(Written by Seema Jayachandran)
A number can make us pay attention to a societal problem. India has 63 million "missing women." That stark number makes it harder to ignore the shortage of girls in India. The 2018 Economic Survey gives us a powerful new number: India has twenty-one million "unwanted girls". This number describes the girls who are born but not treated well. Crafting a new statistic that brings a spotlight to this problem will be an important legacy of the Economic Survey.
"Missing women" are the girls and women who would be alive today if parents were not aborting female foetuses. Girls getting less food and healthcare add to this count by raising female mortality. Amartya Sen woke us up to this problem in 1990 with an article titled "More Than 100 Million Women Are Missing". He counted the missing women across several countries such as India, China and Pakistan. Many people knew the problem existed, but Sen's number, called out in the title of his article, made the problem salient.


The population census enumerates everyone in a country, which allowed Sen, and others after him, to quantify missing women based on the sex ratio of the population. Today, there are 63 million fewer women counted in the Census in India than there naturally should be. Once we have
quantified the problem, we can track whether it is improving or worsening. We can benchmark India against other countries. We can make state-wise comparisons and see that Haryana and Punjab, and, more surprisingly, Telangana, have a large missing women problem.
"Unwanted girls" are girls who are alive but likely disfavoured by their parents. They receive less healthcare and schooling, with life-long effects on their well-being. It is not news that many parents favour boys over girls. What we lacked was a statistic that quantified the scope of the problem. Now we have it: Twenty-one million unwanted girls under the age of 25 in India. These girls are more precisely described as "less wanted" children. They are daughters that parents gave birth to when they were really hoping for a son. We cannot know if their parents would be happier without the girl; what we can surmise is the parents were disappointed to have given birth to a girl.

How do we detect this "less wantedness" or "unwantedness"? Here is a common pattern of childbearing. A couple wants to have two children, ideally one son and one daughter, but it's especially important to them to have at least one son. If they have two daughters in a row, they will keep having children until they get a son. (Meanwhile, if they have two sons in a row, they might regret having no daughter but not enough to expand their family.) A son might arrive on the third birth, and their children will be girl, girl, then boy.

It might take two tries: Girl, girl, girl, then boy. Notice that in both cases, the last child in the family is a boy. If we aggregate all families, we'd notice that the sex ratio of the last child (SRLC) is maleskewed. SRLC is thus a revealing measure of parents wanting sons. A subtle but important point is that these fertility "stopping rules" do not skew the populations' overall sex ratio. I used the SRLC measure in my research to show that the fervent desire for sons in India is not a feature of all less economically developed societies. For example, in the historical US, there wasn't a maleskewed SRLC.

The Economic Survey built on this work and took it further. Its analysis revealed that even Kerala and Assam have a male-skewed SRLC; if we only tracked missing women, these states would look problem-free. Importantly, the report also calculated the India-wide total of 21 million. In the figure below, taken from the report, the right panel shows that last children are disproportionately male. The left panel shows that non-last children are more female; that's because the child being female led the parents to keep having children in their quest for a son. The 21 million unwanted girls can be calculated using the left panel: They form the gap between what would occur naturally - the dashed horizontal line at a sex ratio of 1.05 - and what we actually see.

Many couples have a girl when they were hoping for a boy. If the girls are nonetheless treated equally, this would not be much of a problem. Unfortunately, girls get fewer resources than boys. The stopping behaviour means that girls tend to grow up in larger families. Even if parents treat their children equally, girls are disadvantaged by being in families with fewer resources to spend per child. Moreover, parents who passionately want sons, unsurprisingly, favour them once born. Boys are more likely to get immunisations. India shows a gender gap in stunting compared to other parts of the world, consistent with girls consuming less nutritious food. One study found that one year after parents were advised that their child needed surgery to correct a heart defect, 70 per cent of the boys but only 44 percent of the girls had undergone the surgery.

This is why having 21 million unwanted girls is unacceptable. I am hopeful that by alerting us to the size of the problem, the Economic Survey will spur efforts to fix it. But we need to be smart in how we track progress. A decline in the number of unwanted girls isn't necessarily progress. Unwanted girls arise when parents keep having more children to obtain a son. Couples are becoming more reluctant to have large families and are gaining better access to ultrasound. "Trying again" might give way to more sex-selection. It will not be progress if we achieve fewer unwanted girls at the cost of more missing women.

The goal is for both numbers to come down. The way forward is to improve women's earnings opportunities so that dowries are lower and women have more say in family decision-making. Better options for people to support themselves in old age, such as a good pension system, would make having a son less paramount to couples. We also need more efforts that take on society's norms and try to reshape them so that people start valuing daughters as much as sons. The writer is associate professor, department of economics, Northwestern University and led the study that put the figure on 'unwanted girls'.
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