



Female deficit syndrome: Trend, Causes and Challenges ahead

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ABSTRACT

The adverse sex ratio also called female deficit syndrome is affected by many factors. Female feticide and sex selective abortion being the most common in today's scenario of two child norm. Child sex ratio has reached to a figure which is lowest since independence. Laws, policies and schemes favoring girl child are in place. But the attitude of both males and females of society needs to be changed first. Once they identify their needs they will be able to utilize the schemes and policies. The consequences are liable to damage our social and economic fabric beyond repair. Solution needs to be tailored in the social context of country.

INTRODUCTION

Though the world today sees and accepts India as one of the emerging global economies, one of our most significant social indicators viz., the sex ratio isn't something we are proud of. Sex ratio is defined as the number of females per thousand males; child sex ratio being the sex ratio in children 0-6 years of age has gone down to 914 females per 1000 male; the lowest since independence.[1] On the other end of the spectrum, stands the United States of America with a predominant female population.[2]

Trend observed among different surveys

While the Census releases their data every ten years, other national representative surveys release data on sex ratio in between this period. We compared the data on sex ratio in India from the various National Surveys [Census, Sample registration survey (SRS), National family and health survey (NFHS) and Civil registration survey (CRS)] conducted at different times by various government agencies. The earliest report included was of Census in 1981 and latest by NFHS and CRS in 2015.

Census in ten years from 2001 to 2011 has reported a seven point increase in sex ratio. Sample registration survey (SRS) is based on three year average conducted by the registrar general of India with dual recording system. SRS reported a decline in sex

ratio from 2011-12 to 2013-14.[3] The Civil registration survey on the other hand is based on coverage of registered births and shows a sharp decline in sex ratio at birth from 909 in 2011 to 887 in 2014.[4] The National family health survey uses random sampling technique and provides information on sex ratio at birth based on children born in the five years preceding the survey. NFHS-4 reports a four point rise in sex ratio as compared to NFHS-3 for the country.[5] NFHS is a representative and externally valid survey as compared to CRS, where the data is only from among the registered births and hence cannot be generalized. Also one of the reasons for decline in sex ratio according to CRS could be due to non registration of female births. NFHS reports sharp decline of sex ratio when comparing the results of NFHS-2 to NFHS-3 and further a gradual rise from NFHS 3 to 4. (Table 1)

The census and the NFHS are showing a slight increase in the sex ratio, whereas the SRS reported a decline in the numbers in table 1. The decline noticed over a period of three years i.e. from 2011 to 2014 could probably be transient, since in NFHS-4 we see a gradual rise in the numbers. The census covers a large period of 10 years hence short term variations go unnoticed. The gradual increase in sex ratio is definitely encouraging for a nation which has placed gender equality as a major component in its new health policy. Various measures taken by the government to curb the skewed sex ratio could definitely have contributed to this change.

Formulation of the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques act

The act was formulated in 1994 specifically for pre-natal diagnostic techniques (invasive procedures) and centers were termed as genetic clinics. When the Supreme Court of India in 2001 gave a verdict on a petition filed by an NGO that ultrasound clinics should be brought under the act, the Government added the term ultrasound clinic everywhere along with genetic clinic. Any medical geneticist, gynecologist, registered medical practitioner or any person who owns a Genetic Counseling Centre, a Genetic Laboratory or a Genetic Clinic or is employed in such a Centre, Laboratory or Clinic and renders his professional or technical services to or at such a Centre, Laboratory or Clinic, whether on an honorary basis or otherwise, and who contravenes any of the provisions of this Act or rules made there under shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years and with fine which may extend to ten thousand rupees and on any subsequent conviction, with imprisonment which may extend to five years and with fine which may extend to fifty thousand rupees.[6,7] The act was amended and effectively implemented in 2003 and strictly amended in 2011. The PC-PNDT (Prohibition of Sex Determination) Act 2003, with Rules made there under is an act to safeguard the girl child.

The double edged sword

The PNDT act and its strict enforcement are the major contributors in turning the figures around. However the PNDT act has eventually proven to be a double edged sword, wherein those flouting the rules have led to early detection of female child and female feticide. This has also led to an increase in illegal and unsafe abortions where a nexus of medical professionals would conduct the entire procedure from diagnosis to the MTP in unhygienic conditions, endangering the life of the mother.[8]

Declining child sex ratio

Another matter of concern is the sharp decline in the child sex ratio. The child sex ratio (0-6 years) includes sex ratio at birth and sex differential in mortality. In 2001, the contribution to the skewed sex ratio was two fifth at birth and one fifth by female child mortality, whereas in 2011 there is distortion in sex ratio by two third at birth and one third by child mortality. Hence the skewed sex ratio is the result of lower proportions of female births.[9] A sharp decline of 60 to 83 points in the juvenile sex ratio between 1991 and 2001 was one of the worst in the history of the country, questioning the sole reason of dislike of the girl child to be behind such a sharp fall in sex ratio.[7]

Can education change the societal perspective?

Proportions of low female births was more among educated women who could best afford the ultra sonography.[10] The pressure from the family of the woman would force her to undergo innumerable such procedures till she finally gave birth to a male child.

The first report on religion data by the census commissioner Jayant Kumar reveals the persistent bias against the girl child. This bias is evident across all regions, economic classes and castes. The reason for such prejudice is an amalgam of several social, cultural and economic factors. [11] In a study on trends in selective abortion in India, Jha et al., observed that the conditional sex ratio for the second order birth in case of the first child being a female, fell dramatically from 906/1000 live births in 1990 to 833/1000 live births in 2005. This decline was more

evident in women from wealthier families and better education. According to them selective abortion of the female child increased substantially in India.[9]

It has been demonstrated from the state of Kerala with the highest sex ratio in the country that female literacy is an important determinant of the performance of health and social indicators of a region. However merely higher literacy rates do not ensure absence of primitive mindsets and actions, since even the literate females are not empowered enough to have a final say in matters pertaining to reproductive, finance and family structure. The unfortunate acceptance by the female of the medieval "woman-can't-survive-without-a-man's-support" proclamation doesn't help our cause either. Another challenge to a pro-girl child environment is the alarmingly rising crime rates against women, be it sexual violence, dowry deaths, domestic violence or vitriolage. It isn't totally baseless for a modern day educated couple to shudder at the prospect of raising a girl in such an environment. Also the concern of the lesser prosperous section of society is well-understood in terms of their fear of not being able to bring up a girl child with dignity. It has been observed that where sex selection occurs it is strongly influenced by the gender of the preceding child; for third births with two previous girls the ratio is much higher than for second births with one preceding girl child. In cases where the previous child was a boy, sex ratios are normal.[10]

The vicious circle

Research indicates that the major factors responsible for this are the long nurtured patriarchal society, age old social customs (like dowry) and lack of women-centric economic growth.

It is the perception of the girl child as a social and financial liability that has led to nutritional and emotional violence which was reflected in a negatively skewed child sex ratio. [7]

The deep rooted belief in society that the return of investment in a male child is higher than a female, leads to a vicious circle of gender discrimination at each stage of life. Although Indian laws against 'dowry' have been in effect for decades, they have failed to produce the desired impact of influencing the mindset and behavior of society. Further, there is concern about the right of a married daughter to the family property, apart from dowry, which leaves the parents with little or no savings. A verdict of the honorable Supreme Court where every dowry complaint is to be referred to Family Welfare committee before any arrests has made section 498A a toothless law. [9] Such riders in the law will delay and deny justice to women and encourage the culprits.

Consequences of female deficit syndrome

Increase in violence is multifactorial in causation and one of the reasons could be decrease in number of female in society. Increase in sex related crimes and violence against women is evident. Rise in social problems like dowry deaths, forced polyandry, rape, child marriage, bride selling, kidnapping of women for marriage etc., are some of the haunting consequences. Shortage of women is likely to lead to a natural selection of more desirable men for marriage. The least desirable men will be those who are either less educated or belong to low socioeconomic status. This situation has been hypothesized to lead to increased levels of antisocial behavior and violence and will ultimately present a threat to the stability and security of society.[12] In India, a study carried out between 1980 and 1982 showed a strong correlation between homicide rates in individual states across the country and the sex ratio in those states, after controlling for

Table 1 : Sex ratio trend reported by various national surveys

	Census			
Year	1981	1991	2001	2011
Sex ratio at birth and one year	934	927	933	940
	Civil registration system			
Year	2012	2013	2014	2015
Sex ratio at birth	908	898	887	881
	Sample registration survey			
Year	2010-12	2011-13	2012-14	
Sex ratio at birth	908	909	906	
	National family health survey			
Year	1 (1987-91)	2 (1993-97)	3 (2000-04)	4 (2015-16)
Sex ratio at birth for children born in last five years	941	938	914	919
0-6 years sex ratio	934	926	918	919

potential confounders such as urbanization and poverty. The authors concluded that there was a clear link between sex ratio and violence as a whole, not just violence against women as might be assumed when there is a shortage of females. [13]

Steps taken by Law and Government policies

It is injustice to an innocent girl child full of unexplored potential, stigmatizing her as a liability even before she has taken her first breath. The solution lies in devising an approach targeted at addressing the challenges faced by her at different stages of life: as a daughter, daughter-in-law, wife, mother and mother-in-law.

A stepwise approach needs to be taken to increase the sex ratio of the country. The Dowry act and PC-PNDT act were the first steps towards this. It is easy to intervene at macro environment level through legislation which needs to be further strengthened and not weakened. To bring about a behavioral change in the society a major challenge is indispensable. The schemes by government like '*Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*' have the potential to make the desired break through. [14] Schemes like the *Sukanya Samridhi Account Scheme*, where the girl child is provided financial help through opening bank accounts and active involvement of the government officials in targeting areas with low sex ratio could go a long way in bringing a change.[15]

Solutions are slow paced with long lasting effects

Motivating families to provide the girl child with equal growth opportunities and discourage discrimination against the girl child would definitely improve the skewed sex ratio.

Educating the girl child is the corner stone of these strategies. As the proverb goes the charity begins at home; in the same vein,

change also begins at home. A girl child should be equally involved in the decision making of day to day family affairs as simple as selecting the color of new car to as complex as matter related to investments and banking. This would enable her to take intelligent decisions regarding education, career, marriage and most importantly reproductive health care matters. For this to be possible, the importance of conditioning the male child from a very tender age towards honoring the fairer sex and treating her as an equal can't be undermined. Divisibility of work on the bases of gender should be discouraged in families, so that children adopt similar behavioral patterns. This would perhaps stop exploitation of women in the household and would render a more conducive environment for them.

This is a classic example of behavior change of society. There still exists a major portion of iceberg submerged are not even in pre contemplation stage of change. The lazy and negative attitude of some females of the country towards the younger generations for facilities they are getting easily. Certain females have this cognitive bias that others should be devoid of facilities which they were not provided. If every female right from childhood is nurtured in a respectful, fear free and non hypocritical environment she will create the same enabling environment for other females too. This in itself will be inculcated in the mindset of males of the society also.

CONCLUSION

The focus of any social intervention should be the female population of country. A strategic approach targeting the adolescents, adult and old age females is the need of hour. It is the female mindset of helplessness which needs to be changed before

approaching their male counterparts. Devising a strategy or a national programme using the continuum care approach exclusively for women, addressing her needs with a holistic approach at every stage of life could be the way forward. The above actions cannot be implemented in one day or immediately. However preparedness to prevent future damage is the need of the hour.

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