



# Every Girl Counts through Stories

UNFPA TECHNICAL DIVISION  
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## Acknowledgements

WHEN IT COMES TO ENDING SON PREFERENCE AND DAUGHTER AVERSION, **EVERY STORY COUNTS.**

With generous support from the European Union and Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UNFPA and its partners are working to engage multiple levels of society to transform social and gender norms and end these harmful practices.

At the heart of this work are the stories of champions who are making a difference in their own lives and their communities. Their stories were collected from UNFPA-supported programmes in 8 countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Bangladesh, China, India, Nepal and Vietnam.

UNFPA is grateful to each of these champions, for kindly agreeing to share their stories. We hope that these stories will inspire more people and communities to build a world where every girl counts.

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## \* The issue

**Worldwide, 142 million girls are missing as a result of son preference and daughter aversion.**

Son preference and daughter aversion are harmful social and gender norms rooted in gender inequality. They are products of gender-biased and patriarchal and patrilineal systems that assign a higher social status to men and boys, thereby valuing male children more than female children. Because they are often concentrated in specific regions of a country, son preference and daughter aversion may not be visible at the national level.

Son preference and daughter aversion can manifest before or after birth. In pre-natal sex selection, families use methods including implantation of embryos and sex-selective abortion to ensure the birth of a boy or avoid the birth of a girl.

After birth, discrimination against daughters within the family can lead to the neglect of a daughter's basic needs such as nutrition, health care and education.

**Son preference and daughter aversion have severe impacts on the health, rights and future of women and girls worldwide.**

For women, son preference has been linked to increased vulnerability to reproductive coercion as well as psychological and physical violence by intimate partners or other family members.

Pressure to have a son can prevent women from accessing contraception, and increases their likelihood of unwanted or short-spaced pregnancies – heightening mortality risks for both women and children.

Women may be forced to maintain a risky pregnancy if they're carrying a boy, or forced to terminate a pregnancy if they're carrying a girl. Since women in many contexts lack access to safe abortion services, they may be forced to rely on unsafe measures to terminate a pregnancy, with high risks of complications and death.

Daughter discrimination results in poorer development outcomes, reduced capabilities and opportunities for girls, as households allocate more resources towards their sons than their daughters.





LAXMI BAYAK | NEPAL

## "There are many others like me"

**"After having three girls, society made me believe that I was under the spell of some witchcraft, just because I didn't have any sons," says Laxmi Bayak.**

Married and forced to leave school at an early age, Laxmi suffered physical and verbal abuse at the hands of her mother- and sister-in-law – because despite three pregnancies in short succession, she did not give birth to the son they wanted.

Soon, she and her children were kicked out of the house and repudiated by her husband and his family – echoing Laxmi's own early life. After she was born, she and her mother were evicted and abandoned by her father, simply because Laxmi was born a girl.

But Laxmi is determined to ensure a different future for her daughters. "I love my daughters and will be strong and confident enough to protect them and help them have a good life," she says. Recuperating at a safe house, she and her daughters have food, shelter, legal support and counselling to help them cope with the past and prepare for the future.

"There are many others like me," says Laxmi. "I hope I get to tell them that it's not their fault. God is not behind all this."

## \* UNFPA's response

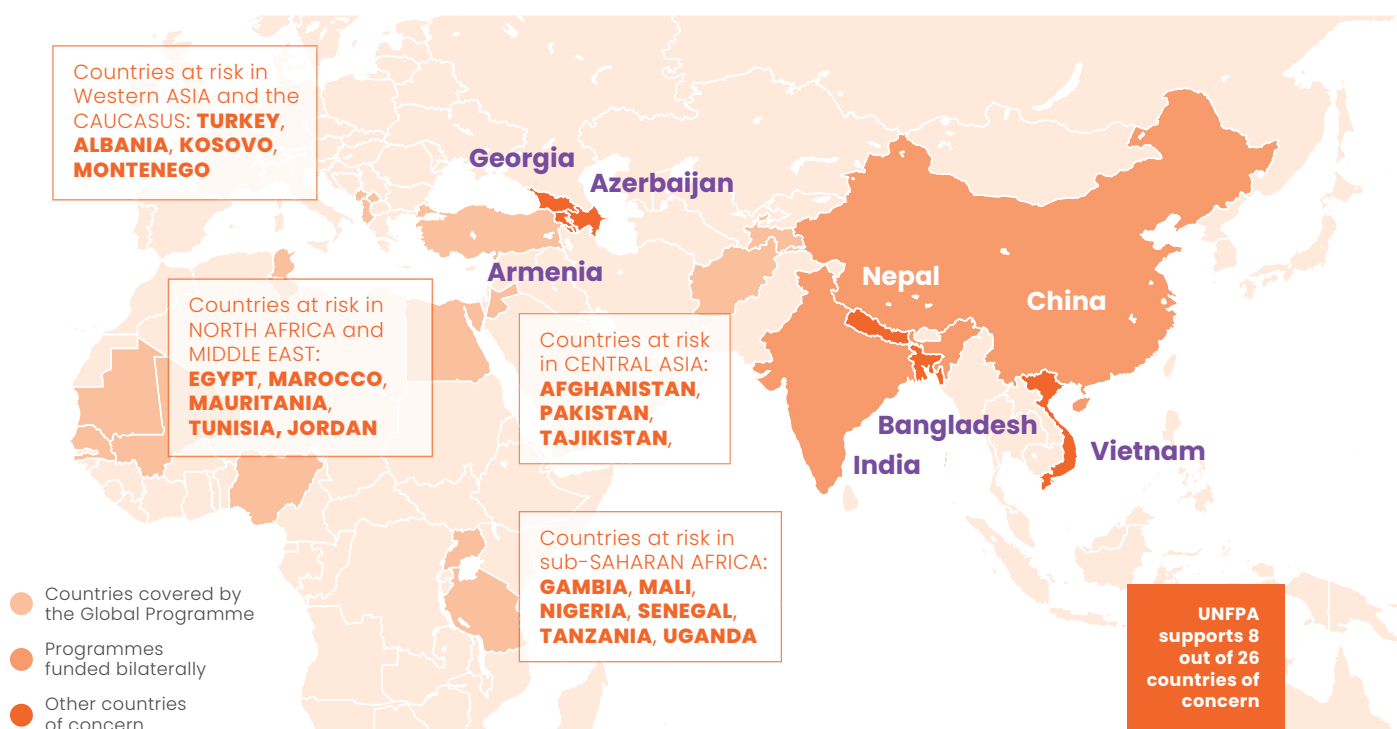
**UNFPA is working to end harmful practices and ensure that every girl counts.**

For over 20 years, UNFPA has been a leader in the global movement to end harmful practices, including son preference and daughter aversion, child marriage and female genital mutilation. Ending harmful practices and all forms of discrimination against women and girls is critical for achieving gender equality.

Every Girl Counts is UNFPA's strategy to end son preference and daughter aversion, as a pathway to improve the lives of women and girls and achieve gender equality. This work is integral to UNFPA's commitment to its third transformative result, ending gender-based violence and all forms of harmful practices by 2030.

**Every Girl Counts places women and girls at the centre of all its work. Only when every girl and woman is counted and empowered can we achieve gender equality.**

Every Girl Counts is supported by the European Union and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, and currently implemented in six countries in Eastern Europe and Asia. UNFPA implements related programmes in India and China, and monitors the situation of women and girls in 18 other countries where son preference and daughter aversion are observed.





## **Every Girl Counts focuses on transforming the harmful social and gender norms that perpetuate son preference and daughter aversion.**

The programme aims to achieve an in-depth understanding of the root causes of son preference and daughter aversion. We examine how different factors – individual, social, material and institutional – reinforce and are reinforced by gender inequality, and how they manifest in harmful social and gender norms observed in households, communities and societies.

Every Girl Counts uses gender-transformative and human rights-based interventions that centre the value of women and girls, working to transform power relations embedded in social and gender norms that perpetuate gender inequality. That means assessing legal and policy frameworks for compliance with human rights commitments, amending discriminatory laws and policies while enacting ones that empower women and girls with agency to exercise their rights, and holding institutions accountable for protecting those rights, including the right to bodily autonomy and the right to live free from violence and discrimination.

Partnerships and South-South cooperation are a critical means of effecting change. UNFPA's convening power has helped strengthen advocacy and dialogue across countries facing similar challenges, expanding our collective knowledge – and spreading the commitment to end son preference and daughter aversion. Every Girl Counts promotes more systematic, intentional and strategic cross-country exchange of technical expertise in key areas like data quality and social and gender norms change.

## **\* Empowering women and girls**

Empowering women and girls is the cornerstone of all approaches to end harmful practices, including son preference and daughter discrimination. It means ensuring that girls and women have access to educational and economic opportunities, sexual and reproductive health care and other essential services, so that they are equipped with everything they need to make informed decisions about their bodies and their lives.



JASBEER, MANDEEP, SANDEEP AND PARDEEP KAUR | INDIA

## **“We want to make something of our lives**

**“My stomach was huge, so I knew that I was carrying more than one child. What I didn’t know was that they were going to be all girls,” says Jasbeer Kaur, smiling at her 23-year-old triplets, Mandeep, Sandeep and Pardeep.**

“People here in my village often tell me, ‘Poor thing, you should have had at least one son instead of three daughters.’ And I tell them, spare me this rubbish!” she says.

Mandeep, Sandeep and Pardeep laugh when their mother tells the story. But they’re acutely aware that their very existence is something Jasbeer had to fight for.

At her ultrasound, Jasbeer recalls, “the doctor offered to perform an abortion, because she said it would be difficult for me to raise three daughters. For a few moments, I was scared, but God gave me strength to refuse, and I said no. When I told my mother, she said, ‘If I can raise daughters, so can you.’”

Jasbeer’s husband and in-laws were not supportive. “They told me, ‘We won’t allow three daughters to be born in the house at the same time. Get an abortion or leave.’”

She left, and raised her daughters on her own. It wasn’t easy, but Jasbeer provided for her daughters, made sure they were educated, and raised them to know their own value.

“No one approaches girls for their views,” says her daughter Sandeep. “But our mother consults us first. She asks us, ‘Tell me your views.’ It feels really good.”

Today, Sandeep and her sisters are building careers across the arts, business and health care. “People know us as Jasbeer Kaur’s daughters. We want to make something of our lives,” she says.





TRANG NGUYEN | VIETNAM

## **“Don’t let gender stereotypes take away our dreams”**

Wildlife conservation scientist Trang Nguyen was born in 1990 – an auspicious year, her parents believed, for having a son. Instead, they had Trang.

“Just because I was a baby girl, my father was really upset,” says Trang. “I faced disavowal from him until I was 2 months old.” Son preference and daughter aversion are deeply rooted in Vietnam’s traditional culture, informed by Confucianism and patriarchal family systems, in which boys are more highly valued than girls.

Trang can’t remember those early days of being rejected because she was born a girl. But it wasn’t the last time she had to confront the impacts of gender inequality.

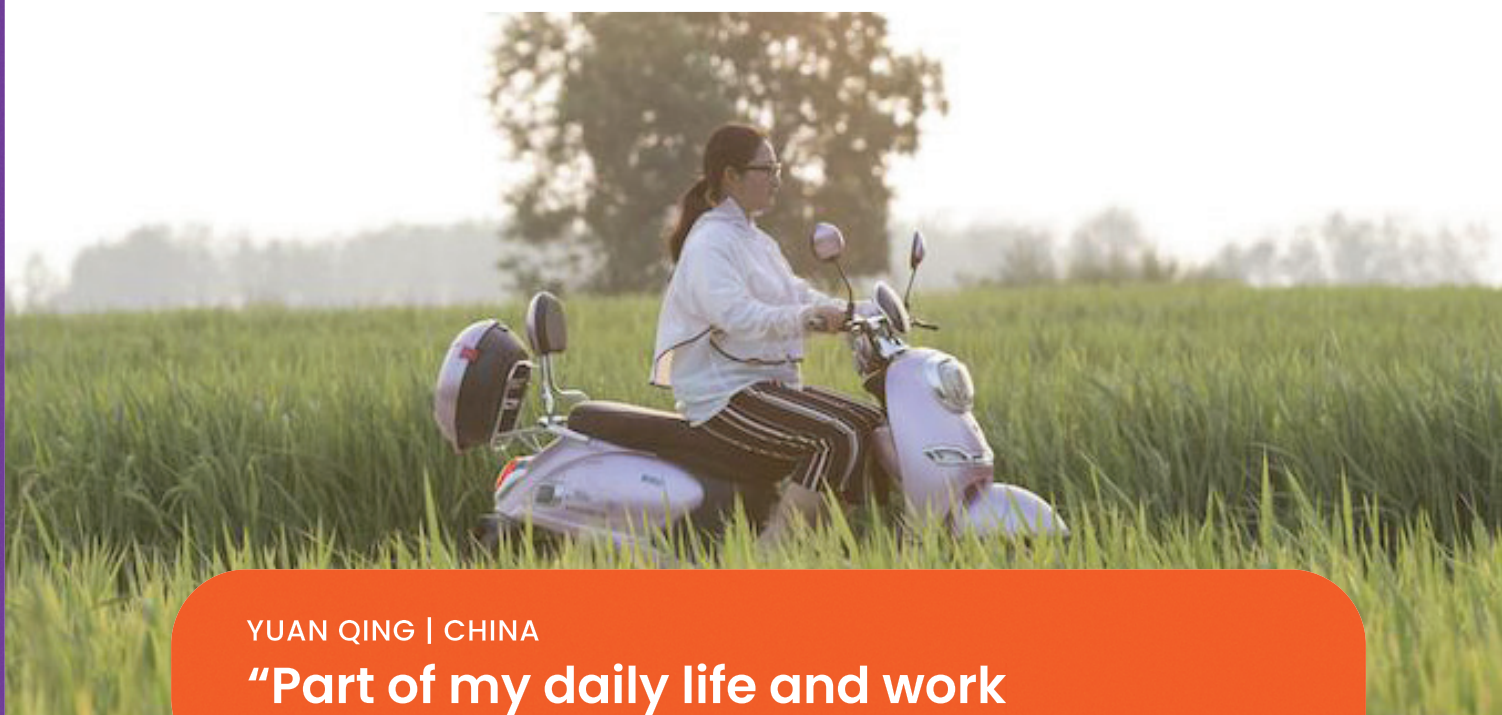
When she was 14 years old, Trang developed a passion for wildlife conservation, and she was determined to make it her life’s work. Her parents and relatives were often less than supportive, telling her, “This work is not suitable for women,” or “You should be a teacher.” Even after she got her degrees and set out into the working world, she was rejected by some employers, who believed a woman would be unable to do fieldwork or data processing, or even to read maps.

Today, Trang has a successful career in her chosen field, garnering both national and international recognition for her work as the founder and director of the NGO WildAct, which works to conserve biodiversity and endangered species in Vietnam by engaging and empowering local communities. She was named one of the world’s most influential women by the BBC in 2019, and one of Forbes Asia’s ‘30 under 30’ in 2020.

Even while Trang has been able to realize her aspirations, she knows that the harmful gender norms and stereotypes that have shadowed her life and career persist. “Some of my relatives are still trying to ensure that they have baby boys,” she says. “They seek all kinds of food, medicine and even fortune tellers.”

To help the next generation of girls reach for their dreams, Trang joined the “Girls Deserve to Shine” campaign, which seeks to inspire high school girls in rural Bac Giang province, a mountainous area in the north of Vietnam where son preference is especially entrenched. Launched with UNFPA and NORAD support by the NGO CSAGA, the campaign uses direct, meaningful engagement with successful women like Trang to raise awareness of gender stereotypes and their harmful impacts, while empowering girls and women to overcome gender-related social barriers.

“Girls are extremely powerful, confident and independent,” says Trang. “Girls can be conservationists, professors, astronauts, scientists, ministers and presidents. Don’t let gender stereotypes take away our dreams.”



YUAN QING | CHINA

## **“Part of my daily life and work**

**“At first, I had no idea about how to push for gender equality,”  
admits Yuan Qing.**

At age 27, as the first female head of Anfeitang, a village of over 2,700 people in Anhui province in southeastern China, she was determined to bring local regulations and rules more in line with national policy. But as she went house to house, everyone – women and men – assured her that gender equality had already been achieved.



She knew, from experience, that this wasn't true. Growing up as a girl, she had felt the impacts of gender inequality firsthand – such as when her aunt refused to pay for her to go to university, considering the expense of higher education wasted on a girl who would marry sooner or later.

Yuan decided to try another tactic, to get the villagers to feel the impacts of gender stereotypes more directly, through roleplay. Traditionally, women cook while men eat, and may even be excluded from sitting at the main table during festivals and other events. But Yuan asked villagers to switch gender roles, by having men cook and women eat. The women then dined at the main table, while men sat at a low table next to them.

As embarrassment dawned, the villagers could not help but become aware of how differently women and men were being treated. Soon thereafter, the village regulations were revised to encourage men to share domestic labour, and to require that half of the village committee members be women. In addition, village women became eligible to own land, regardless of their marital or family status.

Next, Yuan worked to promote economic opportunities for women. "Economic independence is vital to changing women's social status," she explains. With support from UNFPA and the local government, she organized training sessions on employment skills for women whose husbands had migrated away.

All these efforts have led to changes in norms, including son preference and daughter aversion. As women's ability to improve the well-being of their families and their village has become clear, there is greater awareness of the value of girls.

For Yuan, the work continues. "Advancing gender equality and women's empowerment has become deeply rooted in my mind," she says. "It has become a part of my daily life and work."

## \* Engaging men and boys

Engaging men and boys is an important strategy to address son preference and daughter aversion. Some programmes focus on fathers, to promote their involvement in caretaking and challenge social and gender norms that devalue women and girls. Others focus on mobilizing adolescent boys and young men as advocates of gender equality. These interventions provide spaces for transformation of harmful norms related to masculinity and fatherhood.



TOFIG SADIGOV | AZERBAIJAN

## "Becoming better versions of themselves"

**"We were expecting our second child," recalls Tofig Sadigov, now the father of two daughters. "Those who knew I already had a daughter at the time were saying, 'Don't worry, hopefully your second child will be a boy'."**

All he and his wife wanted, says Tofig, was to have a healthy child, regardless of that child's sex. But there was no escaping the widespread manifestations of son preference and daughter aversion in their society.

In 2021, Tofig decided to take a stand – against gender discrimination and for his daughters. He became a mentor in the UNFPA-supported Papa School initiative, which creates a space for fathers from Baku and other regions of Azerbaijan to come together in an atmosphere of mutual respect, confidence and trust, to speak freely and learn about the scope and impacts of son preference and daughter aversion – and to change their minds.

Since joining the program, Tofig has witnessed some remarkable transformations in attitudes among the participants. "The most rewarding experience was when the men approached me after the sessions and admitted with sincere regret that they had persuaded their wives to have multiple abortions after the birth of their first daughter," he explains. "It was very inspiring to see how many of them were becoming better versions of themselves."

As a father of two girls, Tofig feels a moral obligation to contribute to efforts to eliminate discriminatory social norms that would deny them equal standing in their society.

"It is actually my personal transformation story, too," he adds. "I've grown as an ardent social change agent, determined to promote the value of a girl child in my native Azerbaijan."





KRISTO KACKHIDZE | GEORGIA

## "I learn a lot by listening to others"

"We often do not have the space and opportunity to talk about the redistribution of family roles, stereotypes or other important issues in the regions and villages," says **Kristo Kackhidze, a young man from the remote village of Sakuneti, in the Samtskhe–Javakheti region of Georgia.**

Kristo was among the first participants in Men Talking to Men (MTM), organized with UNFPA support by the NGO Care Together. MTM seeks to create a safe environment where young men can talk openly about gender stereotypes and established social norms. The sense of safety and trust provides a unique opportunity for men to question these stereotypes and norms, and to transform their attitudes towards gender equality, within their families and beyond.

"I learn a lot by listening to others," says Kristo. "This helps me to develop a critical approach. MTM offers an environment where I can express my opinion freely."

The MTM sessions have already reached 48 men of diverse ages, social and ethnic backgrounds across the region. A new cadre of local trainers will expand the programme further.

The sessions themselves, Kristo explains, are only the beginning of a profound process of change: "I think that after such meetings, people may start to question and slowly dismantle stereotypes and participate in a healthy discussion. I believe that everyone needs to attend those meetings at least once."

## \* Training health care workers

UNFPA works to deepen health system understanding of and contribution to ending son preference and daughter aversion. This achieved through an increased understanding of causes and consequences of sex selection, in particular, and protection and promotion of women's bodily autonomy and decision-making power.



LYANA GEVORGYAN | ARMENIA

## **"Look, she is the girl you saved"**

"I always say that the future of their girls depends on what environment they will grow up in, what values will be embedded in their mindset – for example, girls can be future governors, or hold other high leadership positions," **says Lyana Gevorgyan, an obstetrician-gynecologist.**

In her 20 years at Gyumri maternity hospital, she has often encountered couples who, when they learn they are having a girl, contemplate terminating the pregnancy.

"Unfortunately, we face such cases a lot, and the role of the doctor is important in preventing these cases," she says. "I always talk to the couple, give examples of famous women. Very often, such conversations helped the couple to back down from that decision."

Lyana often consults her mother, Dr. Lilia Pogosyan, also an obstetrician. "My mother's advice is to have a talk also with the husbands, and these conversations often help. There are cases when, several years later, I met these women on the streets of Gyumri, already with a grown up girl, and they say, 'Look, she is the girl you saved'."



## **Training media professionals**

Given the power of media coverage in countries to influence social and gender norms, UNFPA works to build the understanding of media professionals, as critical agents of change, to enable reporting which tackles harmful attitudes and practices.





SHAIKH MOHAMMAD SALEH RABBI | BANGLADESH

## **“The responsibility and agency to tell stories that effect change”**

Shaikh Mohammad Saleh Rabbi is the proud father of a 7-year-old daughter and head of content at one of Bangladesh’s leading creative media agencies. In 2022, a UNFPA media training showed him how those two responsibilities intersect.

Before the training, he never questioned the fact that most of the stories and visual designs created by his team featured boys, rather than girls. “I don’t think I have ever thought about it very much,” he admits. “It was one of those deeply ingrained biases that people in our profession have, and more often than not, they delude themselves thinking they don’t.”

The training opened his eyes not only to how his industry perpetuated gender inequality – but to his own potential to make a difference. “This training helped me realize that we have both the responsibility and the agency to tell stories that are more likely to effect change, rather than reinforce harmful gender norms,” he says.

Back at work, Rabbi instituted two major changes: First, he committed his agency to balanced and sensitive gender portrayals, depicting young girls in positive roles. Second, in the absence of a generally accepted gender-neutral English pronoun, all materials published by the agency predominantly use the feminine pronoun.

“Whenever clients ask us why we are not using the traditional ‘he’ pronoun, it gives us an opportunity to engage in a dialogue,” he observes. “And I can’t emphasize how important these dialogues are. We have conflated the traditional with what is actually the right way of doing things. It is time we asked ourselves why we do what we do, and how we can better serve our audiences.”

Rabbi is now organizing a workshop on gender-sensitive reporting and the ill effects of son preference, to educate his colleagues and friends in the media.

“You know, my daughter has recently turned seven. I can’t wait to see where she goes in the coming years. And if there is something in the meantime that I can do to make the world a little better for her, you bet I am doing it,” he says.

## \* Engaging faith-based organizations

Every Girl Counts partners with faith-based organizations to address son preference and daughter aversion within the communities they serve. This approach ensures sustained social and gender norm transformation through trusted and deeply embedded value systems within communities.



TABRIZ GASIMOV | AZERBAIJAN

**“We can change minds by communicating with young people**

**“If we want to improve society, we must give women equal rights,” says Tabriz Gasimov. “If we don’t, the society will never grow.”** What sounds like a message for the present day comes, in fact, from the 12th-century philosopher Ibn Rushd, the subject of Tabriz’s first book.

Gender equality, Tabriz explains, has deep roots in Islamic thought. It’s something he has studied extensively and approached from different angles: as a cleric, as a scholar of religion and philosophy – and as an advocate, working among Azerbaijan’s most conservative communities to promote gender equality, bring an end to son preference and raise awareness of the value of girls and women.

“When a woman has a girl,” says Tabriz, “some people say, ‘A son next time!’” In Azerbaijan, the social norms that favor boys and men are sustained by a



combination of factors – including patriarchal family structures, traditions around inheritance and land rights, and men’s greater workforce participation. Religion, too, plays a substantial role – but, according to Tabriz, this stems from a fundamental misunderstanding.

“A wrong interpretation of Islam has a big impact on this problem,” he says. As a cleric, Tabriz is thus well positioned to address the issue – and get to the root of some of the norms that underlie son preference and other manifestations of gender inequality, including gender-based violence.

Four years ago, he joined a UNFPA programme to educate clergy on gender equality – and then became an educator himself. Since then, it’s been his job to set the record straight, demonstrating that gender equality and Islam are in perfect alignment. He has traveled around the country, offering seminars on gender equality and disseminating materials on the value of girls, from an Islamic perspective that speaks directly to his target audiences.

Tabriz has great confidence in the message he brings – but making sure it’s heard can be a challenge. “Our society is a conservative society,” he explains. “When you talk about gender equality, they don’t want to listen to you.”

Furthermore, because the most conservative communities tend to be outside the reach of mainstream media and formal education, they are unlikely to hear about or attend a seminar. Instead, the programme works to reach them in other ways, starting with informal chats, over tea. And because he is a cleric, Tabriz automatically garners their respect. Although community leaders may initially question his emphasis on gender equality, they hear him out and invite him to hold seminars in their villages.

Once people attend the seminars and listen to what Tabriz has to say, they tend to change their minds. “We always give examples from Islamic history, of the Prophet and his friends, how they treat women,” he says. This approach resonates: “Once they hear our examples, they change their opinions about this topic easily. We have witnessed this change during our seminars.”

The impact on young people has been especially powerful. After attending the seminars, some have gone on to become advocates themselves, spreading the message further within their communities.

“We are focusing on the young generation,” says Tabriz, “because they have the potential to change the world, to change society.”

#### Finding champions in policy spaces

UNFPA works with relevant ministries and government institutions to ensure that girls’ rights are at the center of their policy agenda. Finding champions in relevant policies spaces is a central strategy to galvanize national commitments that are long term and multisectoral. With the support of these champions, Every Girl Counts strengthened the national commitment across all six programme countries, where specific policies, strategies and action plans were adopted to address son preference and daughter aversion.

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ROSHANI DEVI KARKI / NEPAL

**“Son preference is not just a women’s issue”**

“If we ensure that girls and boys are valued equally, it will boost the development not only of women, but of the nation,” says **Roshani Devi Karki**, Under Secretary in Nepal’s Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP).

Roshani is one of the architects of Nepal’s National Strategy to End Gender-Biased Sex Selection (GBSS), which aims to end GBSS and son preference in Nepal by 2032 by formulating and implementing new policies and programmes that prevent prenatal sex selection; help change social norms, attitudes and behaviours to promote gender equality and the value of girls; and empower women and adolescent girls.



The strategy was developed through a consultative process led by the Ministry of Health and Population and was endorsed by the Government of Nepal in May 2021. Roshani now provides technical guidance and coordinates with relevant government, non-government and development partners to implement the strategy at the federal, provincial and local levels.

In Nepal, son preference, which lies at the root of GBSS, is a harmful practice that is deeply rooted in traditional, patriarchal values and discriminatory norms. Girls and women face discrimination within their families and communities, and often come under immense social and familial pressure to have sons. “A significant number of women in Nepal face violence if they are not able to give birth to a son,” Roshani says.

Prenatal sex selection is illegal in Nepal. But data from the 2021 National Population and Housing Census show that the sex ratio at birth stands at 112 boys for every 100 girls. This is an increase from 106 boys for every 100 girls reported in the 2011 census, and it exceeds the [biologically normal range](#) of 102-106 boys for every 100 girls – suggesting that GBSS is still taking place, despite the legal prohibition.

According to Roshani, one of the major challenges in implementing the strategy has been making the case for its relevance to the development of the country as a whole. GBSS is considered “a women’s issue, not a social issue related to development,” she says, pointing out that the gender imbalance itself renders it an issue of national concern.

She also notes that the impacts on women, including the heightened risks of gender-based violence associated with son preference, have critical implications for the country’s future: “If women are not safe within the family and community, it impacts national development.”

The sensitive nature of the issue also poses serious challenges. Addressing it entails reaching into some of the most intimate scenarios in the lives of women and their families, including the confidential relationship between a pregnant woman and her health care provider.

Before the strategy was developed, GBSS and son preference were not recognised as national issues. To bring the issue to the forefront of the national agenda, and to ensure that the strategy was evidence-based, UNFPA invested heavily in data generation and research.

Roshani herself has played a pivotal role not only in leading the development and the implementation of the strategy, but also in the advocacy that has been critical to effecting change. Through her initiative, the strategy was initially publicized during the 16 days campaign in 2021. Since then, intense advocacy campaigns, mobilizing traditional and social media, have sparked a national conversation on son preference and the value of girls.

This advocacy, Roshani observes, is paying off. Son preference is now widely recognized as a harmful practice in Nepal.

In addition to being a policymaker, Roshani writes poetry in her spare time, and she has used her verse to advocate for the equal value of girls and boys and the end of son preference. Her poem 'Every Girl Counts' opens with a human rights imperative:

*Every daughter should be counted*

*Within the family, society and nation.*

She closes it by acknowledging the indispensable practicalities involved in transforming social norms and practices:

*All three levels of government in every area, and every dimension of the state,*

*Must take a step forward for the sake of daughters.*

*It will take policies, planning and budgets.*

*It will take policies, planning and budgets.*

Another significant challenge of implementation, Roshani notes, comes down to coordinating among the federal, provincial and local levels of government, and overcoming silos to get people scattered across government ministries to join forces. The work to end son preference and GBSS is linked to a range of issues – including raising awareness among health care workers, addressing gender-based violence, and promoting the economic empowerment and leadership of women and adolescent girls.

"If we draw those interlinkages," Roshani says, "then with our limited resources, we can achieve a lot."





