

Sex imbalances at birth in migratory context in Western Europe: evidence from Italy

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore SRB of migrants in Italy in order to shed light on the phenomenon of sex selection at birth and to help to address policies against that practice. Our objective is to analyze births from mothers with a foreign background from countries where sex selection at birth is widespread and that are among the largest immigrant communities in Italy. Data stems from the Survey on births from the Resident Population Registers and from the First Regional Survey on Sexual and Reproductive Health of Migrant Women held in Lombardy in 2010. Average SRB will be calculated for the period 1999-2011 by mothers' country of birth. Births of first, second and third order will be analyzed. A comparison with SRB in the origin countries will be provided. Using a multilevel approach the relation among SRB of children and the mothers' eventual experience of abortion will be explored.

Introduction and previous findings

In the Program of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo, was recommended to eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girl child commonly known as “son preferences”; among those, there is prenatal sex selection. The phenomenon of prenatal sex selection is particularly widespread in East and Southeast Asia. Recent studies (Guilmoto 2009; 2012) show that sex ratio at birth (SRB) has risen in a few Asian countries since the '80s. The trend was opposite to observed SRB worldwide that has been stable at 104-106 in the period 1950-2000 and will have the same pattern in the future (Guilmoto 2009). In a few Asian countries, such as India and China, the SRB is abnormally higher than expected. According to Guilmoto (2012), the causes of the rising trend of SRB in certain countries of the world are to be ascribed to son preference, to the availability since the '80s of prenatal diagnosis technology that allows couple to know the sex of the future born and that could lead to an (legal or illegal) abortion, and finally to the fertility transition that lead many countries to lower level of fertility that could have exacerbate the need for sex selectivity. Sex selection at birth has important consequences from the demographic point of view because it leads to the well-known phenomenon of “missing women”: in 2010 there were about 117 missing women worldwide, i.e. girl that didn't born or that didn't reach the age of 5 because of sex selection at birth or immediately after birth. Major contributors to the bulge of missing women were India and China (Guilmoto 2012).

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However, sex selection at birth is also diffused in other countries of the world, in particular, after the end of the iron curtain, it has been recorded and unusual SRB in few countries in West Asia: Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia and in two countries in Southeast Europe: Albania and Montenegro. Only South Korea has managed to achieve a decrease from the elevated levels of the 1980s and now has a normal sex ratio at birth (WHO, 2011). Finally the increasing number of international migrant worldwide, in particular from Southeast and East Asia could have exported the SRB imbalances in destination countries in the Western World. So far, few studies have found evidence of SRB from migrants of South East or Eastern Asia, slightly higher than expected in countries such US, UK, Canada and Italy (Almond and Edlund 2008; Almond et al. 2009; Dubuc and Coleman 2007; Meldolesi 2012; Blangiardo and Rimoldi 2012).

Research aim and questions

This paper aims to explore SRB of migrants in Italy in order to shed light on the phenomenon of sex selection at birth and to help to address policies against that practice. Recent studies addressed the same issue for migrants of Indian and Chinese origin living in Italy (Meldolesi 2012; Blangiardo and Rimoldi 2012). The first study was limited at the period 2006-2009 and used data on birth records, the second study uses data from a survey of 700 women of Chinese and Indian origin realized in 2011 in the Lombardy region. Our objective is to go beyond these previous studies, analyzing births from mothers with a foreign background from countries where sex selection at birth is widespread and that are among the largest immigrant communities in Italy, including Albania and Montenegro, China, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. We will analyze births of first, second and third order.

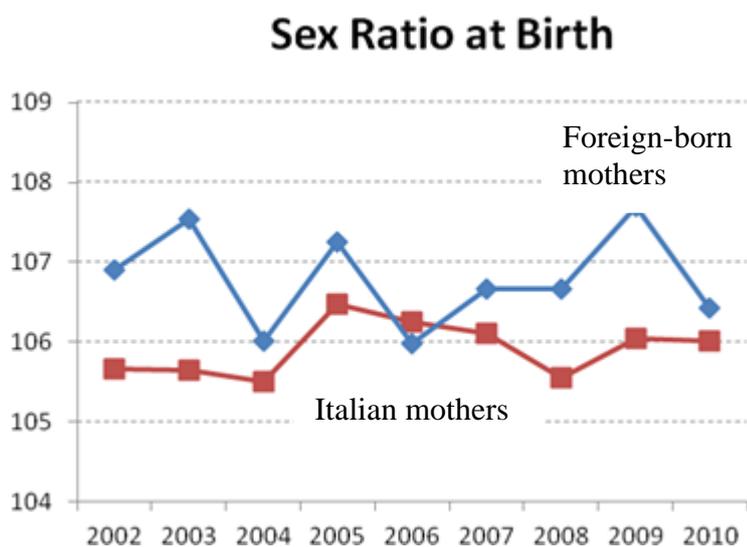
Data and Methods

Data stems from the Survey on births from the Resident Population Registers. Among the vital statistics sources, an individual and continuative Survey on births from the Resident Population Registers was set up by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat) since January 1999 and it ensures the knowledge of the main characteristics of births and parents at the municipality level. The individual sheets currently retrieve information on births (sex, date and place of birth, nationality), parents (place and date of birth, nationality, and marital status) and the main details of the head of the household. The last data available are referred to 2011. Thus, average SRB will be calculated for the period 1999-2011 by birthplace of mother. A comparison with SRB in the origin countries will be provided. An explorative study of SRB by birthplace of mother with a series of covariates (age of mother, citizenship of father...) will be also performed. Higher SRB could be linked to higher propensity to voluntary abortion: we will explore this possibility analyzing voluntary abortion rates and SRB by mothers' place of birth. First results (tables 1 and 2) show

significant bias in SRB for foreign-born mothers and in particular for Indian origin migrants.

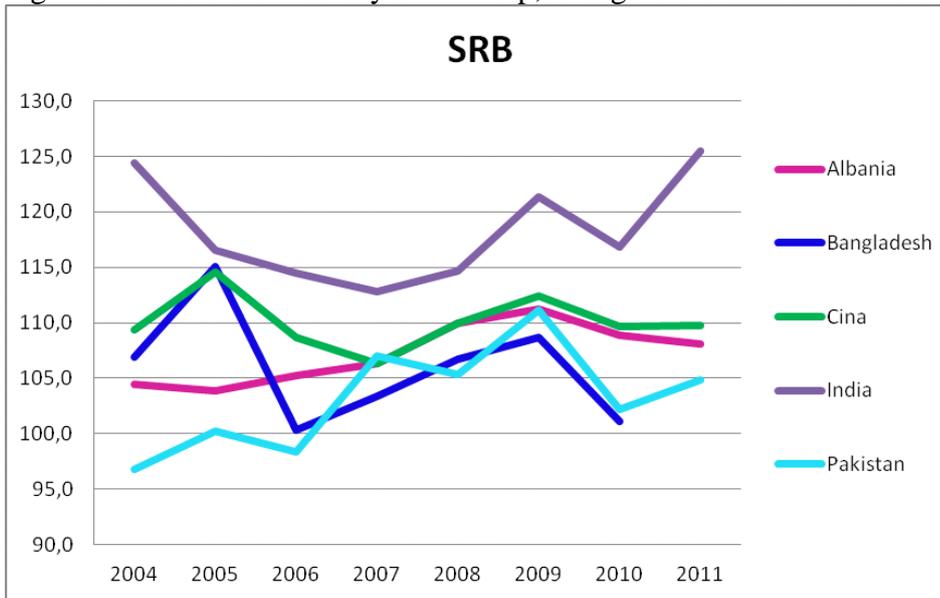
A second analysis will be performed on data from the First Regional Survey on Sexual and Reproductive Health of Migrant Women held in Lombardy in 2010, the first Italian region for number of migrants that accounts for nearly a quarter of the whole national number of migrants. This data contain information at personal level on women's experience of abortion (in Italy or abroad) as well as data on the gender of children ever born. Using a multilevel approach among SRB of children and the mothers' eventual experience of abortion will be therefore explored. Also for the Lombardy region first results (table 1) show important bias in SRB at birth to several foreign-born mothers.

Table 1 Sex ratio at birth: Italian and foreign-born mothers, 2002-2010



Source: Istat: <http://demo.istat.it>

Figure 2- Sex ratio at birth by citizenship, foreign-born mothers resident in Italy



Source: Istat: <http://demo.istat.it>

Table 1: *SRB* by mother's citizenship in Lombardy Region, 2010

Mother Citizenship	<i>SRB</i>
Albania	125
Bangladesh	155
China	114
India	127
Pakistan	104

Source: Farina P. et al. (2010).

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