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How to Fix India's Sex-Selection Problem

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Indian gynecologists conducting ultrasound examinations on pregnant patients at a government-run hospital in the northeastern Indian city of Agartala. Credit: Jayanta Dey/Reuters

There are too many men in India today. Over the course of several decades, 300,000 to 700,000 female fetuses were selectively [aborted](#) in India each year. Today there are about 50 million more men than women in the country. While selective abortion of female fetuses accounts for most of the excess of men, another reason for the [disparity](#) in the population is that some people are believed to kill female infants, and some girls

die because of medical or nutritional neglect. This oversupply of men is harming women and girls. (1)

Starting in the 1980s, the desire of some parents to have a son and at the same time have fewer children than past generations met with the widespread availability of ultrasound machines. Sonograms were used to detect the future sex of fetuses, and many women aborted fetuses that were predicted to be female. (2)

Despite the increasing role of women in the work force, the old idea that a son will be the breadwinner and will support parents in old age remains powerful. Although it is illegal, many parents are still forced to pay a dowry to marry their daughters. And Hindu tradition requires a son to perform certain funeral rituals for his parents. (3)

Despite a law adopted in 1994 that prohibits medical professionals from revealing the future sex of a fetus to a pregnant woman, people can readily obtain this information from illegal operators of ultrasound machines. The effectiveness of enforcement efforts against illegal sex-selection tests varies across the states. (4)

Abortion is legal in India and fairly easy to get for those who can afford it. Since ultrasound is the most common method of detecting the sex of a fetus, most abortions are surgical procedures as the pregnancy is too advanced to terminate using pills. (5)

Sex-selection and abortions are more common among urban, middle-class and educated people since they have more money and access to illegal providers and abortions. The prevalence of the practice varies across the country. In the southern state of Kerala, the ratio of women to men is normal, but in the northern state of Haryana there is a large male surplus. The scale of sex selection is so enormous that one demographer estimates that if current levels of sex selection persist, nearly 10 percent of Indian men will be single at age 50 in 30 years. (6)

Scholars have long suggested that surpluses of men in China and India will destabilize society and increase violence. Sociologists examining the results of nationally representative surveys of tens of thousands of households in India found that in communities with greater male surpluses, there was more rape, child marriage of girls, domestic violence and greater perceptions of sexual harassment. (7)

Although there is a statistically significant correlation between the male surplus and increase in rape of women and girls, the early marriage of girls and violence by husbands against wives, there is no certainty about its cause, as other reasons for increased violence against women cannot be ruled out. (8)

Popular perceptions that attribute the causes of sex selection to general “son preference” and “daughter aversion” are not entirely accurate. Prabhat Jha, an epidemiologist at the University of Toronto, and his co-authors found that Indian parents who intervene typically do so at their second and third births after they have had one or two girls. After parents have one male child, they again leave to chance the sex of their next child. This suggests that most couples who are sex selecting want at least one boy and are willing to have girls. (9)

Some parents may desire to have female children but do not act on that preference. The Indian government could allow those parents to conceive a girl. One way to do this is by sperm sorting, a process whereby X chromosome-bearing and Y chromosome-bearing sperm are sorted. (10)

Thereafter, only the sperm that will form an embryo of the desired sex are artificially inseminated into the uterus. But Indian law currently prohibits sex selection using sperm sorting and in vitro fertilization even for parents who want to conceive a girl. The law should be amended to allow for pre-implantation sex selection in favor of girls. (11)

Current solutions to the sex-selection problem are largely failing. The surplus of male children increased from the 2001 to the 2011 Indian census. Many blame the government for failing to catch and prosecute illegal ultrasound providers. Frustrated with government inaction, some civil society groups have started guerrilla campaigns in which pregnant women seek out the sex of their fetuses, after which they report ultrasound operators that provide that information. (12)

Even if greater enforcement efforts are made, it is likely impossible to completely eliminate the black market for fetal sex detection. Ultrasound machines are used in routine maternal care, and it is very hard to detect acts that take place secretly. New methods of sex detection are also available on the global market — a blood test at seven weeks of gestation can now reliably predict the future sex of a child. Advertisements for sex detection tests are popping up on the internet, and the Indian Supreme Court recently ordered Google and other search engines to do more to censor them. (13)

Some authorities and N.G.O.s monitor the movement of pregnant women who have female children to ensure that they do not obtain abortions. In other cases, without any concrete evidence, some families are publicly shamed by what are known as “mourning ceremonies” if women in their family are suspected of having an abortion. It is poor women who are the targets of those problematic policies. (14)

Some local governments give cash payments to women when they give birth to daughters. This strategy is aimed at discouraging women from aborting female fetuses. The Indian government should go even further and encourage people to conceive girls. Certainly any cash payment scheme would change the behavior of only poor people. (15)

But if sperm sorting, which is 93 percent effective in conceiving girls, were made available to any woman who wanted to select in favor of a girl, we might see both poor and middle-class people conceiving girls, in that way helping to equalize the male surplus. The challenge will be to properly enforce it. While sex selection can also be accomplished through in vitro fertilization, it is a much more expensive and invasive method than sperm sorting. (16)

Most countries, including India, have a long way to go before women achieve equality. The United Nations Development Program ranked India 125 out of 159 countries in terms of gender equality. Prevailing television and radio campaigns aimed at changing sexist attitudes toward women and girls will work to improve gender equality only over the long term. (17)

The Indian government, activists and N.G.O.s must find solutions that will more swiftly improve the gender imbalance in births. (18)

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