

Lost Daughters: Unravelling India's Selective Abortion Crisis

Background

For over a century, India's census data has revealed a troubling gender imbalance, with far fewer women and girls compared to men and boys. The 2011 census reported only 940 women for every 1,000 men and an even starker child sex ratio of 918 girls for every 1,000 boys. This persistent gender disparity has led to the characterization of India as a "country of missing women." The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21) confirmed the ongoing prevalence of son preference, with over 80% of Indian households expressing a desire for at least one male child. The cultural and societal pressure to produce male heirs has contributed to skewed sex ratios, selective abortions, and significant female underrepresentation in the population.

Recent studies, such as the 2022 research by Kabir Firaques, highlight this disparity further. The findings revealed that 15% of married women prefer having more sons than daughters, a figure five times higher than those who prefer daughters. This preference was four times more prevalent among men, with 16% preferring sons compared to only 4% favouring daughters. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has estimated that approximately 63 million women are "missing" from India's population due to sex-selective practices and gender-based mortality.

Objective

The present paper will assess the trends in sex ratio by birth order, drawing on data from the 2 waves of the nationally representative India Human Development Survey (IHDS), IHDS 2 and the recently conducted IHDS 3.

Data and Sample

The study sample consists of ever-married women aged 15 to 49 years. The data will be sourced from the second and third rounds of the India Human Development Survey (IHDS), a nationally representative panel survey that tracks the same households over time. The IHDS offers comprehensive and reliable information on various aspects of fertility, mortality, family planning, and the use of reproductive and child healthcare services, among other related indicators. This survey is part of a

collaborative research initiative led by the National Council of Applied Economic Research, the University of Maryland, and Indiana University, with a strong focus on human development issues.

Methods

A previous study by Jha (Lancet, 2011) assessed sex-selective abortions of girls in India from 1990 to 2005 using data from three rounds of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS). In contrast, the present study will use data from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) Wave 2 and Wave 3 data sets, which provide more recent trends and allow for a comparison with Jha's findings to corroborate the current situation.

The IHDS survey is conducted by female interviewers after obtaining informed consent from participants. A complete birth history was recorded for each woman, including information on the date of birth, sex, birth order, and mortality of all children, as well as the woman's religion and education level.

This study will also analyse several potential explanatory factors at different levels:

- **Individual level:** maternal education, whether the mother earns cash income, access to media, and the sex of older siblings (for health-related outcomes).
- **Household level:** household wealth, family structure (extended or nuclear family), caste, and religion.
- **Community level:** economic development at the regional, state, and village levels, measured by access to roads, electricity, and healthcare facilities; and village-level women's status, measured by female literacy and employment outside the home.

Additionally, the study will assess how these factors and trends may vary across different education and wealth groups. Appropriate statistical techniques will be applied to the birth history data to estimate the extent of sex-selective abortion practices.

Policy implications

A major concern in India regarding son preference is the failure of decades of policy efforts to bring about meaningful change. Instead of improving, the worsening sex ratios suggest that the issue is becoming more severe. Our findings will likely emphasize that the effectiveness of policies addressing this problem depends heavily on their specific focus. While current Indian government policies mainly concentrate on reducing sex-selective abortions, our results may highlight the need to also tackle the underlying parental motivations behind son preference, not just the mechanisms used to enforce it.

An important direction for policy development would be to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations and social norms within communities and families, especially those that do not exhibit a preference for sons. Learning from these groups could provide valuable insights into reshaping social attitudes.

Additionally, while addressing the skewed sex ratios is crucial, it is equally important to focus on the treatment of surviving girls. Son preference manifests not only through practices like feticide and excess female mortality, but also in the form of health and nutritional discrimination against girls. Thus, policy interventions must address both the missing girls and the well-being of those who are born.