

The lowdown on falling sex ratio

A recent report from the NITI Aayog said sex ratio at birth (SRB) nationwide had dropped from 906 in 2012-2014 to 900 in 2013-2015. The SRB is the number of girls born for every 1,000 boys. In all, 17 of 21 large Indian States saw a drop in the SRB, with Gujarat performing the worst, declining 53 points. While the NITI Aayog report used data up to 2013-15, newer data from India's Sample Registration System show the SRB fell even further in 2014-2016, from 900 to 898. While this is a highly disturbing trend, it isn't new for India, which has seen a consistent lowering of the SRB since the 1970s. In natural circumstances, the SRB hovers around 952 girls for every 1,000 boys.

The number of girls born is naturally lower than the number of boys, and demographers speculate that this may be nature's way of offsetting the higher risk that men have of dying — male babies are biologically weaker than females, and men have historically seen higher mortality rates owing to risk-taking behaviour and participation in wars. This evens out the sex ratio of a population as it grows older. But India is a special case. Its SRB is far lower than 952 because of the preference for the male child.

This means we are killing girl children in the womb. As on today, around 63 million girls are estimated to be 'missing' in India because of such actions.

Till the 1970s, female infanticide was the preferred way of killing the girl child, notes a review in the journal *Genetics in Medicine*. But in the Seventies, sex selection technologies like amniocentesis came about, in which doctors can test the amniotic fluid around a developing foetus for genetic abnormalities. But people soon realised this method could be used to determine the child's sex and to abort it, if female. Other technologies, including the cheaper and less invasive ultrasound, followed, allowing more people to use them. As a 2010 report from the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI) puts it, these technologies gave son preference "a tiny, sleek technological nudge". Families who were killing baby girls till then made the shift to abortions. A thriving market for sex selection sprung up with doctors openly advertising their services. In 1994, the government took notice and introduced the Prenatal Diagnostics Techniques Act which punishes healthcare professionals for telling expectant parents the sex of a child with imprisonment and hefty fines. In 2003, when technologies that allowed gender-selection even before conception became available, the act was amended to become the Prenatal Conception and Prenatal Determination Act (PC-PNDT). By any token, this Act has been a failure. In November 2016, a report from the Asian Centre for Human Rights noted that between 1994 and 2014, 2,266 cases of infanticide were registered in India, against 2,021 cases of abortion under the PC-PNDT, even though abortions outnumber infanticides today. In all, 17 out of 29 States had either not registered any case, or had zero convictions. The PHFI report in 2010 found major gaps in the training of personnel implementing PC-PNDT. Poor training meant that they were unable to prepare strong cases against violators to secure convictions.

Low SRBs starting from the Seventies have led to large numbers of "surplus men" today in countries like India and China. There are concerns that skewed sex ratios lead to more violence against both men and women, as well as human-trafficking. In India, some villages in Haryana and Punjab have such poor sex ratios that men "import" brides from other States. This is often accompanied by the exploitation of these brides.

India must implement the PC-PNDT more stringently, but must also dedicate more resources to fighting the preference for boys. Last week, the Drugs Technical Advisory Board decided that ultrasound machines should be included in the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, so that their import is regulated.

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