September 6, 2009

LETTER

The Daughter Deficit

Tina Rosenberg, quoting Monica Das Gupta, portrays “development” as a unitary concept. But there are different kinds of development with varied consequences within the same society. In China, the most comprehensive studies of female infanticide and the neglect of girls show that excess female mortality fell precipitously from the 1930s through the 1960s before rising again with the “development” that started in the late 1970s. Despite reasonable (and unreasonable) objections to the socialist government, these facts are not questioned by demographers.

What changed? First, the adoption of a one-child policy restricted family flexibility and exacerbated patriarchal preferences for male heirs. As Das Gupta reports, antifemale bias is stronger for later-born siblings. In that context, if only one child is permitted, she had better not be a girl. Second, the collapse of basic social support for the poor once again made family composition the main determinant of old-age security. For all its amazing growth, China’s economy has flourished off the insecurity of the poor.

It was not “development” that hurt China’s girls. It was the turn away from the kind of development that supported cultural change toward gender egalitarianism.

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