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Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population

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Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population, by Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer, is a controversial book. The book starts from the premise that "scarcity of resources and unequal access to those resources are the most important sources of conflict at any level of analysis" (p.3). Hudson and den Boer apply this premise to human female scarcity and argue that scarcity of females, as revealed by high sex ratios, can lead to domestic and international violence, perpetuated mainly by low-status, unmarried young males, called "bare branches" by the Chinese. That scarcity can lead to conflict is not a new concept. The philosophers of ancient Greece talked about it in relationship to wealth scarcity. It was Aristotle who said "poverty is the parent of revolution and crime." In the 19th century Charles Darwin put competition and associated conflict over scarce resources at the center of his theory of natural selection. In the 1970s, E.O. Wilson made competition over scarce resources one of the cornerstones of sociobiology. More recently Homer-Dixon has shed light on the relationship between environmental scarcity and conflict.

The notion that scarcity of females can lead to aggressive behavior among males is also not new. Darwin discussed it as an important component of non-human male violence. Many biologists since Darwin have documented, among non-humans, examples of male-male aggression over scarce females. Turning to humans, anthropologists have documented instances of male-male aggression among tribal units resulting from scarcity of females (see, for example, the study of the Yanamamo by William Divale and Marvin Harris). Prior to the work of Hudson and den Boer, in the early 1990s, Amartya Sen talked about "missing females" in Asia. So what have Hudson and den Boer done that is new and controversial? In short, they are the first scholars to assert that, under certain conditions resulting from a complex set of colliding variables, female scarcity can lead to international conflict. They are, therefore, the first scholars to elevate this issue to the level of international security. This is new. And it is controversial.

In order to buttress their argument, the authors take a hard look at China and India, two countries with abnormally high sex ratios. The reason for focusing on China and India is made clear by the following statement by the authors: "If violence against females within a society bears any relationship to violence within and between societies, then it should be possible to observe this relationship at work in societies where violence against women is exaggerated—that is, in countries where offspring sex selection is prevalent, such as China and India" (p.4).

Since the mid-1980s widespread sexual selection has produced abnormally high sex ratios

in both China and India. This has led to large populations of low status young males (large in relationship to their female cohorts). And both countries are set for large population increases in the near future, leading to an increase in the number of young surplus males. According to Hudson and den Boer, if governments fail to provide these surplus males with positive alternatives to violence, the entire region could suffer from instability. Governments threatened by surplus males often attempt to solve the surplus male problem by employing them in large scale construction projects (something that has proven effective in China) or promoting migration to frontier areas. But, in some cases, governments address the problem by becoming more authoritarian and militaristic. In the worst case scenario, governments begin to see inter-state warfare as a viable solution to the male surplus problem. If this tactic is taken by the governments of China and India, the negative consequences will be global in scope.

The 333 page book is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on methodology and theory underpinning their main argument. A brief overview of security studies is presented. The evolution of offspring sex selection is discussed, focusing on military invasion and chronically fragile subsistence systems as stimulants to gender selection and violence. And the question as to why female infanticide persists over time is probed.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the practice of offspring sex selection throughout human history. The reader is introduced to cases of infanticide and induced abortion in the animal world. Information is presented on how to determine skewed sex ratios. An extensive review of human infanticide follows with specific attention given to sex-selective infanticide in Australia and the South Pacific, the Middle East, ancient Greece and Rome, historical Europe, North America, South America, and Japan. Son preference in contemporary Asia is reviewed and data on “missing women” is presented for several countries in Asia.

Chapter 3 is a detailed overview of offspring sex selection in India. Included in the overview is a history of the evolution of offspring sex selection in India, the cultural context within which it occurs, a discussion and data presentation of past and current sex ratios, and an assessment and comparison of various data sources. Chapter 4 is a similar overview of offspring sex selection in China.

Chapter 5 lays out the theoretical and historical material linking the presence of significant numbers of surplus males (or missing females) to increased instability and violence within and between societies. The shared characteristics and behavioral predispositions of surplus males in high-sex-ratio societies are listed and case studies (Nien Rebellion in China, the Reconquista in Portugal, banditry and rebellion in pre-colonial Oudh, and violence in colonial Taiwan) are presented as supporting evidence. A few other historical case studies are also presented.

Chapter 6 examines the characteristics and behavior of surplus males in contemporary China and India. Government policies and options for dealing with the problem of surplus males are examined, and harm reduction strategies that governments could employ to reduce the level of instability are put forth.

Chapter 7, the final chapter, explains why the security calculus of high-sex-ratio societies, like China and India, is different from the security calculus typically found in normal sex-ratio societies. According to Hudson and den Boer, “Our research has found that high-sex-ratio societies, where women typically have very low status, cannot be expected to emulate normal-sex-ratio societies in terms of either their form of government or of their tendency toward peacefulness” (p.264). Given the low status of women in China and India, and given that both countries now have huge numbers of surplus males (with more to come), democracy and peace in the region could be in jeopardy.

Hudson and den Boer conclude with a plea for more research and action: “Our research has only begun to explore this important relationship. We hope that other scholars and analysts concerned with national security will continue this effort. Indeed, there may be no more urgent task for security studies, for we believe that the heretofore under examined relationship between national security and the status and situation of women is critically

important, and that it will become a central focus of scholars and policymakers in the twenty-first century” (p264).

Hudson and den Boer undertook a massive search of the literature to produce their well thought out, well crafted and well written book. Their work, in the opinion of this reviewer, is an example of first-class scholarship. The authors have managed to move the science of international security forward (how much forward remains to be seen). They have elevated the subject to a level of controversy that this reviewer has not witnessed in a long time (often a sign of quality work). Their work has ignited research to test hypothesis derived from it. People from various disciplines and occupations are taking a serious look at the possible relationship between “missing females” and intra/inter-state conflict. Even the CIA has shown an interest in their research. If their purpose was to show a plausible link between high-sex-ratio societies and societal conflict, they have done their job.

Of course, no model of human behavior is perfect. And no researcher can or should be expected to do everything possible. Consequently, there are gaps in their research that need to be addressed. For example, their work rests on a few isolated cases that support their model. Their argument would have been on firmer ground if they would have paid more attention to contradictory evidence. In Rwanda, for example, the sex ratio during the year of genocide was normal. In the USA, a nation that some would argue is extremely violent, the sex ratio is normal.

Another difficulty is that Hudson and den Boer seem to dismiss the possibility that a quantitative probe of the phenomenon in question could prove to be useful. This reviewer would argue that both qualitative and quantitative probes are useful. A good quantitative test (as Melvin Ember, the president of the Human Relations Area Files at Yale University pointed out) would be to select a random and large sample from the HRAF with high, low, and normal sex ratios, and then attempt to correlate a measure of conflict with sex ratio. This would not be a simple minded approach. Rather, it would be good quantitative science following good qualitative science.

This reviewer would have liked the authors to comment on whether or not abnormally low-sex-ratio societies (societies with surplus females) might also be linked to violence. In fairness to the authors, they do make the following statement on page 187 in footnote number one: “This volume addresses the problems of high-sex-ratio societies, a case can be made, however, that there are negative societal consequences to very low-sex-ratio societies as well.” We are left wondering what those negative societal consequences might be. In the opinion of this reviewer, it is likely that one will find abnormal levels of violence in societies with high or low sex ratios if they are also characterized by unsustainable population levels, widespread poverty, and degraded environments.

In spite of the criticisms above, this reviewer firmly believes that Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer have done a masterful job at tackling a very complex problem. Their main thesis is significant in that it links offspring sex selection favoring males to national and international conflict in the modern world. They have made a compelling argument that suggests that nations with large populations of surplus males are likely to find their levels of social instability amplified. Their argument is logical and reasonable and must be taken seriously by policymakers. The book is highly recommended for those interested in national and international security, sex ratios, infanticide, male violence, and gender inequality.