

India's New Trade Development: Male Fertility for Guns

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In a country where population control efforts exhort male sterilization, compensation for loss of manhood is equated to guns. "Today's Solutions are Tomorrow's Problems"...and not a woman around to help.

A recent front page story in the Washington Times reported that certain states in India are now offering easy access to gun licenses for men who agree to become sterilized. Sterilization campaigns, though routinely viewed with a great deal of suspicion, have long been attempted in India as part of larger population control efforts. The unpopularity of these campaigns was evident by the fact that few men were willing to come forward and undergo the procedure – in part because many felt that it would deprive them of an essential element of their manhood. In order to offset men's instinctual resistance to agree to become sterilized, the authorities deemed it necessary to compensate them for their loss of fertility with a "bigger symbol of manliness." Enter rapid access to gun licenses.

According to the Washington Times story, this gun license incentive is, for the moment, meeting with some success. Government and family planning officials report that men are responding "enthusiastically" to the new program, and that many more men are coming forward for vasectomies now that there is the incentive of obtaining a gun license – without the bureaucratic red tape and expense that ordinarily goes along with obtaining one.

So does this approach, or perhaps other similar incentive-based approaches, signal that family planning advocates have at last stumbled upon that hitherto elusive means of "getting men involved" in matters of "reproductive health" and population control? This seems highly unlikely. Indeed, it more likely reflects the wisdom of a Javanese proverb popular in nearby Indonesia: "Today's solutions are tomorrow's problems."

If anything, the sterilization campaigns, and more specifically the broader population control efforts long pushed by so many international actors, are exacerbating rather than ameliorating the most serious demographic crisis that India is actually facing: its "girl gap". It is not unknown today for some regions in India to have more than 120 males for every 100 females. This ratio is actually higher in parts of China than it is in India. How has this come to be?

In many parts of India and China, a longstanding cultural preference for sons, combined with the misuse of new sonogram technologies and increased access to abortion has led to highly skewed gender imbalances within its populations. The medical journal Lancet recently estimated that this practice of selecting females for termination has resulted in as many as 100 million "missing" girls worldwide.



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Their analysis of these trends in India noted, interestingly, that this problem was just as severe if not more so among the well educated, which indicates that this practice of sex selected abortion or infanticide – up to a half million a year in India alone – is not a function of poverty or desperation.

One does not need to pause for long to imagine the kinds of long term ramifications that this massive imbalance between the genders portends. One could, for example, rightly be concerned about the prospect for increased trafficking of women in the not too distant future, as one of many other foreseeable, potential byproducts of today's growing "girl gap."

Well, you might wonder: how does this "girl gap" relate to the whole question of sterilization campaigns and population control? It is precisely the multifaceted forces which are conspiring to limit family sizes that end up widening the "girl gap". This fact goes largely unmentioned, however, particularly among those with prior ideological commitments to the sexual freedom which sustains the push for "reproductive rights" – even if they are, on the other hand, simultaneously conflicted by their awareness of the disturbing injustice unfolding upon females whose rights they claim to champion.

Nonetheless, it has been persuasively demonstrated that declining fertility rates are one of the very factors which directly fuel the practice of selecting, on the basis of sex, which children will survive pregnancy and which will not. For example, after a first child is born in India, the desirability for a female child plummets as the desirability for a male child rises in each successive pregnancy. (By the fourth pregnancy, the parent's desire for a son is 75% versus only 9% for a daughter) A recent Chinese census likewise found that among those who were not a first born child, the sex ratio was 150 boys for every 100 girls.

In other words, all of this means that with fewer children born into a family, the pressure mounts to have a baby boy. Thus the trend towards smaller families, which has been for decades so fervently promoted by international donor institutions and many world governments – all in the name of development – helps account, at least in part, for the elimination of so many females. Thus it is plausible that certain population control efforts contribute towards greater demographic catastrophe and a host of other related societal ills than towards "solving" an ill-defined problem whose name is human life itself.

But in other and important ways, the attachment of incentives for sterilization, in the name of an amorphous "greater good", blurs and distorts what it means to be a man.

In light of these larger gender-related population trends, and given the fact that men in India are already naturally hesitant to become sterilized, one wonders why this manifestly shortsighted gun license incentive and ultimately demeaning appeal to "manliness" might not be replaced instead by an appeal to other more noble aspects of manliness. After all, it would be much more sensible to build on what is lodged deep within than to seek artificial replacements for the "manliness" they explicitly intend to rob. These other aspects of "manliness" – such as calls to respect



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the dignity of women, to protect children, and to act honorably and even courageously in defending the weak, the vulnerable, and all that is true and good, even if that means paying a dear personal price – are something to which men can aspire and willingly respond.

Though such appeals would certainly encounter resistance from those with varied vested interests, it would be welcomed by many others, regardless of any particular religious creed. Indeed, people of different backgrounds and faiths within India, including Hindus, Christians and Muslims, are actively seeking to thwart this practice. Furthermore, it is not just India and China that experience this phenomenon. It is occurring with more frequency in other parts of the world from Latin America to the Middle East, and there have even been reports of this practice here in the United States, particularly in enclaves among immigrant populations.

Finally, it is worth asking ourselves just how we would react if a similar type of incentive for sterilization program were being imposed or even proposed, say, in Dallas, Boise, or New York? Even if nothing that drastic is on the horizon, we should be prepared to marshal arguments against any number of other, similarly inspired trends which already enjoy considerable ratification by the dominant culture in this country – each of which treats the potential consequences of sex as a technical matter to be resolved.

At a time when population in most of the Western world is stagnating or contracting, population control initiatives seem to be the last thing we need. The premises from which they originate, and the elixir they promise to deliver, should be met with considerable scrutiny. Only when we can clearly see and name what is at the root of these sterilization campaigns and its many cousins – rival conceptions of human dignity and of the human person – will we begin to make headway in advancing authentic human development.



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