

IMPLICATIONS OF ADVERSE SEX RATIO

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In modern world, in addition to sociological and humanitarian reasons, crimes against women have economic implications. Crime against women lead to adverse sex ratio and even mothers begin to show preference for a son. There is substantial research, recently documented in series of articles by the International Monetary Fund, that shows gender equality, particularly in education and employment, contributes to economic growth.

The state-wise Child Sex Ratio (CSR: number of females per 1000 males in 0-6 years age group) in India during 2001-2011 has deteriorated further except in Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Mizoram, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu. Interestingly, these same states, had recorded significant fall in CSR during 1991-2001 also. However, overall sex ratio has recorded an improvement over the years but has deteriorated in some states like Bihar and Gujarat. Internationally, the figures are not promising when compared with the US (1025), Brazil (1042), Russia (1167), Japan (1055), or Sri Lanka (1034).

The adverse CSR is a general indicator that female infanticide is probably being practiced across the country. There are some empirical studies that show an association of such a trend with increasing levels of income in transitional economies like China, Korea and India, and technological advancement in pre-natal sex selection tests, which are painless and affordable. The trend could have geographical pattern, and preference for sons could be higher in rural areas because of the sway of traditional institutions, as well as in some other regions for reasons which are rooted in long standing local institutions, according to UNFPA (2012).

The Government has recently released new data, based on the Census 2011, relating to family size and sex ratios. The data reveals that preference for a male child continues and families with fewer or no sons were choosing to have repeated trials for another child. One-child families with only a son outnumbered those with a daughter by nearly 25 per cent. The number of two-child families with both sons were double than those with two daughters. Similar anomaly existed for families with three children having two or more boys compared to two or more girls. The trend

does sober down after three children according to Census data, 2011. A similar study authored by Hu and Schlosser (2015), recently published in the Economic Journal also concludes that girls are more likely to be born in larger families, after the urge for sons is somewhat satiated, given pre-natal sex selection.

Causes

The persistence of adverse sex ratio is mainly because of high preference for sons. There could be various reasons for persistence of male child preference. The sociological, cultural and religious reasons for preference of a male child are extensively documented in various academic studies and government reports.

The reasons for skewed sex ratio has been examined empirically by many researchers. Sekher and Hatti (2010) after undertaking an empirical study in Karnataka, discuss about the origin of dowry and argue that rapid fertility decline, unaccompanied by changes in cultural values, has resulted in a deliberate attempt to get 'rid of girls' – a conclusion that can be applicable across India. Gender discrimination could probably boil down to a simple is it a fact or myth? that girl constitutes impoverishment and boy constitutes enrichment. It is with reference to costs and benefits, including the institution of marriage and dowry that daughters appear so expensive. In general, one key menace of dowry, despite increasing level of literacy, per capita income, and westernization, continues unabated. In agrarian societies, like Punjab and Haryana, equal rights in inheritance of land and resultant land fragmentation between male and female child can be a cause of concern for the family.

In addition to traditional factors, social mobility could be a driving force behind the skewed sex ratio in India. But there could be a few key economic factors which have neither been examined in detail nor focused upon by the policy makers in relationship to the persistence in psychology of seeking a male child. One such issue could be financial security to be extended by a son in old age to have provision for food, medical help and residence.

Implications of Adverse Sex ratio

An adverse sex ratio can have many implications. The relationship between sex ratio and crime has been a long standing issue and in the context of Asia, mainly China and India, an elaborate study was undertaken by Hudson and Boer (2005). Dreze and Khera (2000) concluded that murder rates in India are correlated with the female-male ratio in the population; districts with higher female-male ratios have lower murder rates.

The scarcity of females could lead to prolonged bachelorhood. The scarcity of brides may generate new waves of female migration from neighbouring countries, with different cultures and customs contributing to social tensions. In the absence of sufficient migration in view of the size of India, cases of human trafficking, kidnapping, forced marriages and other related crimes can increase.

Adverse sex ratio, resulting in scarce women could lead to parents offering larger dowry to attract the most suitable man in marriage for their daughter (Lena, 1996). In contrast, others argue that high sex ratio increases female bargaining power in the marriage market, shifting resources and family structures in ways that favour women (Angrist 2002).



In modern world, in addition to sociological and humanitarian reasons, crimes against women have economic implications. Crime against women lead to adverse sex ratio and even mothers begin to show preference for a son. There is substantial research, recently documented in series of articles by the International Monetary Fund, that shows gender equality, particularly in education and employment, contributes to economic growth. Empirical evidence suggests that women are more responsible in financial and monetary matters, an assumption serving as a bed-rock of the micro finance movement and self-help groups, not just in India but across the world. However, Wei and Xiaobo Zhang (2009) have suggested that high sex ratios have actually stimulated economic growth in China by inducing more entrepreneurship and hard work. Kastlunger (2010) showed that women were more tax compliant in Italy than men but according to McGee (2012), that may not be true for India.

Efforts to Improve Sex Ratio

In the Vedic times, the role of a woman was considered important in social order but was reduced to utter subordination and a dismal state during later periods. Herculean efforts by Guru Nanak, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Raja Rammohun Roy and Swami Vivekananda improved the condition of women but could not significantly change the situation.



In recent times, Government of India and state governments have been making concerted efforts mainly through Conditional Cash Transfer schemes (CCT), to stem the trend of adverse sex ratio and devised schemes like Dhanlaxmi, Bhagyalaxmi, Beti Anmol, Ladli and Nanhi Chhaan. The main criticism against these schemes is that the amount provided by the government is far less than that required to sustain and marry a girl child. Sekher (2010), in an extensive review of selected schemes, concluded that there was a need for more coordination within departments for successful implementation of these schemes may be a joint scheme by the Centre and states would be more successful.

Conclusion and Select Recommendations

The success story of some states reflected in Census 2011 should serve to provide some encouragement. To start with, states, which have successfully stemmed the national trend, should be awarded and their efforts celebrated publicly.

The sex ratio would be difficult to change without fundamental economic and social change as argued by Oldenburg (EPW, 1992). A multi-pronged effort would be required. This can only be achieved by active involvement of Panchayati Raj Institutions, local level of social, religious and political leaders, media and entertainment industry, medical professionals and medical associations.

In addition to the sociological reasons, there are economic factors too that need consideration. An adverse child sex ratio could have a bearing on the growing economy in future, as girls are like capital goods, directly providing labor force and bearing children who are future labor force. In view of the cost benefit analysis, where protection provided to a girl child for first two decades could yield an income stream for next five decades, there may be a need to have an amortization fund, probably named as National Girl Child Protection Fund (NGCPF) with the support of government, banking institutions and life insurance. The NGCPF could extend suitable financial support to the girl child from conception, through mothering allowance to highest level of education, and even marriage expenses.

According to USAID (2008), increases in educational attainment generally reduce preference for a son. The government has already initiated schemes for free education for the girl child, mainly in government schools. India could also consider incentives like gender-based quotas in colleges and work places. Also, couples having only daughters could be eligible for a higher than the normal universal old age pension, starting earlier at the age of 55 years.

The key factor is employment opportunities. In India, only about 30 per cent of women are in workforce. In contrast, in Nepal nearly 80 per cent of women are in the workforce followed by China (71 per cent), Bhutan (67 per cent), and Russia (57 per cent). The women in workforce can be expected to be relatively financially independent than those dependent on income of a male member in the family. In old age, there is always an insecurity regarding shelter as well as financial resource for not only food but also medical expenditure. The opportunity to work provides financial independence to women, and in case of need, it is easier for an independent woman to provide shelter and support to elderly parents.

The government could also consider more recruitment of women in armed and police forces. According to some estimates, women constitute only 3 per cent of police force in India and a small number in Indian army. In contrast, women play an important role in armies of many countries, including the US, Israel, China, Russia, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. India could consider Sainik and Military schools/colleges for training female students and women could increasingly be encouraged to join defense forces. Illustratively, in the recent Central Seventh Pay Commission Report, it is mentioned that Indian Army is short of officers by nearly 25 per cent while Navy is short by 17 per cent and Air-Force by 4 per cent. The defence forces have a provision of Short Service Commission (SSC) which can be tailor-made to suit the psychology of Indian families which insist that the females should get married and start their own family before thirty years of age. The SSC, with a provision of 5 or ten years of service is most suitable in such circumstances in India. Similarly, the judiciary suffers from serious shortage of courts and legal staff. It would be useful to have more female participation in legal services. In fact, India could consider, introducing study of law, like civics and geography, at early stages in school curriculum, and encouraging women to study and practice law. This effort may also help in making India a safe place for women.

To enhance female workforce participation, another out-of-the-box view needs to be considered. It is established that women generally demonstrate responsible behaviour in financial matters and their income is generally used to finance family expenditure. Therefore, the Government could consider offering complete exemption from income tax for women working in public and private sector. As the income earned by women is spent on family expenditure, and more women will be encouraged by this measure to enter the workforce, indirect tax collection on goods and services would improve, and therefore, in net, not impact the national or state. Similarly, to incentivise female participation in self-employment, especially under micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), tax holiday could be offered to MSMEs run by women entrepreneurs.

As consistently in all research, the dowry system is emerging as the main factor. It may be

necessary to highlight the benefits of simple and dowry-less marriages – may be even encourage group marriages. To incentivise widow remarriages and dowry-less marriages, the Government could even consider schemes like offering honey-moon packages and concessional houses for such couples. To discourage female infanticide, the Government could consider a ‘mothering allowance’ to the mother for first six years after the birth of a girl child. The medical association should also play a role in ensuring that doctors play responsible role.

The government may also assuage the elderly by offering universal old age pension, covering not only expenditure for food and living but also for accident and medical purposes. This financial independence of the elderly demonstrated for at least a generation may succeed in lowering the preference for a male child. The Atal Pension Yojana, recently announced, is an initiative in right direction, but limited in scope because of eligibility criteria of having a bank account and with applicability to young adults between 18 and 40 years. As many citizens, especially women, in India do not have a bank account despite efforts under Jan Dhan Yojana, this may not yield desired change in social behavior. It needs to be stressed that India has many more female widows than male widows and the gap widens with age, as women tend to live longer than men. Probably, that is the reason that even women prefer a male child.

The need is to financially empower the girl child similar to male child, offer equal opportunities, and encourage independence in decision making. Until parents internalize the value of a girl child as equal to male child, at least financially, change in preferences is difficult to achieve as has been witnessed in India for the last few centuries. To facilitate this change, various political, religious and social institutions may have to play a role. The reformers may have to devise ways to ensure that a girl and male child enjoy a similar status in observing social norms and rituals. Similarly, with changing times, it may be necessary to revisit some social events and festivals which lower female status.

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