

Combating Selective Abortions in Contemporary Azerbaijan: Public Policy and Demographic Reality

Background and Relevance

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus has become the only region of the former USSR where cases of sex-selective abortion have been documented. The spread of ultrasound diagnostics, which enabled parents to determine the sex of the fetus, played a decisive role in this development (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu, Eryurt et al., 2014). In effect, longstanding cultural preferences were reinforced by new technologies (Michael, King et al., 2013).

Azerbaijan occupies a particularly striking position in this respect. It currently exhibits the highest sex ratio at birth in the world (116 boys per 100 girls), surpassing countries such as China, India and Armenia. Moreover, it is the only Muslim-majority country of the former Soviet Union where the masculinisation of births is so clearly pronounced. Importantly, high levels of sex-selective abortion are observed not only in relatively secular regions but also in the most religious parts of the country, particularly in the south (DHS, 2006).

The Azerbaijani government recognises sex-selective abortion as a negative demographic trend, but tends to explain it primarily through a lack of education. As a result, its policy response has focused largely on symbolic and awareness-raising measures, such as establishing “fathers’ schools”, distributing gifts to newborn girls, and launching public campaigns. Yet these initiatives have proved insufficient to reverse the trend.

Existing research on sex-selective abortion in the South Caucasus remains limited in scope and largely descriptive. Scholars highlight factors such as restricted access to modern contraceptive methods, declining quality of sex-specific vital statistics (Meslé, Vallin et al., 2007), birth order (Michael, King et al., 2013), and entrenched gender bias (Guilmoto, Dudwick et al., 2018). However, the deeper structural causes remain poorly understood. Competing explanatory models link the phenomenon either to the impact of ongoing military conflicts, which foster a cultural “cult of the male”, or to long-standing traditions of son preference rooted in the social fabric of the region (Shief et al., 2024).

Research Questions

The overarching hypothesis of the project is that sex-selective abortion represents one of the most pressing demographic challenges in contemporary

Azerbaijan. However, existing state policies have proven largely ineffective because they are designed primarily to demonstrate compliance with international organisations rather than to address the root causes of the problem.

On the one hand, this requires a detailed demographic analysis, including variables such as sex ratio, maternal age, birth order, regional variation, and other parameters. On the other hand, it necessitates an examination of the political and practical measures that the state has adopted—or failed to adopt—in response to this issue.

1. How has the prevalence of sex-selective abortion evolved since the collapse of the Soviet Union?
2. What political and practical measures has the Azerbaijani state introduced to address sex-selective abortion, and how effective have these measures been?
3. To what extent are these state policies aimed at genuine problem-solving, and to what extent are they designed to demonstrate compliance with international organisations?

Theoretical Framework

This project draws upon a combination of classical demographic theories and contemporary sociological and political science concepts, allowing for a multi-level and comparative analysis of family transformation in Azerbaijan.

Classical Theories of Demographic Transition

The classical theory of demographic transition (Adolphe Landry, Frank Notestein, Jones Caldwell, Tim Dyson, and Jean-Claude Chenais) provides an analytical framework for examining declines in fertility and mortality, urbanisation processes, and transformations in maternal age patterns.

The theory of the Second Demographic Transition (R. Lesthaeghe, D. Van de Kaa) highlights dynamics characteristic of low-fertility societies, including the increase of cohabitation, rising rates of lifelong singleness, the spread of the one-child model, and the growing prevalence of births outside marriage.

Gendered Approaches and the Concept of “Missing Women”

The concept of “Missing Women” (Amartya Sen, Christophe Z. Guilmoto) offers analytical tools for studying sex-selective abortion and excess female mortality. It emphasises that these phenomena are most likely to emerge in contexts marked by cultural son preference, low fertility, and liberal abortion legislation.

Political Demography and the Soviet Legacy

Research by Murray Feshbach, Barbara Anderson, Mie Nakachi, Alain Blum, Alexander Avdeev, Anatoly Vishnevsky, and Michel Rivkin-Fish offers a framework for analysing the specificities of Soviet demographic policy, including the “culture of abortion”, ideological restrictions, statistical falsification, and the impact of state interventions on the reproductive practices of the population.

Sources and Methodology

This project will draw upon a wide range of sources in order to provide both a demographic and political analysis of sex-selective abortion in Azerbaijan:

- Demographic data: materials from the State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan, including the population censuses of 1999, 2009, and 2019.
- International datasets: Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS 2000, MICS 2023) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS 2006, DHS 2011).
- Discourse analysis: legislative acts and public reports, freely accessible on the official websites of the President of Azerbaijan, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Parliament, the State Committee for Family and Women’s Affairs, and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).
- Media sources: approximately 2,000 articles from Azerbaijani media outlets (both state-controlled and independent), identified using the search term *selectiv abort* (in Azerbaijani). To date, around 500 articles (in Azerbaijani and Russian) have already been analysed.
- Expert interviews: analysis of 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with academics, NGO staff, and activists, providing insights into policy implementation, social attitudes, and local practices.

Expected findings

1. This project aims to contribute to the broader discussion on socio-political transformation in post-Soviet states by examining demographic dynamics, with a particular focus on the issue of sex-selective abortion in contemporary Azerbaijan.
2. The analysis highlights that current state policies addressing sex-selective abortion remain limited in scope. On the one hand, the government promotes largely symbolic measures to demonstrate commitment to

gender equality. On the other, it neglects fundamental aspects of reproductive health governance — such as the absence of a reproductive health law and limited access to modern contraception — which are crucial to addressing the root causes of gender-biased practices.

3. The study also argues that international organizations funding gender equality initiatives in Azerbaijan, including programs to combat sex-selective abortion, often exercise insufficient oversight and evaluation of policy implementation. Understanding the reasons for this institutional leniency represents an additional line of inquiry to be explored in future research.