



A generation of women wiped out?

It sounds like science fiction, but in India it's all too real: Technology is being used to drastically reduce the number of girls being born. Already the gender imbalance is causing serious problems, from desperate bachelors to a sharp rise in bride trafficking. And the future? Terrifying. By Carla Power

Lakshmi Devi Rawat sits in the courtyard of her house in the village of Asouti in northern India, amid a knot of children, relatives and neighbors, talking about her failure to give birth to a boy. "Whenever I had a girl, my husband's family would say, 'We will not keep you,'" says the attractive 41-year-old, shading her face with the end of her maroon-and-gold sari. Her in-laws were disappointed after her first daughter, but it was after the birth of her second that the pressure really began. Neighbors started bringing her homemade 'medicines' that they claimed would help her to conceive a boy. They didn't work: She gave birth to a third daughter. Then her relatives began ignoring her and calling her a *kutiya* (bitch); her fellow villagers began avoiding her. She got pregnant again and gave birth to a fourth daughter. This

In part of Punjab, the ratio of girls to boys has dipped as low as 628 to 1,000.

birth was viewed as an unmitigated disaster. "The whole family didn't eat for a week," she recalls.

Four more girls would have followed, except that they were never born. Each time thereafter, when Rawat got pregnant, her husband would send her to the nearby town of Palwal, where for about \$12 a doctor would give her an ultrasound and, once determining that the fetus was a girl, a \$35 abortion. Rawat had four such abortions over the next two years. "The doctor would say, 'You'll ruin your stomach,' but I didn't care," she says. "To my mind, it was better to die than to be under so much pressure from the community." Finally, Rawat gave birth to a boy, and instantly she was no longer the village pariah. "We threw a party, and the whole village ate," recalls Rawat's husband's uncle, Kake Singh, hunched on a stool nearby, before adding, "My wife had 15 abortions, and now I have six sons!"

"Now everyone talks to me," Rawat says contentedly. "My life has totally changed."

India has a long history of getting rid of unwanted baby girls. For centuries, midwives in parts of rural India have known how to kill a female newborn by forcing a toxic amount of tobacco or salt into her mouth. But over the past 20 years with the advent of ultrasounds, getting rid of girls before they're born, known as sex selection, has reached epidemic proportions. (Abortion has been legal in India since 1971.) By 2001, the national census showed that for every 1,000 boys six years old and under, there were only 927 girls, down from 945 girls per thousand boys in 1991. (It doesn't sound huge, but it's statistically seismic.) In pockets of the country, the ratio became even more lopsided: A 2002 study funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation found that in one area of Punjab, there were 628 girls for every 1,000 boys among children age six and under. "What we are seeing," says Delhi obstetrician-gynecologist Puneet Bedi, M.D., "is a genocide."

In India a boy is a source of future wealth and a status symbol—it is the son who lights his parents' funeral pyres in Hindu ceremonies—while a girl, by contrast, is often viewed as a liability. Sons traditionally inherit property, keeping it in the family, while daughters cost money by requiring a dowry when they get married. "Raising a daughter," goes the old Punjabi saying, "is like watering your neighbor's garden." During the 1980s medical clinics capitalized on this bias against girls, targeting nervous future parents with aggressive marketing campaigns that played on their fear of an expensive dowry. SPEND 500 RUPEES NOW, one poster read, referring to the price of an abortion. SAVE 50,000 RUPEES LATER. Finally, in 1994, the government passed a law forbidding doctors from telling patients the sex of a fetus. But since ultrasound scans are done behind closed doors, the law is basically unenforceable, and the practice continues to thrive. Doctors have found new codes to indicate the sex to mothers, rather than telling them outright. "Start shopping for blue," they hint. And should the fetus turn out to be a girl, getting it aborted is easy: Abortions are widely available and are free in government hospitals. "There's no shame associated with abortion when you're getting rid of a pain in the ass—a girl," says Dr. Bedi furiously. "It's as normal as having a cup of coffee."

A study recently published in the British medical journal *The Lancet* estimates that over the past two decades, as many as 10 million fetuses have been aborted because their parents didn't want to have a girl. And as the first generation of children born in the age of sex selection begins to reach adulthood, the effects of the lopsided ratio in India are becoming more pronounced—and frightening. In the farm belt of Punjab and Haryana, two of the states with the most uneven sex ratios, young women are so scarce that trafficking brides for desperate bachelors has become big business. In Delhi, India's bustling capital, the streets and restaurants have become increasingly male-dominated, leading women to fear for their safety, say activists. What will things look like in 20 years?

On the front lines

SEX SELECTION IS A CRIME. WE DO NOT DO IT HERE, reads a sign at the Ashirwad Maternity Home, a 12-bed hospital in Belgaum, a small city in southern India. Despite the sign, the hospital's doctor, Anita Sunil Bhandurke, M.D., 40, and administrator Praneeta Shinde, 39, say they see many women desperate to find out the gender of their unborn child. They turn them away, but plenty of other doctors are willing to break the law. Some entrepreneurs have even rigged up mobile vans with ultrasound machines.

Dr. Bhandurke says she feels sorry for the women who come under massive pressure to conceive sons. The hardships of life in a male-favored society lead many to think that aborting a female fetus is, in a sense, saving her. "The mother doesn't want a girl child to bear all of this," observes Dr. Bhandurke. But seeing women who'd abort female fetuses "feels miserable," says Shinde. "When they degrade their girls, it's the whole sex that they are degrading.

Women make the world. So it hurts when somebody doesn't want a woman to live."

For girl babies carried to term, life can be perilous. In her work as a pathologist in Belgaum, Asawari Sant, M.D., regularly sees examples of what one demographer dubbed "extended infanticide"—the practice of ignoring girls' medical and nutritional needs. "People won't take a daughter to the hospital unless it's really serious," says 37-year-old Dr. Sant. "But the son sneezes? He's there." Dr. Sant was recently called in to give a blood test to a newborn baby girl. She arrived in the afternoon to find the baby still covered in blood from the birth that morning and being ignored by her mother. Nearby sat the grandmother. "She's in shock," the grandmother explained. "It's her third daughter." When Dr. Sant asked why the baby was still filthy, the grandmother was brusque: "I'm not going to clean her—she's a girl." It took a day before Dr. Sant could persuade the mother to breast-feed the infant.

Scenes like that—and the dwindling number of girls—convinced Dr. Sant, herself a mother of a daughter, to become an activist against what she and other activists call female feticide. Dr. Sant focuses on organizing workshops for doctors. "The only opposition to our campaign," she asserts, "comes from the doctors." They have the most to lose—activists estimate that between ultrasounds and abortions, India's sex-selection industry reaps about \$100 million a year—and the medical establishment seems to be protecting its own. To date, the Medical Council of India, an association for doctors, has not disciplined even one of its members for sex selection. "It is up to the government to bring the cases forward," argues the association's secretary, Amulya Setalvad, M.D., "and then we will take action."

Breaking ranks with her fellow doctors has cost Dr. Sant dearly. "I'm considered a black sheep," she concedes. "Doctors are used to being in a very high class of society, and they're not going to take being accused of being criminals lying down." After Dr. Sant penned an editorial in a local medical newsletter saying that doctors

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practicing sex selection shouldn't hold themselves above the law, she received threatening phone calls. "Keep your activism out of my hospital," warned one voice at the end of the phone. Eventually, she says, the harassment got so bad that she had to switch hospitals.

The sex-selection epidemic has spread to areas of southern India such as Belgaum only recently, so for now the impact there is mostly visible only in the census tables. To see the effects more clearly, you need to go to northern India, in Haryana, the state with India's second-lowest sex ratio: 820 girls to 1,000 boys, a ratio that has fallen since 1991. Amid the mostly male groups loitering at a roadside market, a crowd of 40-odd men discuss the issue of the local bachelor problem.

"I'm not married," said one 37-year-old. "There's a shortfall of women. Can you bring some American girls here?"

"The ratio's coming down so much that men are sharing their wives," adds another. "I know two brothers who are both sharing one woman."

"Hey, I hear that in America there's a lot of sex," says one. Guffaws come from the crowd, which presses close around *Glamour's* reporter in a crush of frustrated testosterone.

Given the girl shortage, many villagers view bride trafficking as a social service, not a crime. Over the past decade, Rishi Kant, founder of the Shakti Vahini Law Network, a Delhi-based antitrafficking nonprofit organization, has watched the market for girls from cash-strapped eastern states grow in regions of Haryana and Punjab, the states in India with the lowest girl populations. The current rate for a woman is between \$280 and \$1,200, depending on her face, figure and age. Traffickers and villagers call these women wives, but in reality, most are just glorified breeders and farmhands. "Buying a wife," observes Kant, "is cheaper than buying a buffalo."

In a mud hut in a Haryana wheat field, farmer Najjar Mohammed sits on a bed, talking about how he bought his wife for 8,000 rupees (about \$180). "I'd been waiting nine years to get married," Mohammed says. "The guy who finally got me a girl was a truck driver. He brought her from West Bengal." According to Kant, sometimes a trafficked bride is resold after she's given birth to a few children for her husband, and women who've had boys fetch the highest price. Kant tells of one recent case in which a man resold his wife because she had produced only daughters. He also attempted—before Kant dissuaded him—to sell their two daughters, girls of 9 and 11, as wives for other men.

Among the elites

Surprisingly, this trend is also firmly entrenched among prosperous urbanites. "These better-educated and higher-income groups want to ensure that they have at least one boy, and they have more money and access to the means to get one," notes Prabhat Jha, M.D., professor of epidemiology at St. Michael's Hospital at the University of Toronto and

coauthor of the *Lancet* study. And indeed, the sex ratio gets steadily worse with second and third children. A 2005 study of births in Delhi hospitals by India's Christian Medical Association found that the ratio was 959 girls to 1,000 boys for firstborns, but a mere 219 girls to 1,000 boys if the mother's first two children were girls. In tony South Delhi, observes Sabu George, Ph.D., a Delhi-based activist, "virtually no privileged families have a second girl."

Despite there being no explicit barriers to female equality in India, unlike, say, in Saudi Arabia or Iran, the cultural preference for men runs through every echelon in society. "When I was born, it was a big shock," says Ifat Hamid, a 28-year-old with a master's in literature who grew up in an upper-middle-class household in Kashmir. "My mother had a hard time accepting the fact that I was a girl because it

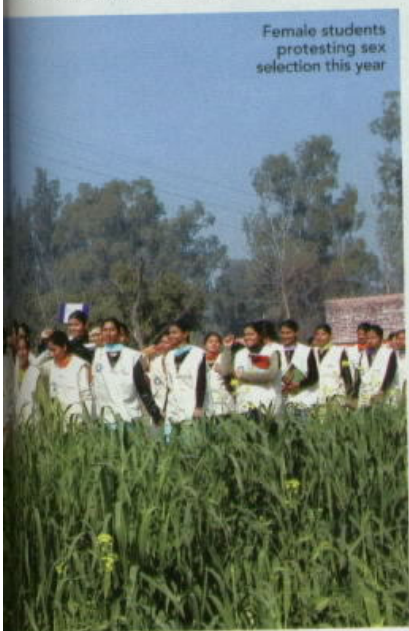


questioned her status in the family." Today Hamid, a slender young woman with mocha eyes and a mass of dark hair, is working to change social norms. "It's not just an issue to me; it's a personal passion," she says. "The more I work with female feticide, the more I feel it's not to do with son preference, but with daughter hatred." That misogynist strain may not be immediately apparent to the outside observer, since India has its share of women doctors, lawyers and politicians. But in many cases women who rise to prominence are members of powerful families; they have been allowed to assume leadership roles because in India class often trumps gender. Hamid knows that for women's plight to change more than just superficially, attitudes toward girls, from conception on, must shift. So she holds regular teach-ins for community leaders, desperately trying to convince Delhi's citizens that aborting girl fetuses will have disastrous effects on their society, including increased violence, social instability and degradation of women.

Meanwhile, the city's public life is becoming more male-dominated. Go to Corbett's, for example, a family-themed

restaurant catering to Delhi's elites, and you'll see that the women seated at dinner are overwhelmingly foreigners; the Indians are nearly all men, their ties loosened, downing beers and clinching business deals. Other signs of the fallout are more subtle but growing. Ramni Chopra, the head of the prestigious Step-by-Step nursery school, which caters to the capital's professional and upper classes, says that in 2004 and 2005, she had a mere seven girls in a class of 26. People in some Delhi neighborhoods have begun having trouble finding young girls to participate in Kanya Puja, a Hindu festival devoted to prepubescent girls. "They're having to use Muslim girls," says Hamid, "because there are no Hindu girls to be found."

More troubling signs: The city's rape statistics have skyrocketed, and although there's no way to prove the



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correlation, activists suggest that the shortage of women is partially responsible. At Delhi University, female students are frequently harassed, so they tend to rush home quickly after classes. "By the afternoon, if you come to our college, the whole campus is cleared of women," notes political science instructor Bijaya Laxmi Nanda. "It's just the men who stay on campus; the women are afraid to." The sex-selection phenomenon has shaped not only female students' schedules but their psyches. "When they talk about the discrimination they face at home, there is a sense of not being wanted," observes Nanda. "That's why even urban, educated and prosperous women go in for sex selection. They have internalized that feeling that they are inferior."

But unlike men in the poorer regions of India, where bachelors have resorted to bride trafficking, upper-middle-class single men aren't yet feeling the effects of the women shortage, in part because as top wage earners, they will always be in demand as husbands. Also, some educated young men leave India to go overseas and

start their careers, as they have done for several decades. Amazingly, the sex-selection trend has also traveled with the Indian diaspora. Although statistics don't exist, anecdotal evidence suggests that Indians in North America are also selecting baby boys over girls. "It's happening," says Sunny Bains, news editor for *Ajit Weekly*, an Ontario-based newspaper for Punjabis around the world that has run ads for clinics and doctors targeting South Asian communities in the United States and Canada. Sex selection in the West "has some of the cultural baggage from the home country, in terms of strong son preference," notes Sujatha Jesudason of the Center for Genetics and Society, a nonprofit in Oakland, California, that encourages responsible use of reproductive technologies. "But women living in the United States have a strong sense of wanting to have smaller families and being able to make individual choices."

Glimmers of hope

Back in India a few local authorities, such as Arvind Kumar, the district collector ("Like a sheriff," he explains) of Hyderabad, have finally begun tackling the problem. Kumar's team has swooped down on suspect clinics and seized ultrasound machines, and in March, for the first time, a doctor was sentenced to jail for sex selection; he'd told an undercover pregnant woman she was carrying a baby girl and then offered to "take care of it."

Still, the situation will get worse before it gets better. Demographer Ashish Bose, Ph.D., predicts that the next census, in 2011, will show a more skewed sex ratio than the last one. There will be a "brothelization of society," warns Mira Shiva, M.D., member of the National Commission for Women and the National Commission on Population. Dr. Shiva believes that "women will be increasingly viewed as property that men with money can collect." Kidnapping and trafficking could increase, as well as sexual violence. "The rights women have gained will be lost," says Donna Fernandes, of the women's rights group Vimochana. "Women will be pushed back into the

four walls of home."

Turning the demographic tide will be tough. India's government has begun offering stipends and educational scholarships to people who have girl children. But what ultimately needs to change is the mind-set against girls, along with traditions like dowry and inheritance customs. "And that," says Kamayani Bali Mahabal of the Mumbai-based Center for Enquiry Into Health and Allied Themes, "could take a zillion years."

And yet there are a few positive signs of change. In Belgaum a proud father of a newborn girl recently set off strings of 5,000 firecrackers in front of Dr. Bhandurke's hospital. "At first I screamed at him, because of the noise," says Dr. Bhandurke's administrator, Pra-neeta Shinde. "But then the doctor told me to stop. It was the first time she'd ever seen a father celebrating like that for the birth of a girl." ©

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