


## SUBJECT TO DEBATE

## Female: An Endangered Gender?

 Does the simple fact of being female expose a person to social and economic peril? In most societies, women are viewed as valuable, even powerful, particularly as mothers, nurturers, teachers, and spiritual leaders. Yet in other ways, to be female is to be endangered. We will consider this controversial idea with an eye to how demographics and culture closely shape each other.

Many cultures have a marked preference for males. The academic term describing this is *androcentrism*; you may be familiar with related terms such as *patriarchy* (a social system in which the father is considered the head of a household, with authority over women and children), *male bias*, or simply *sexism*. Whether a preference for males is a universal feature has been disputed. Some societies pass along forms of their wealth, property, and prestige from mother to daughter, rather than from father to son. This is rare, however, and the roots of cultural preference for males appear historically far-reaching and widespread. In most societies, positions of economic, political, social, and cultural prestige and power are held largely by men. Sons carry on family names and, with them, family honor and wealth. In some societies, sons are obligated to take care of their aging parents, but there is no such expectation for daughters. When girls marry, they are expected to move into their husbands' homes and help care for their in-laws, but not their parents.

Not surprisingly, in many places a son is widely viewed as an asset, a future breadwinner and caregiver for his parents in their advanced age, but a daughter is generally seen as a liability. A cultural premium is placed on producing male children. The birth of a boy may be celebrated and rewarded, while the birth of a girl may be penalized. In countries that have enacted strict population control programs, such as China, or in countries with an obsession with sons, for example, India, this has resulted in severe pressure on couples to have boys. In both China and India, female-specific abortions or infanticide, neglect, and inadequate nutrition for girls has resulted in a glaring gender imbalance. The result is a skewed sex ratio. In 2004, China recorded a sex ratio at birth of 121.2 boys for every 100 girls. The ratio has been falling recently but it is still one of the world's most imbalanced.

One problem that resulted from such an unbalanced sex ratio is that men of marriageable age are increasingly unable to find female partners. By one estimate, there may be 30–40 million more young men than young women in China. Social analysts speculate that this will lead to human trafficking and violence against women. Meanwhile, parents and grandparents often are encouraged to lavish all their attention, wealth, and hopes on the only child, especially boys. For some families, this has led to the “little emperor syndrome,” whereby the male heir becomes spoiled, unable to function independently, and even obese.

### Continuing the Debate

As noted, most societies value females and males equally. For a number of reasons, however, some societies show a clear preference for males. Keeping all this in mind, consider the following questions:

- Are Chinese and Indian families somewhat justified in prioritizing the birth of a son?
- According to a recent report, Americans using technology to select their baby's gender are, unlike the Chinese, more likely to choose to have a girl. Why do you think there is a difference between male and female preference in these two societies?



This cherished grandson poses with his grandparents. (Lane Oatey/Blue Jean Images/Getty Images)