

## Adverse Child Sex Ratio: A 'Mindset' Issue

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**I**n India, the issue of the adverse sex ratio has been a part of our history since at least the colonial period. It re-emerged as a major problem in the 1970s. Whether it be British officials in the nineteenth century trying to figure out why Rajputs and Jats killed their baby daughters, or demographers in post-colonial India wondering why the total number of women is declining relative to men even after independence, there has been no shortage of puzzles and differences in approaching this issue. After the 1980s, a shocking new dimension came into light, when it was discovered that in major cities like Delhi, Amritsar and Mumbai, new technologies meant to investigate foetal development could become a means to detect the sex of the foetus followed by abortion if found that the foetus is a girl.

Because of the misuse of this technology by medical practitioners to aid gender-biased sex selection, India has criminalised the practice through the enactment of the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostics Techniques (PC-PNDT) Act. There has been a significant and long drawn out campaign to stop the practice of sex selection by catching erring doctors and radiologists. It has been a hard won campaign which faced an up hill task in curbing the practice due to the common

prevalence of a power nexus between major clinics, medical practitioners, and state level monitoring bodies. Great zeal was required, visible only among very few dedicated government servants and district collectors (in Faridabad, in Hyderabad, to give a few examples) or by conducting innovative sting operations by NGOs and media persons (in Rajasthan and in Beed district of Maharashtra) to expose medical practitioners in the act of communicating the sex of the foetus, and so criminalising their practice. Some voices warned that such advocacy could also turn into an unintentional campaign against abortions per se. Abortion (which has never been a fully fledged right for women in India, but rather tagged onto our family planning programmes) was in danger of becoming much harder to access for women who genuinely needed it.

### Rethinking Mindsets:

Among the most common beliefs why people are said to be going for sex selection is the idea of a 'mindset'. How often does one hear that people's mindset is the root cause of the problem and that what is therefore needed is a change of 'mindset'? What exactly does the term mean? According to the dictionary, the word 'mindset' refers to "the established set of attitudes held by someone" and the example the dictionary helpfully provides is

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"the region seems stuck in a medieval mindset". I think both the definition and the example convey very well how this notion is being used in the context of understanding and opposing the practice of sex selection. We believe that families guilty of this practice are suffering from having fixed views about sons and daughters and how to value them. Their views are 'stuck' because it stems from age-old traditions that devalue daughters. This also means that when we say people should change their mindset, we want them to become less traditional and more modern in their views.

Based on our research on the adverse child sex ratio, I believe that this is a very inadequate understanding of the problem. When we think in this way, we assume that the thoughts of such people are not in sync with the times they are living in. But let us look more carefully at what families today think when they decide about having a son or not having a daughter. Families are planning their future based not just on age-old ideas, but on their expectations about what kind of resources they will be able to muster in order to realise their hopes. So, yes, we are dealing with people's attitudes and views, but these are views that have been shaped in the contemporary social and economic context within which we live. In other words, families in the present times are struggling between the idea of having children and being able to find the means to support them. This is a very dynamic and complex relationship in which families are pervasively and deeply influenced by their modern surroundings. (For a detailed study, see John et al 2008; UN Women 2015)

This also means that we have to ask questions like: Apart from the availability of new technologies from the 1980s, what other developments of the last few decades may have played a role in influencing decision-making? What kinds of families are particularly susceptible?

First of all, it may be noted that the period of the plunging child sex ratio also coincides with the huge spurt in

economic growth that India witnessed since the 1990s. Though enormous economic expansion and transformation followed, the fact remains that the benefits of such growth have been very unequal and is not creating enough new jobs to replace older ones. In all this, women have been the biggest sufferers. Families not in dire poverty, striving to improve their economic situation by having fewer children in whom they can 'invest', are the most susceptible to practicing sex selection. Though many of them say that they would like to have one boy and one girl, what this actually translates into is having 'at least one son and at the most one daughter'. Moreover, such families are quite 'modern' in wanting their children to have sufficient care and nutrition, good education, and to successfully settle down in adulthood—a reliable job for the boy and a stable married life for the girl. But this is easier said than done and has been creating an enormous sense of burden and anxiety, especially when it comes to bringing up a daughter in an economic and cultural milieu filled with so much uncertainty. So, to cut a long story short, families are displaying evidence of having a 'mindset' that is very much in sync with the time they are in when they 'choose' not to have a daughter.

### Critical Role of Government Schemes:

In this situation, the government must use the means at its disposal, such as schemes at the state and central level to send out the right signals to families. As discussed above, it is families who are beyond the pale of poverty and yet must struggle to match their resources with plans for their children, who are most susceptible to go in for sex selection to ensure that they get as close as possible to the 'perfect' family – one boy, one girl. After the Census of 2001 showed widespread drops in 0-6 year child sex ratios in several states, a number of schemes were floated, especially at the state level, or existing schemes were modified to address the low value given to the 'girl child'. Many of these schemes,

such as *Apni Beti Apni Dhan* had been created to address early marriage, to encourage families below the

### "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao" Programme

The National Programme "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao." was launched by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi on 22nd January, 2015 at Panipat, Haryana. Speaking on the occasion, the Prime Minister had said he "comes as a bhikshuk to beg for the lives of daughters". Stating that we have no right to call ourselves 21st century citizens as long as we have an 18th century mindset, the Prime Minister had called for an end to the discrimination between sons and daughters, saying this was the key to ending female foeticide.

The Prime Minister had declared that each one had a collective responsibility towards ending the practice of female foeticide. We would not only be harming the current generation, but also inviting a "terrible crisis" for the future generations, he warned.

In a hard-hitting message to doctors who contributed to female foeticide, the Prime Minister had reminded them that their medical education had been for the purpose of saving lives, and not killing daughters.

The Prime Minister quoted the eminent Urdu scholar from Panipat, Altaf Hussain Haali "O Sisters, mothers, daughters - you are the ornaments of the world, you are the life of nations, the dignity of civilizations." He also quoted from other ancient scriptures to highlight the importance given to the girl child.

He also recalled the astronaut Kalpana Chawla, as an example of how girls could excel and make a name for themselves. He said girls were today doing well in sports, in education and health sectors, and had a very significant contribution, even in agriculture.

poverty line to keep their girls in school and not marry them before the age of 18 years. These took the form of conditional cash transfer schemes in a number of states such as Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi and Madhya Pradesh. As the name suggests, schemes like Ladli, Dhanalakshmi and so on were adopted to encourage families to have a daughter, and offered payments to be put in a bank account in her name at various stages from birth, immunisation, and stages of schooling and where a lumpsum would finally be available for the girl once she reached 18 and had not married yet. The idea behind these schemes was to compensate, as it were, in financial terms, for the 'burden' of an unwanted girl, but these schemes were also saddled with many conditionalities which hampered their functioning. There have been various studies of these schemes (ICRW 2014; Sekher 2012) – some have shown that there was a marginal improvement in school retention among beneficiary families compared to eligible children who had not been entered into this scheme. Others pointed out that the many conditionalities were a major obstacle; especially its targetting of BPL families meant that it did not reach many families above poverty who were far more likely to resort to sex selection. Still others criticised these schemes for reinforcing public perceptions that a daughter is nothing but a burden on the family.

Two years ago, a new scheme was launched by the central government Beti Bachao Beti Padhao with much fanfare, with an overall budget of 100 crores. In states like Haryana, which has had a long standing low child sex ratio in several districts, this scheme is very visible in the form of huge hoardings across towns and on main highways, on the backs of buses, and in frequent pronouncements by state functionaries. However well intentioned, this scheme represents a set back from the conditional cash transfer schemes, with all their limitations. This is because all the money is being utilised as a communication campaign, as though the problem were simply and primarily one of the wrong 'mindset' of the people who are engaging in sex determination testing or not educating their daughters sufficiently. But, as argued earlier in this essay, people are not suffering from traditional mindsets in the first place. What makes the situation worse is that major government schemes such as the flagship Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) for pre school children, and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan which has been the

#### Healthcare for Women: Caring for Those Who Nurture

- Mission Indradhanush: Under this, more than 42lakh pregnant women have been immunized.
- Maternal and Neonatal Tetanus eliminated: Schemes such as Janani Suraksha Yojana and Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram have strategies to ensure clean delivery.
- India Newborn Action Plan (INAP): which targets to achieve Single Digit Neonatal Mortality Rate and Still Birth Rate by 2030





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backbone for implementing the Right to Education (RTE) have then in these last two years, witnessed major cuts in budget allocations. These are the very schemes that are crucial for ensuring basic nutrition and early child care, as well as universal schooling, and therefore critical for improving the lives of all children, girls included.

More generally, campaigns and especially the policies of the state have to recognise the consequences of their actions if they wish to make more headway in addressing the spread of sex selection. Creating awareness should, in the first place, go beyond changing mindsets to changing the conditions in our society

that are creating such mindsets. At the most fundamental level, this means a mode of development that makes it less necessary for parents to think so differently about their sons and daughters – such as employment prospects for both women and men. It also calls for addressing the escalating fears among parents about the sexual safety of their daughters. The youth of today need to have good reasons to believe that they can build a brighter future for themselves even outside of family support.

#### Readings

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### SwadharGreh Scheme

Swadhar Scheme was launched by the Ministry of Women and Child Development in 2002 for rehabilitation of women in difficult circumstances. The scheme provides primary need of shelter, food, clothing and care to the marginalized women/girls who are in need. The beneficiaries include widows deserted by their families and relatives, women prisoners released from jail and without family support, women survivors of natural disasters, women victims of terrorist /extremist violence and similarly placed women in difficult circumstances, who do not have any family support and without any economic means of survival.

The Short Stay Home Scheme for women and girls was introduced in 1969. Under this scheme, residential temporary accommodation and maintenance and rehabilitative services are provided to women and girls rendered homeless due to family discord, crime, violence, mental stress and social ostracism. The scheme is being implemented by the Central Social Welfare Board.

The two schemes have been merged as SwadharGreh with an objective to set up SwadharGreh in each district with a capacity of 30 women. The capacity can be extended from 50 to 100 on the basis of need based assessment. The financial norms of the SwadharGreh have also been enhanced w.e.f 1.1.2016. The SwadharGreh depending on the location / classification of the city for the purpose, shall be eligible for a grant of rupees 14.54 lakhs to Rs 18.38 lakhs per annum. This SwadharGreh can be implemented by State Govt/Central or state autonomous bodies/Municipal bodies/ Cantonment Boards/ Panchayati Raj institutions and cooperative institutions/ public trusts/ civil society organizations. As a special case, this Ministry is also constructing a SwadharGreh Home for 1000 widows at Vrindavan. The construction has begun and will be completed soon.

### Amendments to the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961

Amendments to the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 have been approved by the Cabinet by introducing the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Bill, 2016 in Parliament.

The maternity benefit Act 1961 protects the employment of women during the time of her maternity and entitles her of a 'maternity benefit' - i.e. full paid absence from work - to take care for her child. The act is applicable to all establishments employing 10 or more persons. The amendments will help 1.8 million (approx.) women workforce in organised sector.

The amendments to Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 are as follows:

- Increase Maternity Benefit from 12 weeks to 26 weeks for two surviving children and 12 weeks for more than two children.
- 12 weeks Maternity Benefit to a 'Commissioning mother' and 'Adopting mother'.
- Facilitate 'Work from home'.
- Mandatory provision of Creche in respect of establishment having 50 or more employees.