



IDRC: Jason Taylor

# The Daughter Deficit

## Exploring Declining Sex Ratios in India

**I**n a “normal world,” the female population equals or slightly surpasses the number of males. Except in India, that is, where the situation is just the opposite, where the gender ratio – or the number of females to males – is known to be among the most imbalanced in the world. Although China has the most severe shortage of girls compared to boys of any country in the world today, in India, the 2001 census revealed disturbing news: the proportion of girls aged 0-6 years dropped from 945:1000 to 927:1000 since the previous census done 10 years earlier.

This means that 35 million fewer females than males were registered in India over this particular decade. The census also revealed that the phenomenon has reached high proportions in states which had no prior history or practice of female infanticide, or where forms of discrimination against girls were not strongly evident earlier.

### A national emergency

**I**ndia’s Census Commissioner Jayant Kumar Banthia’s *First Report on Religion Data, 2001*, first revealed the persistent bias against the girl-child, prompting discussion of this dramatic trend.

Some voices, such as India’s national newspaper, *The Hindu*, recognized the sharp decline as a national emergency. In its August 29, 2004 online article, “No girls please, we’re Indian,” reporter Kalpana Sharma wrote about sex-selective abortion,

infanticide, and the neglect/discrimination of India’s girl child, calling it “...an epidemic that will have far-reaching social consequences.” The reasons behind this mistreatment of girls crosses the spectrum of Indian regions, economic classes, and castes and are due to a complex mix of economic, social, and cultural factors.

### An innovative research approach

**W**hile studies on the declining sex ratio have tended to be quantitative, looking at biological or demographic factors, there has been a lack of data on prevailing socio-economic and cultural aspects. For this reason, Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC), through its Women’s Rights and Citizenship program and in partnership with the Indian non-governmental organization ActionAid India, is documenting the factors contributing to this male/female imbalance in select districts in the five states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, and Haryana.

The study, coordinated by ActionAid India’s Gender Unit, focuses on six field sites – half urban, the other half rural – in two sites in three of the states, except in Punjab and Haryana where there were four sites per state. They were chosen to make the comparison between areas that have a longer history of adverse sex ratios with those where “masculinization” of the population is a more recent trend.



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## The son-preference trend in Northern India

**S**o far, in Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, the researchers have looked at changes in education, employment, nutrition, work patterns, religion, and culture, as well as family concerns such as marriage, property, inheritance, and continuity. The chosen field sites varied in terms of economic status, with Himachal Pradesh being by far the most prosperous. In comparison, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan are less well off, with greater dependence on agriculture and lower levels of education and health care. Because morbidity levels are higher there, the researchers noted that adverse sex ratios could not be attributed to sex-selective abortions alone. Conclusive data analysis for Punjab and Haryana has not yet been completed.

What the researchers can state is that sex ratios varied in villages and urban wards, underscoring that local contexts were significant. Son-preference was noted as being equally strong among different income groups and there was no significant correlation between caste and sex ratios where earlier research showed that sex ratios were better among lower castes and among the poor.

## A disaffection for daughters

**W**hat are the reasons behind these trends? The findings confirmed norms that have been part of India's socio-economic fabric for centuries. Sons are considered pivotal to family welfare, as they are the ones who earn money, continue family lineage, and provide a form of old age security for parents. A daughter, meanwhile, is considered to be a "double loss" as she not only leaves her family when she marries, becoming an "asset" to her new family, but she is also a source of marriage expenses, including the payment of dowry to the groom's family.

In both rural and urban Morena, Madhya Pradesh, residents keenly agreed with one respondent's comment that "...from the moment a daughter is born, the paramount concern of the immediate family is to accumulate money, valuables, and goods for her wedding." Today, dowry is a practice found among almost all castes, with the reported exception of some tribal groups. A *Dhobi* (lower caste) mother said, "Dowry is like a penalty... it's for the girl's security/prosperity, but whether she remains happy or not is decided by her destiny... ." She and others added that while parents fret about post-marriage security and their girls' happiness, they would resist them returning home after an unsuccessful marriage.

From the other "camp," an individual reacted to the idea of her new daughter-in-law remaining at work. "Why do we get daughters-in-law? So that we get some rest and peace. If she goes out to work then I will have to do her job instead... ." The report notes that in instances where women might work – in the fields or in a family business – their contribution is often unrecorded and unacknowledged.

## Family planning — for sons

**S**ome new trends, such as the two-child family encouraged by the Indian government, and an emphasis on education also influence decisions. However, the study notes that although small families are accepted in Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, and Haryana, family planning effectively means, "planning for sons."

Generally, people want educated daughters-in-law, although the researchers state it "...is oriented towards the future family of the couple – children will get proper guidance and instructions from an educated mother...marriage prospects rather than employment appear to drive education." However, parents expressed the hope that more education for girls would result in them obtaining white-collar, regular, and secure work pre-marriage – and a better choice of prospective husbands. In rural areas, there may be a compromise in the duration of schooling. It is noted "... girls are encouraged to complete as much education as they can – but – if a 'good match' is found, the girl is married off before she completes her studies."

Since the 1980s, technology widely available in India, such as amniocentesis and ultrasound, has permitted parents to predetermine the size and gender composition of their families through abortion.



### Sex-selection practices

**M**any informants told the researchers that they did not stop at one abortion, but had three or four – sometimes more – because a girl had been conceived each time. “Abortion,” says the report, “...is the method of family planning par excellence – to limit family size, to enable spacing between children, and also to regulate the sex composition of the family.”

Although sex-selective abortion is illegal in India, it is rarely prosecuted. Women who are most aware of the official position – the urban middle class – usually denied the practice of sex-selective abortions. At the same time, note the researchers, the urgency to have a son appears “...with a greater and more universal tone in the urban settings, as compared to the rural settings.”

And yet researchers noted that members of the older generation referred to children as nature’s or a divine gift, and of the sin of getting rid of a child. Women of reproductive age may agree with this view, and may protest, but the statistics show that they are not winning. “Our informants spoke of arguments between spouses about a daughter’s birth. Women expressed a sullen resentment at repeated abortions, or sorrow at the loss of unborn daughters or sons (by mistake).”

*Changes in work, education, marriage age, and marriage costs also seem to add up to a disaffection for daughters, to a greater extent than before. The factors causing this include: increased investment that has to be made in daughters in terms of education and marriage; the loss of their material and labour support; fears for their sexual safety and security; and worries about their future happiness in an appropriate marriage.*

Neglect of girls, whether planned or inadvertent, also contributes to the lower child sex ratio. While the researchers found that the degree of discrimination varied by location, there nonetheless was widespread evidence of lower levels of nutrition, health care, schooling, and emotional care, and high levels of underimmunization in general. “With nutrition and health, who may or may not take the decision is uncertain, but the discrimination is evident,” say the researchers.

### Causes of childhood deaths

**T**he research has shown a higher death rate among girls in the one-month to one-year age group, especially from gastrointestinal disease, pneumonia, and “miscellaneous” causes.

Among their observations, the researchers note that the most common cause of death is fever,

although less so for urban males in this category; for rural males and rural and urban females, mortality due to fever is about 40%. “Don’t know” was often given as cause of death for all groups, apart from urban males but especially for urban females. The data indicates that urban males under one month of age are taken for medical care more often than rural neonates and urban girls.

Observations in Rajasthan also point to infectious diseases as a common cause of death. Accidents and stillbirths also contribute to mortality. “This brings into the picture the possibility of not merely biological, but also social causes of death, which would then affect female survival,” the researchers note.

### Dealing with the consequences

**S**ome states now experience a shortage of brides because of the adverse sex ratios. The study also notes that 20% or more men in some states, including Haryana and Punjab, may remain unmarried. There are already examples of brides being “imported” from poorer eastern states.

Trends to higher age at marriage, more so in urban settings, were also observed, possibly as a function of the emphasis on education. In urban Morena, Madhya Pradesh, an interviewee observed that the average age at marriage is now 20 for boys and 17 to 18 for girls, where earlier both were married at 14 years of age. This led the researchers to question if perhaps the rise in marriage age may be due to greater difficulty in finding an eligible spouse, with factors such as education, earning capacity, and dowries raising the stakes for the ideal match.

### How research approaches can effect change

The research methodology used to collect data for this four-year project entailed much more than data collection. The study’s objectives included understanding how social class, caste, community, occupation, marital status, age, and type of household factor into the current sex-ratio imbalance in India. A second objective was to develop a viable research methodology using a blend of quantitative and qualitative techniques. With the assistance of an interdisciplinary advisory team from Delhi University, the Indian Institute of Technology, and Jawaharlal Nehru University, a household census was carried out in select villages and wards in five states with adverse sex ratios. The research used a feminist methodology and a qualitative field-based study in the selected districts in five states. The selection of the case studies took into account the heterogeneities of caste, class, and community. In the ethnographic phase, the research was based on participant observation. Researchers spent several months living with families in the selected locations.



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On the other hand, the researchers report that the idea a woman may remain unmarried is “total anathema.” “All the informants made similar remarks – that even the “richest person on earth” cannot take the financial responsibility of an unmarried daughter.” Also, ensuring a girl’s chastity is considered a great parental responsibility and is one of the arguments for promoting early marriage.

For better or worse, some of the usual social, cultural, and economic norms in Indian society’s choice of mates may be swayed. In some regions inter-caste marriage, marriage with girls of tribal communities, and polyandry are now becoming more common. There are also reports of bride buying and forced remarriage of widows. Some suggest that in the near future social tension could rise because of the challenge of finding female partners, and may lead to crimes against women. Others wonder if a shortage of women will lead to less violence against them, or a decrease in dowries.

As the researchers note, the increasing imbalance in sex ratios is a sign of continued inequality between the sexes. The scarcity of females, they add, is symptomatic of their low value.

## Finding solutions

**T**he research team underscored there are both long-term and short-term measures to stem the declining female ratio. In the long term, they recommend ensuring equal entitlements such as property rights, equal access to nutrition, health, education, and affection, and addressing the overall question of dowry and the necessity of marriage. In the short term, incentives to educate girls, financial support for girls, educating healthcare professionals and stopping incentives for sterilization are suggested.

In July 2007 India’s Women and Child Development Minister, Renuka Chowdhury, proposed that all pregnant women register with the government and seek its permission if they wish to undergo an abortion, stating that this is aimed at stopping the aborting of unwanted female fetuses. However, critics warn that the new move could backfire and be misused.

The researchers offer the following conclusions and suggestions:

*It will not be enough to counter son-preference. Aversion to daughters has to be squarely confronted through policy measures that increase the economic worth and support of daughters through improved employment opportunities and recognizing that women’s health and education is tied to more than the mothering roles.*

The reports from the five regions will form the basis for local interventions by ActionAid India and other women’s and community organizations.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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