

# Gender Imbalance in India: Causes and Emerging Issues

Chandrakant N. Kokate

Associate Professor, Department of Economics,

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India

## ABSTRACT

The provisional data of 2011 Census has once again highlighted the problem of severe sex imbalance in the country, especially in 0-6 age group. According to Census of 2011, the sex ratio in 0-6 year's age group has declined to 914 females per 1000 males as compared to 927 in 2001. It shows an increasing trend of male preference as compared to female in the last decade. The phenomenon of son preference is coupled with death of young females due to lack of medical care, under nutrition, female infanticide, and sex selective abortions. Sen (1992, 2003) first addressed the disturbing trend by highlighting that millions of females in India are missing because of widespread neglect in health care, nutrition and prenatal care. The steep decline in sex ratio in northern and western states is a cause of worry. Technological developments permitting sex-selective abortions have seriously aggravated sex imbalance in these states. The trend of rapid decline in sex ratio has given rise to serious social, demographic and cultural problems. This present paper attempts to explain the causes for gender imbalance and its implications on the society as a whole.

**KEYWORDS:** Sex-ratio, Nutrition, Son-preference, Selective abortions, Health care

## INTRODUCTION

The position of women in any society is reflected in its traditions, customs and folklores. The problems faced by women in society are reflection of social attitude and perceptions transmitted from generations to generations. The patriarchal nature of Indian society has for generations together derided women and accorded subordinate and inferior status to them as compared to men. The patriarchal Indian society has a strange and binary opposition towards women, where she is worshiped as goddess on one hand, and on the other she is unwelcome to this very earth believed to be her creation. According to census figures of 2011, sex ratio in 0-6 year's age group has declined to 914 females per 1000 males as compared to 927 in 2001. India's skewed sex ratio and son preference have persisted since 1901 and have not eroded despite the tremendous economic strides India has made through liberalization and globalization. The decline in the sex ratio of the total child population in India is much faster than the overall sex ratio of the total population in India. This decline can be observed over a large number of states and union territories. A very sharp decline and the larger gender imbalance due to the shortage of female children can be observed in the states of Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Chandigarh, Gujarat, Delhi, Uttaranchal, Goa and Delhi. The huge amount of shortfall and the increasing trend into it show the seriousness of the matter. The continuance of female foeticide, infanticide, female discrimination, high maternal and female mortality persists in India worsening the sex ratio. The use of ultra-modern medical technology of sex-selective, both among poor and affluent sections, has compounded the problem. The measures to improve the sex

ratio to restore gender balance have not yielded desired outcome due to patriarchal values and mindset of the society.

### Objective:

The present research paper has following objectives:

1. To study the gender imbalance and various causes responsible for this phenomenon.
2. To understand the implications of gender imbalance on society and study emerging issues associated with it.

### Research Methodology:

The present research article is based entirely on secondary data of books, reports of government, Census Report and website material.

### Status of Women in Indian Society:

The patriarchal nature of Indian society accords a secondary and subordinate status to women. The attitude towards is found in sacred texts, religious rituals, traditions and folklores of the society. Manu writes that according to this tradition, the fulfillment of dharma, the inheritance of family property and the performance of family shradha can be done only by the father who is the head of the family and after him only by the eldest son because it is the male child along who is by birth endowed with economic, religious and spiritual merits. This ideology is fortified in the family, society and through indoctrination into sacred, sacramental and economic values of the male child. It is here that the gender inequality and eminence of the male person originates in the patriarchal tradition.

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**Reasons for declining Females to Males Ratio:**

The pre-eminence put on the male child and its importance in every aspects of life has developed a strong urge towards sons in India. The necessity to obtain male child for inheritance, procreation and moksha becomes the most cherished dream of the parents. The religious, spiritual and ritual status of the male child, particularly the first male child remains higher than the female child. Similarly, the birth of a girl is taken as inauspicious, a liability and a burden on the family's purse and resources, while the birth of a male baby is considered as auspicious and an asset to the family. The system of hypergamy creates the problem of purse on account of dowry, expensive marriage and ceremonies at the time of the marriage of the girl. The baby girl child in Indian family is unwelcome, neglected, and burdensome and there is less pride and honour in nurturing girl child. The to desire to have male child is governed by the logic of expected economic utility of the male child. Both in rural and urban India especially in the northwestern states, if the first birth is a girl child, the sex ratio of the second birth largely worsen against girls. There is a striking deficit of girls if the first birth is a girl; couples face imbalance in the sex ratio of their children. If the first birth is a male child, the sex ratio of the second birth for the entire northwestern states is in favour of females. The use of ultra-modern medical technology for sex-selective abortions, both among poor and affluent sections, has aggravated the problem of gender balance.

Another contributory factor of declining gender ratio related directly to the status of female child in particular and women in general is the lower nutritional status of women in a patriarchal family, causing considerable deaths of female children in the age group 0-6 years. This can be explained in part by the gender discrimination in the patriarchal order manifesting into the quality of food intake and health care services provided by the family to male and female children. The lower socio-economic status of women and the consequent lower nutritional status is a function of patriarchal ideology. The women work a lot but their work is least recognized. They eat the least and the last in terms of quality and quantity of food. Such a gender-based discrimination causes gradual and serious physical deficiency among women and female children. It is because of the social basis of gross nutritional and medical neglect of female babies that the post-neonatal mortality among them higher than male babies, and in the backward rural areas, the mortality of female infants is much higher.

Up to the recent past, our Family Planning Programme gave undue importance to accepting the small family norm. Media, especially radio, television and posters, convinced people about government programmes and also to make use of advanced technology so that choices in family size can be ensured. Worldwide acceptance of the small family norm had an influence on our government. This has had an impact on the incidence of feticide; a strong son preference and a targeted approach together are dominant in the female deficit states. Population stabilization for these states means having two sons per family. There is a greater son preference evident among the educated women. Overall, the government population policy pursued acceptance of small family norm but did not take any initiative to reduce a son preference, and this policy had an impact on the incidence of feticide.

There has been considerable discrimination against women in various socio-economic activities affecting their financial independence and progress. A sons' utility is reflected in the economy of family labour provided by him on the farm or in the family business, earning a wage and salary through mobility, looking after old age parents and also attracting dowry. This reveals that a son is a most valued asset to the family. Whereas, girls are not given such opportunities to perform all these activities, instead, a perception of economic liability is highly attached with daughters. In the case of the organized sector; the doors for employment are still not open to women as compared to men. At the decision-making levels, the presence of women is negligible in India. This makes it obvious that there is an inherent element of gender discrimination. A great deal of pressure persists to raise male children.

**Implications of Gender Imbalance:**

Economic theory would predict that when there is a shortage of girls, the value or worth of girls would increase socially and economically, all else equal. However, this has not happened in India. In some of the northern states in India, we have witnessed a rise in violence among unmarried young men who compete for a limited number of women in the marriage market. We would expect the shortage of women in the marriage market to lower the dowry prices of marriageable women; instead, it has manifested itself in increases in sex trafficking, and greater sexual violence against women. Many states in north-western India have seen a drastic increase in prostitution, violence, and rapes against women in recent years.

The excess of males as compared to females is likely to cause more problems for men. These men will remain single and will be unable to have families, in societies where marriage is regarded as virtually universal and social status and acceptance depend, in large part, on being married and creating a new family. An additional problem is that many of these men are rural peasants of low socioeconomic class and with limited education. When there is a shortage of women in the marriage market, the women can "marry up," inevitably leaving the least desirable men with no marriage prospects. There has been an increase in number of polyandry cases in female deficit states in north-western India.

It is intuitive that if sexual needs are to be met this will lead to a large expansion of the sex industry, including its more unacceptable practices such as coercion and trafficking. This might give rise to expansion of sex industry in the country. Similarly, there is much anecdotal evidence regarding increases in trafficking of women, both for the sex industry and marriage. This is also giving rise to increased violence against women and crimes of pleasure in the recent past.

Most importantly, an artificially skewed gender ratio has major implications on the welfare and development of the world's largest democracy. It is a gross violation of the basic freedom and human rights that is so essential for development (Sen, 1999). Infanticides, feticides, and sex selective abortions deprive millions of unborn females their rights to live and contribute to society through their participation in the labor market, as well as in domestic, social, and political spheres.

**Conclusion:**

The patriarchal nature of Indian society and its preference for male child is instrumental factor in causing gender imbalance. The discrimination against girl child, her neglect and subordination, and custom of dowry have together promoted the inhuman and disgraceful act of female feticide and infanticide. The failure of legislations and enforcement agencies to curb sex-selective feticide has increased the problem manifold. This has lead to serious distortion in gender balance manifesting in the society in the form of crimes against women, trafficking for marriage or sex industry and incidences of polyandry. There is urgent need to tackle this menace by creating awareness among the public and making strong legislations to control the unhealthy trend of gender imbalance in India.

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