

THE STORY OF DISAPPEARING DAUGHTERS IN INDIA & CHINA

Introduction:

Violence against women is one of the most deadly and widespread violations of women's rights across the world. The extermination of a girl child from the womb or the neglect of girl child leading to infant mortality is much more heinous. Noble laureate Amartya Sen, in 1990, alerted the world about the missing women especially in China and India. 'Sen's finding aroused the concern of policymakers and has provoked a wave of research on the topic: Where did the "missing girls" go?' But there has been very little change. In fact, still today 117¹ million women could be "missing", and the possibility of male/son preference and consequent sex selection at birth, and the mistreatment of young girls remains a major concern, particularly in parts of Asia.

UN report states rather blatantly that this killing of girl children can be imagined to "a Boeing 747 full of pregnant women crashing every day. That's how many women die in childbirth, every day. It's a silent statistic that should make headlines, but doesn't...they have been aborted, killed after birth or neglected to death.... The global statistics on the abuse of girls are numbing. *More girls and women are now missing from the planet, only because they are female, than all men killed on the battlefield in all the wars of the 20th century combined.* The number of victims of this routine "gendercide" far exceeds the number of people who were slaughtered in all the genocides of the 20th century"².

India and China, have in the past few decades "witnessed distorted sex ratios in the sense that the share of male population is larger than one would expect based on "natural" gender ratios at birth and mortality rates³. This distorted sex ratio has often been because of the son preference, rooted either on the socio-cultural, political, economic or religious experiences. While a sustainable way to reduce sex selection requires strategies which focus on countering the gender inequality, it also calls for an analysis of varied other factors that assists as reasons for this rampant evil.

A video presentation to introduce the Concern⁴

I. Definition

- **Gendercide**

The notion of gendercide was developed as a way to understand the role that gender plays in genocide and mass killings. The term, most often defined as gender-selective mass killing, was first introduced by Mary Anne Warren of genocide as "the deliberate extermination of a race of people. Elizabeth Gerhardt states that gendercide is "an intentional effort to harm and injure millions of women and girls based on their gender"⁵

- **Sex ratio**

Sex ratio is defined as the ratio of males to females in a population, and is expressed as the number of males per either 100 (or in the case of India, 1000, females), and the biologically normal sex ratio at birth ranges from 102 to 106 males per 100 females. In the spring of 2011,

¹ <http://www.unfpa.org/news/ending-gender-imbalances-must-remain-international-priority-says-unfpa%E2%80%99s-asia-pacific-director>

² <http://www.unric.org/en/latestunbuzz/28277itsagirlthethreedadliestwordsintheworld?tmpl=component&print=1&page=>

³ [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2012/433777/EXPO-DEVE_ET\(2012\)433777_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2012/433777/EXPO-DEVE_ET(2012)433777_EN.pdf)

⁴ It's a Girl Documentary Film - Official Trailer – YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISme5-9orR0>

⁵ Elizabeth Gerhardt, *The Cross and Gendercide*, IVP 2014, p10.

China and India announced their census findings for 2010/11. Both nations showed a continuing imbalance in the sex ratio at birth. In China, 118 boys were being born for every 100 girls, up from 116 in 2000. In India, 109 boys were being born for every 100 girls, up from 108 in 2000. This is despite steady economic growth in both nations over the past decade and despite both countries' governments legislating against sex selective abortion

II. Reasons for sex selection in India & China

Expressions such as “son preference” and “daughter aversion” often used in the context of sex selection may actually be over-simplifying the underlining issues behind male preference, as they tend to direct attention to personal choice and emotional affect (Sen, 2009). In fact, studies point to complex and varied historical, cultural, religious and economic factors that manifest as lower sex ratios.

A. Socio-Cultural

India: There can be no denying of the fact that the declining child sex ratio is a reflection of the prevalence of the gender biases in society, given the nature of the manifestation of the phenomenon in certain parts of India.

- *Patriarchy* and its cultural attendants have been identified as salient causes of gender-selective killing. Son-preference and the viewing of female as having less worth in general- and in particular if not engaged in reproductive roles- and presuming as aggressor/protector role of men regarding nation and family have been held responsible for gender-selective practices such as infanticide in China and female feticide in India⁶.
- *The undervaluation of women* stemming from the lower status ascribed to them is passed on to the girl child, adding on to their unwantedness. Practices of exorbitant dowry payments to get daughters married and the overwhelming fear of sexual exploitation and abuse in a socioenvironmental milieu where women are treated with disdain serve as other prominent deterrents to the girl child's arrival in Indian homes⁷.
- *Patrilineal property transfers, religious and ritualistic practices* and other patriarchal social structures together lay emphasis on the need for a male offspring. This forms the base for a family which should have at least one or more boys. The lower status ascribed to women stemming from societal beliefs and practices that view them as burdens, costs and dangers to family honour and dignity further intensifies this male preference.

If a family is to have one or two children, then at least one of them ought to be a boy! To ensure a family unit of one or two children, selection of the sex of the child so as to include at least one boy becomes a critical parameter. Therefore, analysis based on birth order of children clearly shows that while the first girl child may survive, the next order girls face tremendous risk of abortion, or neglect.

China: Daughters are like water that splashes out of the family and cannot be gotten back after marriage (Traditional Chinese proverb). Women's inferiority is deeply ingrained in the Chinese culture, supported by the Confucian view of a virtuous woman upholding 'three subordinations': be subordinate to her father before marriage, to her husband after marriage, and to her son after her husband died.

- In traditional Chinese rural society, only sons can inherit family properties and host their parents' funeral ceremonies, as well as carry on family names and consequently having a son is extremely important to the family. The strict patrilineal family system (child belongs

⁶ Mary Zeiss Stange Carol K. Oyster & Jane E. Sloan, *The Multimedia Encyclopaedia of Women in Today's World*, 29 November 2012, SAGE Publications

⁷ Preet Rustagi, *The Deprived, Discriminated & Damned Girl Child: Story of Declining Child Sex Ratios in India*, <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/9397>.

to the father's lineage) vests responsibilities upon male offspring for economic-socio cultural and religious functions.

- In Chinese culture, girls typically marry into the husband's family, leave home, and are expected to take care of their husband's parents. Since only boys can continue the patrilineal family line, girl babies are seen as financial burdens, unable to look after their elderly parents who don't get sufficient economic support from the inadequate social services system.
- Women have to depend on men, which results to women's low status. It has been pointed out that Chinese women have often been portrayed as a unified group sharing the same experience of devaluation and subordination to males.

While women's status has greatly improved in contemporary China, traditional culture and customs delay this process, and the problem cannot be solved merely through economic development, as also seen in the case of India.

B. Political

To a great extent, state policies has also affected equity of sexes. When male-dominated family power is replaced by a country's male-dominated social systems, laws, ideologies and resource allocation, control over women becomes part of the public patriarchy. This combination of both private and public patriarchy constitutes an entirely dominant system, which keeps women in a firmly subordinate position.

China: Historically, Chinese parents have favoured large families and have often directed family resources to sons at the expense of daughters. However, the status of women was recognised during the leadership of Mao Zedong, the founder of the People's Republic of China, But as the population grew rapidly, Chinese policymakers felt compelled to limit fertility, and the post-Mao Communist Party began enacting a series of fertility control policies, culminating in the one -child policy (OCP) in 1979. The sacrifice of having only one child became routinely glorified as obedience to duty and expression of love of one's country. The Chinese Government in October 2015 revoked this one child policy.

Analyses of trends in the sex ratio at birth in China have highlighted the importance of the OCP as a key moment in the rise and distortion of sex ratios at birth. When OCP meets the traditional preference for sons, the outcome can often be either sex selective abortion or abandonment. Families that need a son may keep their first daughter and try again (most rural families are allowed to have a second child if their first child is a girl – a telling exception to the policy). However if they bear another girl, abandonment may be their only option.

India: Female infanticide had been prohibited through legislation in the pre-independence period, however the legislation sadly remained toothless with few or no convictions under the law. Certain provisions were included in the Indian Penal Code, 1860 punishing causing of miscarriage and other like offences but unfortunately these provisions were rarely resorted to.

With the availability of pre-natal diagnostic techniques especially amniocentesis, “this development in medical practice combined with a vigorous pursuit of growth of the private health sector have led to the mushrooming of a variety of sex-selective services. This has happened not only in urban areas but deep within rural countryside also”⁸. In 1978, the government issued a directive banning the misuse of amniocentesis in government hospitals/ laboratories. Thereafter due to the relentless efforts of activists...and finally after intensive public debate all over India the Parliament enacted the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and PNDT Prevention of Misuse) Act on 20th September 1994 (PNDT Act).

⁸ Manmeet Kaur, Female Foeticide: A Sociological Perspective, The Journal of Family Welfare, Vol 39(1), March 1993

However, it is widely believed that while these services are no longer openly available their clandestine availability and utilization continues all over the country. The question remains how much a political will is involved to stop this evil and even endorse stricter enforcement of laws.

C. Economic

Underlying reasons for son preference are also economic. According to Sen's cooperative conflict model⁹, the relations within the household are characterized by both cooperation and conflict: cooperation in the addition of resources and conflict in the division of resources among the household. These intrahousehold processes are influenced by perceptions of one's self-interest, contribution and welfare. One's fall back position is the situation for each party once the bargaining process has failed and also determines the ability of each party to survive outside of the relationship.

Typically, the fallback position for men who have land ownership rights, more economic opportunities and less care work related to children is better than a woman's fallback position, who is dependent on her husband for land and income. According to this framework, when women lack a perception of personal interest and have greater concern for their family welfare gender inequalities are sustained. Sen argues that women's lower bargaining power in household decision contributes to the shortfall in female populations across eastern Asia.

In India, the social pressures of marriage for girls and the practice of increasing greed-driven dowry demands have become extremely unreasonable over time. These practices have spread into communities and regions where these were lesser known as being mandatory. The rising probability of such returns on male children is gaining attractiveness, just as the mounting social compulsion of having to provide for dowry is serving as a factor to avoid girls being born into families. The use of available techniques to determine the sex of the child and doing away with the birth of girls is implicitly considered as a safeguard against future calamity and hardships that is bound to befall upon the household when it is time to get them married. Hence, the early advertisements in the eighties and nineties suggesting 'spend Rs.500 Indian rupee (US \$ 7.5) now in order to save Rs. 5,00,000/- in future (@ \$ 7500).

Despite the egalitarian nature of Chinese society, many parents believe that having a son is a vital element of providing for their old age. When asked about the reasons for son preference, Chinese respondents typically mention the fact that only men are strong enough to do the really hard work in the fields, and that sons are needed for old age support. The question of old age support is a good example of how kinship systems create economic incentives for son preference. Therefore in extreme cases, a baby is killed if it is not of the preferred sex, because of the pressure not to have more than one child. Though China has revoked the OCP, allowing couples to have two children; many eligible couples declined to have a second child, citing the expense and pressures of raising children in a highly competitive society.

D. Religious

Though it seems to imply that the advent of science and technology has made things worse in Asia; however, as everyone familiar with India's history knows, female infanticide has a long tradition. For example, in the nineteenth century the Jhareja Rajputs killed virtually all their girls at birth. They were even known as the "kuri mar," the "daughter killers."¹⁰

⁹ Sen, Amartya (1987). "Gender and cooperative conflicts." *Helsinki: World Institute for Development Economics Research*.

¹⁰ Bhavna Hammad & Subhash Rajoria, *Economics and Sociology of Son Preference in India*, European Academic Research, VOL. I, ISSUE 7/ OCTOBER 2013

One of the most important reasons for preferring sons over daughters is religion. According to Hinduism, a man who has failed to sire a son cannot achieve salvation. Only a male descendant can light the funeral pyre and ensure the redemption of the departed soul. Thus, the fault does not lie with science (alone) but with religion.¹¹ Also, as per Hindu religious texts production of sons is the way of paying off one's debt to one's ancestors.¹² The Sikh religion is one of the most gender-neutral, and explicitly proclaims the equality of men and women. This makes it more surprising that censuses in India show there are far more male children than female children in the Sikh community. In practice there does appear to be a strong preference for boys in the Sikh heartland. The community appears to give greater respect to the parents of boys, and boys themselves. The male bias in China is deeply rooted in Chinese traditions which leads parents to want their first child to be a boy. Confucianism regards male children as more desirable since they provide security for the elderly, work and are important for the performance of ancestral rites.

III. Consequences of gender bias in India & China

A national survey carried out in China in 2005 showed that there were 33 million excess males under the age of 20 in the country as a whole. In India, according to the 2011 Census, there are nearly 37.3 million more men than women. Such a demographic profile will necessarily have far-reaching consequences with widespread concern already being voiced over the likely adverse consequences of highly masculine populations¹³.

Each sex selective method, from pre-determination of baby's gender to infanticide and neglect, have serious legal, ethical, health and human rights implications and potentially serious longer-term consequences damaging to the societies they are being practiced.

A. Commodification

Does gender imbalance means more power for Indian women to find a suitable husband. According to this view, a woman is a commodity, low in supply but high in demand, and hence has high value and a better opportunity to gain a husband from among the large supply of males. But as evidences show, in China and India, increasing imbalance could mean a greater dominance of men over women, and fewer women to fight for their rights. The locations where women are relatively scarce have witnessed women being brought in from other places for marriage. Sexual trafficking is often dangerous interwoven in parallel with the channels employed to procure the women. Poverty and false information regarding a bright future and a happily married life propels women into traps laid out for them.

B. Violence, Rape & Abuse

Since the advent of sex selective gender discriminations, that have caused the "missing women", it has simultaneously produced cohorts of excess men. Many speculated that this group of excess men would cause social disturbances such as crime and abnormal sexual behaviours without the opportunity to marry. The crime rate has almost doubled in China during the past 20 years of rising sex ratios, with stories abounding of bride abduction, the trafficking of women, rape and prostitution. It is also found that instead of being prone to

¹¹ Edgar Dahl, Gendercide? A Commentary on The Economist's Report About the Worldwide War on Baby Girls,

. Institute for Medical Ethics, University of Muenster, Germany, *Journal of Evolution and Technology* - Vol. 21 Issue 2 – October 2010 - pgs 20-22, <http://jetpress.org/v21/dahl.htm>.

¹² Bhavna Hammad & Subhash Rajoria, *Economics and Sociology of Son Preference in India*, European Academic Research, VOL. I, ISSUE 7/ OCTOBER 2013

¹³ Ravinder Kaur, Mapping the Adverse Consequences of Sex Selection and Gender Imbalance in India and China, *Economic & Political Weekly EPW* august 31, 2013 vol xlviii no 35.

aggression these men are more likely to feel outcast and suffer from feelings of failure, loneliness and associated psychological problems.

Scholars Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer¹⁴ have found that historically, when largescale female infanticide occurred in Asia, surplus men formed an underclass of drifting, low paid workers with strong proclivities for violence and crime. When work was unavailable, they plundered the land. Predictably, the “bare branches” spent heavily on drinking, gambling, and prostitution. In both China and India, these historic patterns have reemerged. Outbreaks of crime, violence, and vice, traceable to unassimilated young men, have erupted in regions where sex ratios are most skewed. Overall, crime in China has doubled during the twenty year span from 1995 to 2015, though not all of this can be attributed to the distorted sex ratio. A study by China's Institute for the Study of Labor found that a 1% increase in the sex ratio causes a 5% increase in crime¹⁵.

C. **Societal Breakdown:**

Female discrimination and neglect is not just impacting girls and women. Sen described the effects of female malnutrition and other forms of discrimination on men's health. As pregnant women suffer from nutritional neglect the fetus suffers, leading to low birth weight for male as well as female babies. Medical studies have found a close relationship to low birth weight and cardiovascular diseases at later stages in life. While underweight female babies are at risk for continuing undernourishment, ironically, Sen points out that even decades after birth, "men suffer disproportionately more from cardiovascular diseases

In general, these conditions amount to widespread deprivations of women across East and South Asia. According to Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, as millions of females are discriminated against they are being deprived of their essential capabilities to such as life, bodily health and bodily integrity, among others.

IV. **Recommendations**

As recognised by a number of academics, policymakers and activists, the focus should continue shifting to addressing the conditions and root causes that drive son preference in different countries. Social and economic change, including a shift away from a farm-based economy and increases in nuclear families, urbanisation, greater workforce participation of women with better employment opportunities, improving women's educational opportunities, and parents having retirement savings for old age security are all contributing factors.

A. **Prevention**

- Deeply entrenched social beliefs regarding the subordinate roles of women constitute a strong barrier to preventing violence against women. It is necessary to take positive action to change attitudes that perpetrate violence against women through systematic and comprehensive education and awareness programmes, including educating women and girls about their right to live free of violence.
- At the same time, the misuse of abortion to eliminate girl children while still in their foetal stages subsequent to sex determination tests needs to be prevented. The responsibility of medical professionals in prevention of such misuse is tremendous. Campaigns against female foeticide in the country are therefore shifting focus in a more concerted fashion upon this community, employing all methods available to expose the crime committed within private spaces of hospitals or clinics.

¹⁴ Valerie M. Hudson and Andrea M. den Boer, *Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male population*; Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2005.

¹⁵ <https://newrepublic.com/article/118439/chinas-one-child-policy-may-be-making-country-more-violent>

- Prevention through research: Research studies on the subject are essential for awareness generation on these aspects of societal deviancy, which have spread roots very widely and seem to be expanding their outreach for all the wrong reasons. A continued emphasis on generation of systematic data from different sources on diverse dimensions are required in order to shed clearer light on this complex phenomenon of declining numbers of girl children.

B. Protection

- Protection through law: International human rights and humanitarian law provides important protection for women from violence by establishing common standards and norms. It is of utmost importance that international human rights and humanitarian law instruments are ratified by all states, and that they are implemented. National legislation, including the constitution, must assure women's rights. It is crucial to criminalise violence against women in all its forms, including domestic violence and so-called traditional practices that are harmful to women.
- Protection through institutions: Responding to gender-based violence requires a multidisciplinary approach, engaging institutions from the political, justice, health, labour, media, education, social and security sectors, including civil society, at all levels. This requires not just training, but in many cases, change of institutional cultures. Co-operation between state institutions and NGOs and other civil society anti-violence networks should be strengthened, on local, national, regional and international levels.
- Establishment of shelters and support mechanisms; Women and girls suffering from gender based violence need to have safe places to go. Governments must ensure shelters and assistance hotlines, and medical, psychological, social and legal services for women suffering from violence.

C. Empowerment

- Empowerment through education and labour: Increased access to education and labour systems are key for the empowerment of women and girls, which reduces their vulnerability to gender-based violence. It is crucial to identify and dismantle barriers to the education of girls and women, and to their access to labour systems. Further, education can play a key role in transforming a society's discriminatory attitudes and gender roles.
- Empowerment through participation in decision-making: To eradicate gender-based violence, women must be empowered in all aspects of their lives. Essential is women's participation in decision-making, at family, community, national and international levels. Increased women's political participation can be facilitated through quota systems, by assisting and training potential female candidates, and by active measures to remove barriers (including to ministries of defence and foreign affairs). Women should be engaged in decision-making in sectors involved with peace and security at the national, regional and international levels.

D. Restoring the Dignity of Women (The role of Church & Christian Organisations)

While efforts to Prevent, Protect and Empower women and girls are a grim necessity, there is a paradigm shift needed in how one perceives women. There is a need to work towards changing the prevalent mindsets in order to enhance women's status. Perhaps such a change in mindset has not been brought about either by education, enforcement of laws or even empowerment of women. One cannot but fully agree with Elizabeth Gerhardt that the underlying causes of global violence against women and girls are rooted deep in our cultures, and the scandal of this violence is symptomatic of a pervasive and deep misogyny. The stubborn pervasiveness of this violence and its deep rootedness in misogyny is best defined as a theological issue, rather than merely an ethical or moral

issue¹⁶. The power of the cross crushes the idolatry of power that leads to the denigration of women and girls and crushes the ideologies that keep women and girls from realizing their full potential as human beings with dignity. The language of the cross is freedom and promise that has real meaning for working to end systems that enslave mind-numbing numbers of women and children.¹⁷

Dignity of women as created equal and blessed equal needs to be a loud confession by the Church; to begin, within herself before she can call upon others to repent. The church in India and China needs to proclaim this loud and clear. The Church needs to recognise that more than a mere moral or ethical response, “what is needed is a powerful, holistic and missional response rooted in the biblical theology of the cross because a theology of the cross does not separate proclamation of the Gospel from the prophetic and active role of working to end injustice and for millions of women and girls”¹⁸.

UESI¹⁹ in India has taken steps along with Let Her live²⁰ to promote Gender equality and denounce any discrimination in the Universities of Delhi and beyond. We have encouraged students to take pledges respecting the dignity of women and take a stand against the practice of dowry. We have visited mother and child in the hospitals on the International Girl child day to welcome the birth of the Girl and proclaim that she is precious. Yet such efforts is immeasurably small when one understands the magnitude of the crisis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I feel ashamed to share this story, and yet cannot but share it. It is there every day! The blood of these girls cry out from our countries. It calls us to pray and act. Actions that will stop the oppression of women and the oppressive viewpoint that still persists. Action that will awaken the moral consciousness of the medical professionals who assist this gendercide. But may I also request that you would pray that the ‘mothers who desire to keep their baby girls to have the courage and strength to insist on being able to keep their daughters’. Let us also ‘pray against the illegal use of ultrasound equipment used to predetermine the sex of infants. Can we also spread and ‘pray for awareness of this injustice to spread out so that the world will see the effects of gendercide and speak out against it. Pray that the church will stand up and speak out against this injustice’.

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¹⁶ Elizabeth Gerhardt, *The Cross and Gendercide: A Theological Response to Global Violence Against Women and Girls*, IVP, 2014

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ Union of Evangelical Students of India

²⁰ Letherlive.in