

# BOOK REVIEWS

Mara Hvistendahl

*Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys Over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men*

New York: PublicAffairs, 2011. xix + 314 pages. Cloth, \$26.99, ISBN: 978-1-58648-850-5; paper, \$15.99, ISBN: 978-1-61039-151-1; e-book, \$26.99, ISBN: 978-1-58648-991-5.

At a time when the international community is beginning to pay close attention to the magnitude of sex imbalances that have emerged during the past 25 years, *Unnatural Selection's* global perspective on sex selection (taking us from China and Vietnam to India, Albania, and the United States) will likely bring wider public attention to the issue. Mara Hvistendahl, an American science journalist, spent several years in China reporting on population issues before embarking on a systematic study of birth imbalances in Asia. The informed reader will be struck by the limited reference made in the book to the usual culprits associated with the emergence of sex selection, such as drastic family planning policies in China, dowry inflation in India, and the collapse of the socialist regime in eastern Europe. The blame is placed elsewhere—much further west.

*Unnatural Selection* does not follow the typical framework of an analytical study. Instead of being organized historically, geographically, theoretically, or by another common conceptual schema, the chapters are knitted as vignettes centered around prominent figures in the sex-selection story ("The Feminist," "The General," "The Doctor," "The Parents," and so forth). As it so happens, the first chapter, titled "The Demographer," revolves around this reviewer, who is also referred to throughout the book. During the past three years, Hvistendahl interviewed me on numerous occasions, yet she did not invite me to review the quotes for accuracy, and, more troubling, saw to it that I not see the manuscript prior to publication. Not only would I have been able to detect many incorrect statements and figures, but I would have been spared the embarrassment of finding my own views misrepresented in a number of so-called "quotes." (Unfortunately, all efforts at ensuring that the publisher, PublicAffairs, withdraw my name from any subsequent edition of the book have thus far been denied.)

Hvistendahl explores various aspects of sex selection, and combines personal observations, interviews, anecdotes, secondary evidence, and archival work. Interspersed are irrelevant (and in some instances inaccurate) comments concerning the physical features, biographical details, and personal habits of the interviewees. We learn, for example, of an individual who provided a lot of information "before [getting] drunk" (p. 134). Yet the book generally reads well and is peppered with academic and archival references beyond anecdotes. Despite being organized through vignettes, *Unnatural Selection* follows a somewhat logical progression and takes the reader full circle from Asia back to America, revealing a diverse social and cultural landscape along the way. This broad landscape includes involuntary bachelors, prostitutes, Vietnamese women married in South Korea or trafficked into China, Korean women too old to bear children, violent unmarried men of the Wild West and the Taiping Rebellion, angry young Chinese men, as well as unhygienic abortion clinics and genetic research on sex determination. Despite its diverse geographic detours to settings such as Tirana (Albania) and Vietnam's Mekong Delta, the main focus of the book is North America. The author reveals a clear US-centric bias, on several occasions using "we" to refer to Americans (e.g., "In America, we want girls . . ." [p. 252]), and this US-centricity is befitting a book that sees the United States as the center of Asia's current sex imbalances.

As a researcher familiar with sex-selection issues, I find this focus on North America unexpected. The book begins with a discussion of sex selection as a demographic phenomenon related to the preference for sons and the emergence of sex-selective abortions in Asian countries. In a pivotal chapter titled "The Imperialist," Hvistendahl relates the history of female infanticide in India at the end of the 18th century, but instead of stressing how the British described, measured, and fought this practice, she proclaims that "by the time the colonialists began denying that Indians killed girls, infanticide had finally become a custom" (p. 71). To an enthusiastic reader of Indian colonial reports and censuses like me, both arguments (denial and new custom) seem somewhat perverse. The fact that trav-

elers described infanticide in different parts of Asia long before the British set foot in India goes unmentioned.

The author makes the case that cultural traditions are unduly blamed for sex discrimination, and floats a new hypothesis: "What if the indiscriminate elimination of girls was planned—not by individual parents thinking only of themselves but by some larger force?" (p. 74). The remainder of the book attempts to document and validate this conjecture. To do so, the author provides her interpretation of the development of family planning programs in the 1960s and adopts Matthew Connelly's somewhat unbalanced analysis of the central role of US-based and other international organizations in establishing the family planning program in India. (China, too, is claimed to have borrowed its family planning program from the West.) The book offers new material drawn from archives from US-based organizations promoting prenatal sex identification as a way of preventing unwanted births of girls in (particularly Asian) settings characterized by a staunch preference for sons. All of this was occurring in the late 1960s, when the international population lobby had gathered steam as a result of the acceleration in population growth. Several population experts had indeed toyed with the idea that prenatal sex selection would both respond to the gender needs of Asian populations and also hasten fertility decline. The excesses of national family planning campaigns are given as an illustration of the influence of these powerful international forces, though the emphasis is on India's Emergency Period in 1975 rather than the later family planning campaigns in China. We are taken on a tour to encounter a series of villains who had planned it all, including Paul Ehrlich, Steven Polgar, William Draper, and Sheldon Segal.

Hvistendahl's argument weakens further when we realize that a time gap of some 20 years exists between the often cynically advanced ideas of (some) population experts and the actual emergence of prenatal sex selection. She reasons that the ideas were planted early on and that American manufacturers moved in quickly when prenatal technology became an industrial reality in the 1980s. The author clearly suggests that the responsibility for today's sex imbalances lies with all organizations associated with family planning in the 1960s, namely, the Population Council, UNFPA, IPPF, USAID, and the World Bank. Publicity information accompanying the book states that "UNFPA ... has been mostly silent on this issue," a bizarre claim that a visit to UNFPA's website would quickly dispel. Furthermore, several UN agencies issued a strong joint statement against prenatal sex selection when the book was released.

The book provides a good review of two preconditions of prenatal sex selection—fertility decline and sup-

ply factors (access to sex-selection technology)—but little attention is given to the most indispensable ingredient: the demand for sons, which seems of little interest to Hvistendahl. Demand for sons is the subject of the shortest chapter ("The Parent"), consisting of anecdotal stories collected in China's Jiangsu province and previously published by the author. Interestingly, we are not even given proof that the wife of Wu Pingzhang, the main protagonist of this chapter, ever did resort to sex selection. The phrase "son preference" is missing from the book's otherwise detailed index, and we do not learn anything about the role of patrilineal family systems in fostering the demand for sons. Perhaps such anthropological interpretations are, in the author's eyes, nothing but a reflection of an archaic, culturalist view inherited from the worst of "Orientalist" knowledge.

In many ways, sex-selective abortion is a rational response of families operating within social and economic systems where sons are necessary, but Hvistendahl never considers this dimension of the issue. She also makes assertions about emerging sex imbalances in eastern Europe, but offers no discussion of why these imbalances are emerging there and whether this should or should not be unexpected given traditional cultural practices in the region.

Hvistendahl's grand narrative contends that prenatal sex selection is the joint product and malicious design of a few population experts and some greedy multinational companies. All populations and governments in Asia, both authoritarian and democratic, have apparently fallen into this trap, according to the author, and have allowed millions of girls to be eliminated before birth to alleviate Western countries' fears of excess population growth. This narrative discounts any sense of agency on the part of Asian governments or the millions of parents who have practiced sex selection. Little is written about the social, economic, or spiritual predicaments of Asian families who want to limit family size but also want to ensure the birth of a son. Son preference is seen merely as an insignificant backdrop to the cynical manipulation of international organizations and their puppets—the Asian governments that devised population policies at the West's biddings.

Not surprisingly, Hvistendahl offers no recommendations for what should be done. The book is mostly conceived as a long denunciation of US interference in the domestic social affairs of Asian countries. Such an approach, ironically, ensures that the book will generate more publicity than did Elisabeth Croll's classic detailed anthropological description of gender bias in several countries, *Endangered Daughters: Discrimination and Development in Asia* (2000), which is predictably absent from the index.

The shortcomings of the book are a pity, because *Unnatural Selection* does present intriguing material on the population lobby from the late 1960s and early 1970s, and offers a larger picture of the still little-known phenomenon of sex selection and its influences on the demographic future of many Asian and eastern European countries. Yet the overall product is a somewhat misguided and ethnocentric view of the mechanisms leading to the current sex imbalances at birth, and an often sensationalist analysis of sex selection's potential future impact (the image on the cover is of four toy soldiers and a pink doll). Since its publication, the book has provided more ammunition to pro-lifers attempting to limit access to abortion and to politicians eager to curtail US multilateral engagement through UN agencies than to feminists and activists fighting against the ravages of prenatal sex discrimination.

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## Reference

Croll, Elizabeth. 2000. *Endangered Daughters: Discrimination and Development in Asia*. New York: Routledge.

Carole H. Browner and Carolyn F. Sargent,  
editors

*Reproduction, Globalization, and the State:  
New Theoretical and Ethnographic Perspectives*

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. xiv + 294 pages.  
Cloth, \$84.95, ISBN: 978-0-8223-4941-9; paper, \$23.95,  
ISBN: 978-0-8223-4960-0.

This timely work is a compilation of ethnographically rich and theoretically informed studies conducted by anthropologists from around the world. Examining a broad spectrum of topics—including birth in the age of AIDS; male sexual labor; the prenatal period; DNA paternity tests; and the role played by family planning, translators, and reproductive policies on family structure—*Reproduction, Globalization, and the State* underscores the importance of framing these subjects within the lens of globalization.

The book contains 14 substantive essays, organized into three parts, and also includes a foreword by Rayna Rapp, an epilogue by Didier Fassin, and an introduction by the editors. Part I, "Global Technologies, State Policies, and Local Realities," investigates reproductive practices in the contexts of global, national, and local factors. Part

II, "Biotechnology, Biocommerce, and Body Commodification," explores the ways that children born by means of assisted reproductive technologies challenge notions of convention, family, and kinship. Part III, "Consequences of Population Movements for Agency, Structure, and Reproductive Processes," analyzes how movement across borders shapes individuals' reproductive strategies and family structures.

Several contributions are by prominent figures in the anthropology of reproduction, including Caroline Bledsoe, Ellen Gruenbaum, Matthew Gutmann, Marcia Inhorn, Cecilia Van Hollen, and Linda Whiteford. Also included are articles by political and medical anthropologists such as Didier Fassin, Mark Padilla, and Lisa Ann Richey, whose research contributes significantly to the understanding of globalization and reproduction. Particularly appealing is the inclusion of newer voices in the reproductive field (Junjie Chen, Aimee Eden, and Susan Erikson). This layering of scholarly voices makes the compilation enjoyable and dynamic, and will likely contribute to its enduring success.

Erikson's powerful piece on the use of ultrasound in Germany serves as an excellent starting point. She discusses theoretical and methodological conundrums that often befuddle ethnographers who work on issues connecting the global to the local. Her concern with keeping her informants' lives center stage, while exploring the health and policy bureaucracies that affected their pregnancies, gives rise to an aggregated picture of healthcare that can be applied to many other parts of the world.

Gutmann's chapter highlights the ways that male exclusion from family planning and reproduction becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for noninvolvement. Addressing the long-standing neglect of male reproduction in anthropology, Gutmann shows (through a brief historical overview of Mexican population policies) how men were almost entirely ignored as targets for these policies.

Shining a bright light upon the connection between reproduction and modernity in China, Chen provides a cogent overview of the state-level policies that established "a behavioral model for local women to follow" (p. 43) to become modern citizens instead of "deficient rural subjects" (p. 46). Other notable contributions in Part I include chapters by Richey and Van Hollen on linking HIV with women's decisions about reproduction, a connection that is often ignored in policy and practice. Gruenbaum's analysis of the various contradictory discourses and "clashing global ideologies" (p. 108) surrounding Sudanese female circumcision provides a much-needed layering of the politics of health and women's rights.

In Part II, Marcia Inhorn and Aditya Bharadwaj explore the ways infertile couples in the Middle East and