbaijan becomes increasingly skewed with birth order; the sex ratio for third and subsequent births reaches an astonishing number of 205 males per 100 females (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu and others, 2014, p. 30).

The strikingly skewed and persistently high levels of SRB in Azerbaijan strongly suggest the practice of gender-biased sex selection – that is, families with a strong son preference may choose to have an induced abortion if they know the fetus is female. More than half of married women in Azerbaijan have had at least one abortion (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu and others, 2014, pp. 36–37). The mean number of induced abortions is substantially higher among women with two or three boys relative to those with two or three girls, indicating that many Azerbaijani families have used induced abortion to secure the birth of male offspring (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu and others, 2014, p. 38).

In the context of son preference and the undervaluing of daughters, families may allocate fewer resources to daughters, discriminate against them and neglect them. This may have many adverse impacts throughout a girl's life, such as poor health status. According to the Azerbaijan Demographic and Health Survey (AZ-DHS, State Statistical Committee Azerbaijan and Macro International, 2008), only 14.4 per cent of girls aged under 5 with diarrhoea had been given oral rehydration treatment compared with 22.1 per cent of boys, and more girls (40.1 per cent) had received no medical treatment for diarrhoea relative to boys (31.5 per cent). The uneven parental investment in the treatment of their children's illnesses may result in girls having poorer health than boys.

4. Outcomes

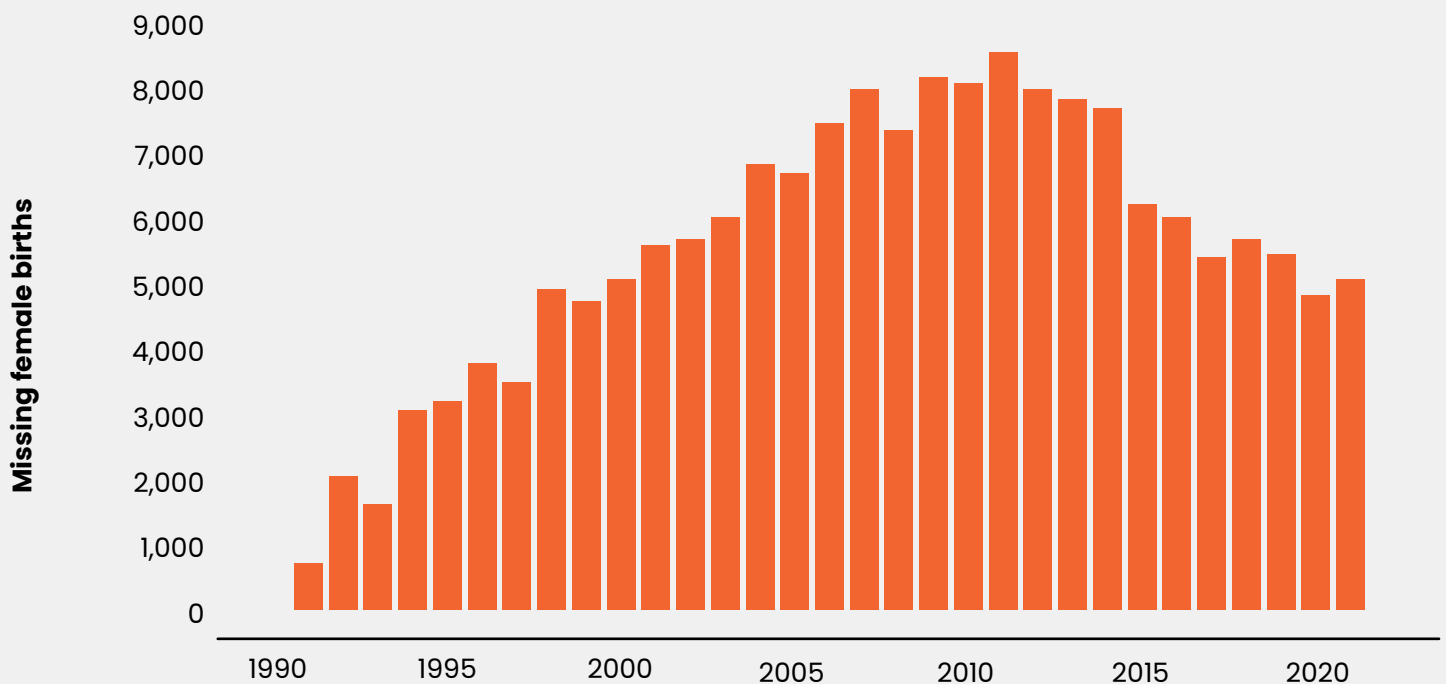
Son preference and daughter aversion have serious consequences for women and girls.

Son preference and daughter aversion have 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 Azerbaijan, 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) and the number of observed female births.

Figure 6 depicts the temporal trend of our estimations. We observe a consistent rise in the number of missing female births from the early 1990s, peaking at 8,790 in 2011, which represented 11 per cent of observed female births. However, there has been a subsequent decline, with 5,233 missing female births in 2021, representing 10 per cent of observed female births.

Figure 6:

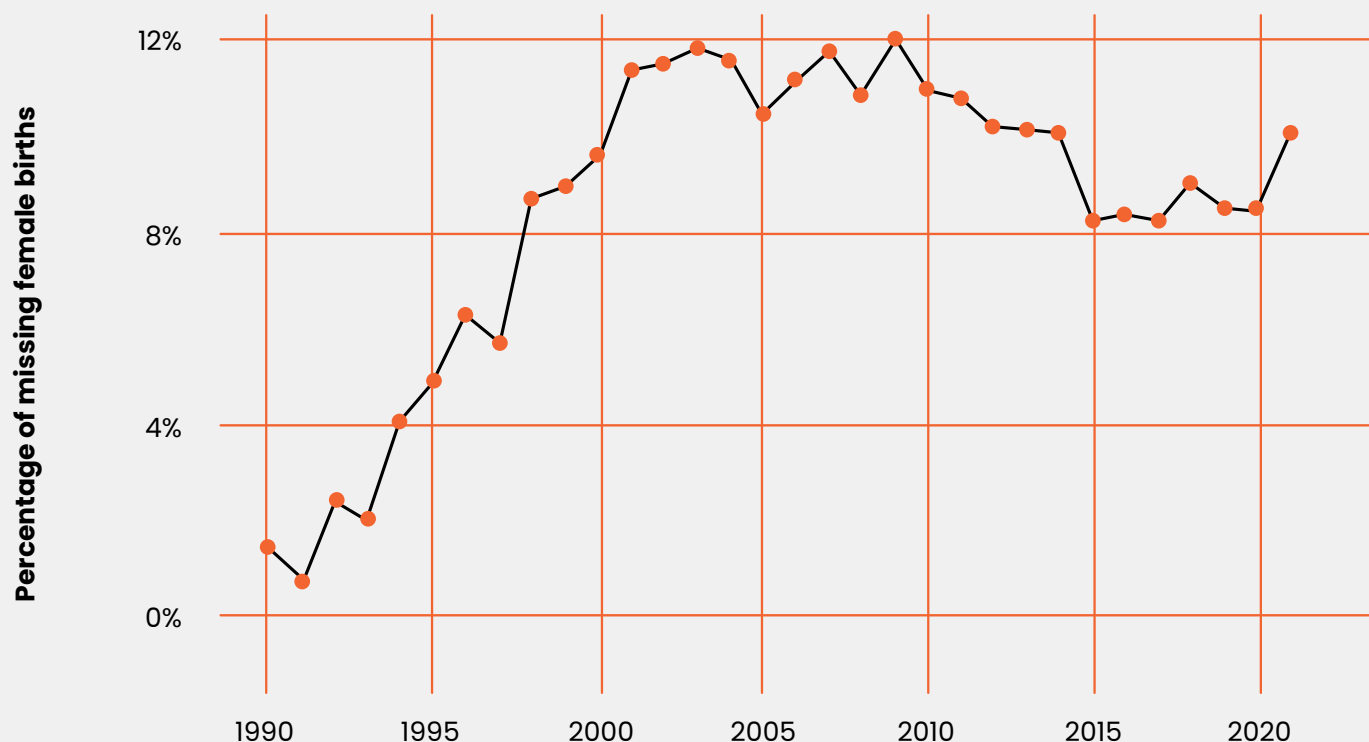
Annual number of missing female births in Azerbaijan between, 1991–2021



Source: Author's calculations, based on the annual sex ratio at birth and live births series published by the National Statistics Office of Azerbaijan, 2023

Figure 7:

Missing female births as a percentage of observed female births in Azerbaijan, 1990–2021



Source: Author's calculations, based on the annual sex ratio at birth series published by the National Statistics Office of Azerbaijan, 2023

Figure 7 provides evidence that the annual number of missing female births has consistently exceeded 8 per cent of observed female births since 1998. This indicates a persistent prevalence of son preference without significant change since the late 1990s. Consequently, the decrease in missing female births can be attributed to a decrease in overall fertility rates in Azerbaijan over the studied period, rather than a shift in attitudes regarding son preference.

In addition, according to estimates by the Hacettepe University in Ankara in Türkiye, by 2050 there will be 12,000–15,000 more boys than girls born each year in Azerbaijan if the SRB remains high. The study predicts that if this masculinization of the SRB continues or worsens, negative impacts such as widening gender gaps in education, reduction in the proportion of women in the labour market and less gender diversity in all spheres of life are likely to be observed (Koç & Eryurt, 2015).

Son preference is associated with reduced opportunities for women and girls in many areas of life, such as education, employment and marriage. The AZ-DHS data indicates, for example, that Azerbaijani women of reproductive age (15–49 years) had on average 10.7 years of education, which is two years lower than the average years of education among their husbands or partners (State Statistical Committee Azerbaijan and Macro International, 2008). The female employment rate is also low in Azerbaijan. Less than one-fifth of women surveyed in the AZ-DHS were working at the time of the survey, 40 per cent of whom had low-skilled jobs, for example as agricultural or domestic workers. Teen marriage, which is rooted in gender inequality and threatens women's socioeconomic well-being, is also common in Azerbaijan, with 39.6 per cent of women marrying when they are under 20. Moreover, the level of trust within marriage is low and men have a dominant role. More than half of married women sampled in the AZ-DHS said their husbands do not trust them with money or are jealous if they talk with other men, and only 14.1 per cent of women said they do not have control issues with their husbands.

Growing up and living in a patriarchal society with a strong son preference also undermines women's empowerment, as women are systematically denied their rights and opportunities to participate fully in society. Women's capabilities are shaped by the freedom to make choices and take actions that result in their desired outcomes. According to the AZ-DHS, less than 20 per cent of women had a final say on decisions about their own health care (17.6 per cent); large household purchases (11.5 per cent); household purchases for daily needs (17.8 per cent); and visiting family or relatives (10.1 per cent). When women cannot make their own decisions about their health care it follows that they do not have full agency over their bodies and well-being. The low percentages of women with decision-making power regarding large household purchases and purchases for daily needs reflect women's limited economic agency. Restrictions on women's social autonomy is evidenced by their lack of decision-making power around when they can visit their family and relatives. These points demonstrate women's limited empowerment and capabilities, which further reinforce and perpetuate social norms that value sons over daughters. Furthermore, 58.5 per cent of sampled women in the AZ-DHS thought that a husband is justified in beating his wife. These internalized gender norms of tolerating violence against women further undermine women's empowerment.

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 these factors 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 impacts 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 and daughter aversion, but also to foster a society that values all genders equally.
- > Continuing advocacy is needed for state-supported childcare and family care that supports women's economic empowerment, including through legal amendments to ensure paid, flexible and non-transferable parental leave policies for men. Continuing advocacy is also needed for the endorsement of the Law on Family Planning and Reproductive Health.

2 —————> **There is a need for more data and research**

- > The available microdata related to this topic, such as the AZ-DHS, was collected more than a decade ago. It is recommended that the next round of the AZ-DHS is carried out to provide the basis for analysing trends to determine the effectiveness of interventions to date.
- > Future research and data are also needed to better understand the consequences of son preference for girls and women across the life course, especially for girls transitioning into adulthood.

References

Cislaghi, Bieniamo, and Lori Heise (2018). Theory and practice of social norms interventions: Eight common pitfalls. *Globalization and Health*, vol. 14, No. 83 (August).

Dudwick, Nora (2015). *“Missing Women” in the South Caucasus: Local Perceptions and Proposed Solutions*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.

Guilmoto, Christophe Z., and Géraldine Duthé (2013). Masculinization of births in Eastern Europe. *Population & Societies*, vol. 506, No. 11, pp. 1–4.

Koç, İsmet, and Mehmet A. Eryurt (2015). *Population Projections, 2014–2050: Different Sex Ratio at Birth Scenarios in Azerbaijan*. Baku, Azerbaijan: UNFPA Azerbaijan and Hacettepe University.

National Statistics Office of Azerbaijan (2023). Available at <https://www.stat.gov.az/source/demography/?lang=en> (accessed on 14 November 2023).

Pearce, Katy E., and others (2022). The influence of social media discussion on son preference in Azerbaijan: Reinforcing norms, bargaining with patriarchy, space for dissent. *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 16, pp. 2456–2476.

State Statistical Committee Azerbaijan and Macro International (2008). *Azerbaijan Demographic and Health Survey 2006*. Baku, Azerbaijan and Calverton, Maryland, USA: State Statistical Committee Azerbaijan and Macro International.

UNFPA Azerbaijan (United Nations Population Fund Azerbaijan) (2018). Fact sheet. *Global Programme to Prevent Son Preference and the Undervaluing of Girls: Azerbaijan*. Baku, Azerbaijan: UNFPA Azerbaijan.

United Nations Population Fund Azerbaijan (UNFPA Azerbaijan) and others (2018). *Gender Equality and Gender Relations in Azerbaijan: Current Trends And Opportunities. Findings from the Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES)*. Baku, Azerbaijan: UNFPA Azerbaijan.

UN DESA (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs), Population Division (2022). *World Population Prospects 2022*. Online Edition.

Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu, İlknur, and others (2014). *Mechanisms behind the Skewed Sex Ratio at Birth in Azerbaijan: Qualitative and Quantitative Analyses*. Baku, Azerbaijan: UNFPA Azerbaijan.

