


Were there *missing girls* in Biscay? Sex ratios in Northern Spain, 1550-1899

¿Hubo missing girls en Bizkaia? Sex ratios en el norte de España, 1550-1899

Elena Catalán Martínez* (elena.catalan@ehu.es) 

Universidad del País Vasco UPV/EHU

ANALYTICAL SUMMARY

This paper seeks to contribute to the knowledge of sex ratios at the time of birth, their long-term evolution, and their determinants. Data were therefore used from the baptismal records of a region in northern Spain which has mainly gone unnoticed until now. They also allow us to observe how the transition from a predominantly rural to an industrial economy affected sex ratios. The chronological breadth (1550 to 1900) and a sample of 857,681 are very unusual in studies of this type and mean that the paper is very sound.

The interval of 102 to 106 boys per 100 girls was used as the contrast statistic – for its minimum and maximum values – to determine whether Biscayan births show the existence of missing girls. The data show intense periods of deficits of girls throughout the 17th century, which stabilised within limits considered to be normal in the following century. Only the advance of industrialisation at the end of the 19th century managed to break the balance to the detriment of girls. Starting from this general trend, the aim was to establish the factors that could determine that behaviour. First, we assessed whether there was a correlation between the periods of economic crisis and a higher presence of boys among the children baptised. As no infant mortality figures were available, we decided to prepare a synthetic index to identify the years in which a higher-than-average deficit of girls was recorded and compared it to the synthetic indexes for adult morality and cereal prices. The results seem to indicate that families prioritised male offspring, particularly during turbulent times when it was more difficult to provide the same care to all the children. Second, we considered whether being legitimate or illegitimate at the time of birth significantly affected the distribution of the sexes. The data show a clear preference for males among the legitimate offspring in the rural world, at least up to the 18th century, while girls predominated among foundlings, at least until the end of the 19th century when there was an overabundance of boys among the latter. Third, a differentiated analysis was performed of the sex ratios in rural and urban environments. Totally different behavioural patterns were observed, even though they were convergent in time. Finally, the data at the time of the baptism was compared to the population censuses available in the province, from the Floridablanca census to the one in 1920 and which allow the data to be discriminated by ages.

In conclusion, it can be said that the phenomenon of missing girls had an impact in rural Biscay, at least until the 1730s, and in the industrial areas at the end of the 19th century. Seemingly, the succession system and the lack of ecclesiastical regulations fostered a legal concealment of girls. However, it cannot be ruled out that there were other more extreme forms of discrimination that flourished in times of turmoil and of great economic and social change.

* Corresponding author.