

Money & Business

Section 3

It's a Girl! (Will the Economy Suffer?)

Couples With Boys Are Divorcing Less

By DAVID LEONHARDT

LOOKING for a distraction, the two economists sauntered out of their offices at the University of California at Berkeley last spring and met near the water cooler.

The economists, Gordon B. Dahl and Enrico Moretti, are both experts in a rarefied part of the field known as econometrics. On this day, however, their conversation quickly drifted to a wide-ranging discussion of the reasons for the persistent wage gap between men and women.

Could the problem stretch far beyond the workplace, they wondered, and all the way back to childhood and the ways that parents treat boys and girls? Was it possible that even in the United States, even in 2003, parents favor boys in a way that has lifelong implications?

One way to look for such a preference, they realized, would be to see whether parents of girls divorced more often than parents of boys, as has long been the case in male-centric societies like China. So the two economists scurried back to their respective offices and, over the next three days, did what econ-



omists do: plugged reams of data into a computer and ran regressions, statistical speak for the search for patterns.

"We thought, 'There is no way we are going to find something systematic,'" Mr. Moretti said. "The results were shocking."

In every decade since the 1940's, couples with girls indeed divorced more often than those with boys, United States Census Bureau data showed. The effect was not huge — just a few percentage points — but it was unmistakable. It happened in every region of the country. It happened among whites more than blacks and among people with only high school diplomas more than those with college degrees.

Over the last 60 years, parents with an only child that was a girl were 6 percent more likely to split up than parents

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of a single boy. The gap rose to 8 percent for parents of two girls versus those of two boys, 10 percent for families with three children of the same sex and 13 percent for four. Every year, more than 10,000 American divorces appear to stem partly from the number of girls in the family.

Whatever the cause, and there are some prime suspects, the effects are as obvious as they are pernicious. Children from divorced families are twice as likely as other children to drop out of high school, become parents while teenagers or be jobless as young adults, earlier studies show. The new research makes clear that girls are bearing more than their share of these costs.

"I'd rather boys and girls have the same crack at success in life," said Mr. Dahl, an assistant professor at the University of Rochester.

THE study fits in with a fast-growing interest among economists in how families operate, research that is moving beyond the ways that women's family roles affect their finances to include fathers and children as well.

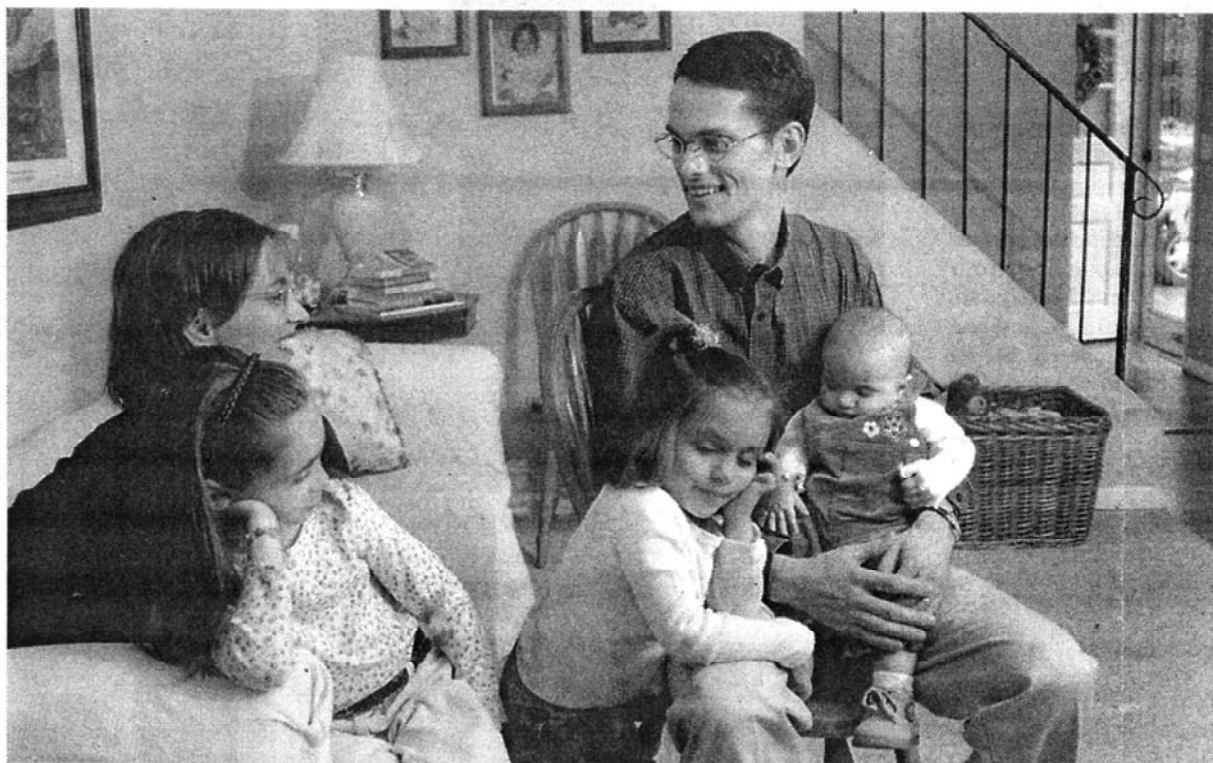
"This is part of well-known economic imperialism," said Shelly Lundberg, a professor of economics at the University of Washington at Seattle, referring to her field's penchant for sticking its nose into just about every human endeavor. "How families operate and how husbands and wives make decisions has important economic implications."

Taken together, this research strongly suggests that the age-old favoring of boys is not confined to the past or to developing countries like China and India. It is subtle and less widespread than it once was in the United States, but it still gives boys an important leg up.

Parents, and especially fathers, appear to invest more in their families when they include a boy. They put more money into their homes, spending an additional \$600 a year on housing, according to a study of families with an only child by Ms. Lundberg and her colleague Elaina Rose, an associate professor of economics.

In addition, fathers increase their workweeks by more than two hours, and their earnings, after the birth of a first, male child. When the first child is a girl, workweeks increase by less than an hour.

The effects go beyond mere dollars and cents. Among unmarried couples, fathers read to baby girls and put them to bed as often as they do for boys. But the fathers feed the boys, change their diapers and play



Kevin Rivoli for The New York Times

Gordon B. Dahl, an economist and assistant professor at the University of Rochester who is studying whether parents favor boys, with his wife, Katherine, and their three daughters, Sarah, left, Allison and Natalie.

with them more often than they do with baby girls, concluded Ms. Lundberg, Ms. Rose and Sara McLanahan, director of the Center for Research on Child Well-Being at Princeton.

And among unmarried women who had ultrasound scans, those carrying boys were slightly more likely to marry the father than those with girls, a study of California records from the early 90's by Mr. Dahl and Mr. Moretti showed.

By itself, of course, the higher divorce rate among parents of girls does not prove that society prefers baby boys. Mothers might tolerate a difficult marriage if they have sons, thinking that the presence of a father is crucial to the boys.

Or mothers and fathers might both have a slight preference for children of their own sex. Some fathers might spend more time with their family when it includes boys, strengthening the marriage. Other fathers, knowing they are likely to lose a custody battle, might avoid a divorce when it would cost them time with their sons.

But a wide array of findings from family research suggests that these factors alone do not explain the gap.

"The weight of the evidence suggests that parents have a preference for boys," said Mr. Moretti, an assistant professor at the University of

California at Los Angeles who, like Mr. Dahl, had been on sabbatical at Berkeley. "The differences are not huge, but they are not trivial."

Researchers also found a Henry VIII-like eagerness for a male heir in many parents. Over the last six decades, 33.7 percent of families whose first four children were girls had a fifth child, while only 31.5 percent of those who start with four boys kept going.

The preference for boys could matter a lot more in the future. Technology already permits parents to choose a baby's sex, and as the cost of the procedure falls, it could create a divisive social issue.

For about \$3,000 on top of the usual fee for in vitro fertilization or artificial insemination, the Genetics & IVF Institute in Fairfax, Va., will sort sperm by weight, separating the X chromosomes, which produce girls, from the smaller Y's. When its customers are indeed able to become pregnant, the institute claims a 75 percent success rate for parents who request boys and 90 percent success for those who want girls. Another method boasts a success rate closer to 95 percent for each sex, but it is more controversial because doctors check for gender after in vitro fertilization and discard the embryos of the unwanted sex.

"There is reliable technology for gender selection," said Dr. Norbert Gleicher, chairman of the Centers for Human Reproduction, which has clinics in Chicago and New York. Whether it becomes more popular "will depend to a large degree on the political climate."

President Bush has appointed a committee, led by Dr. Leon R. Kass, to advise him on biotechnology and issues related to the beginning of human life. In an preliminary report it released on Oct. 16, the committee questioned the wisdom of sex selection.

THE research by Mr. Dahl and Mr. Moretti, which was first reported in the online magazine Slate by Steven E. Landsburg, another economist at Rochester, seems to offer a new reason to be squeamish about the process.

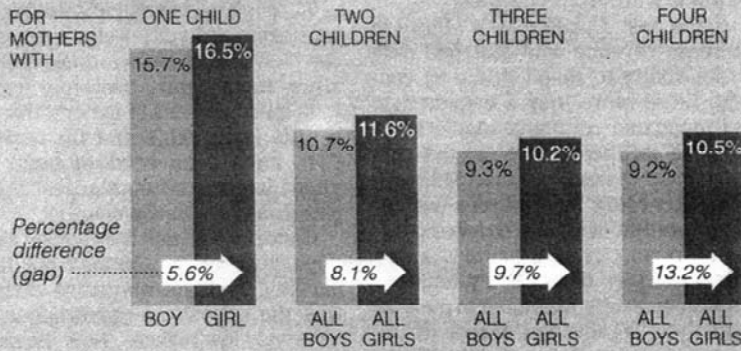
If parents, as a group, showed no preference for one gender over another, the new technology would be able to do little more than reallocate boys and girls in society. But if parents favor one sex, then acquire new degrees of control, the delicate balance between boys and girls could easily be upset, researchers say.

Consider what would happen if many parents with two girls opted for sex selection when having a third

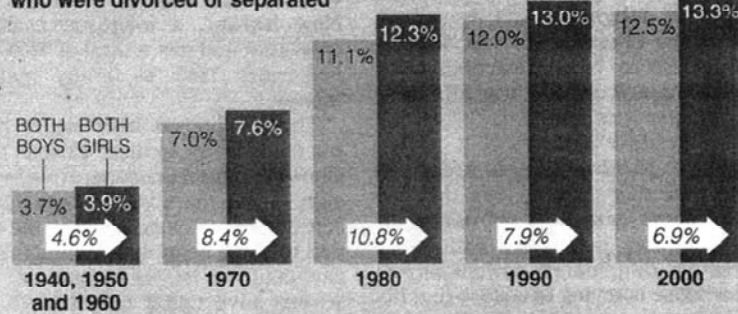
Gender Gap

Since at least 1940, couples with daughters have divorced more often than those with sons. The effect grows as the number of daughters rises. But the gap has narrowed somewhat in recent years.

Percentage of mothers who were divorced or separated, 1940-2000



Percentage of mothers with two children who were divorced or separated



Note: Data are for all mothers who were ever married between the ages of 18 and 50 with children less than 15 years old living at home; from the 1940 through 2000 Censuses. Figures are rounded.

Sources: Census Bureau via Gordon B. Dahl (University of Rochester) and Enrico Moretti (University of California at Los Angeles)

The New York Times

child, while those with two boys were more likely to leave the gender of their third child to nature. Over decades, the population would slowly become more male.

"This presents enormous ethical and social problems," Mr. Moretti said.

Nobody seems to believe that the United States will end up like China or India, where the combination of ultrasound scans and abortion has created a vast gap between the number of boys and girls being born. The good news for society, researchers say, appears to be that the preference for boys is waning somewhat in the United States.

In the 1940's, for example, couples with an only child who was a girl were 8 percent more likely to get a divorce than those with a lone boy. In 2000, the gap was just 5 percent.

"Gender is just not what it used to be," said S. Philip Morgan, chairman of the sociology department at Duke University and a fertility expert.

Girls now play high school sports about as often as boys, for example, and they enroll in college more often.

In fact, Mr. Morgan, who wrote about the divorce gap in the late 1980's, said he could no longer notice it among the group he studied. But because Mr. Dahl and Mr. Moretti used a larger sample, the Census, he said he did not doubt their findings. The two economists are now presenting the paper at seminars across the country and plan to submit it to a journal next month.

As clear as its results seem to be, Mr. Dahl emphasized that they were not necessarily an indictment of all, or even most, parents' attitudes toward girls: "Remember, the numbers aren't huge. So it doesn't mean this affects the whole population. It might just be a small fraction."

Obviously, that fraction would not include Mr. Dahl, who is the father of three girls.

"I could not imagine it any other way," he said of his family. □