

## DECLINING SEX RATIOS Will it Impact Economic Growth!

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*[Abstract: The child sex ratio between the age group of 0–6 years has come down to 914 in the 2011 census from 927 in the 2001 census. The declining sex ratio trend is being recorded since 1991. This declining trend can now be observed in regions where, historically, the ratios had been sound. Developed states have recorded even steeper falls. Literacy and economic development have resulted in sharper skewness. Studies have revealed that families resort to various practices such as sex selection techniques, foeticide, infanticide and neglect to do away with the girl child at pre-birth/conception/infancy stage itself, and, also due to many social reasons like the increasing demand for dowry, the increasing violence against women, prevention of division of property, etc., to name a few. The gradual loss of an ethical perspective by adoption of these practices has been attributed to the patriarchal system of society. The power of women and girls as drivers of economic growth has remained invisible. Women have always been perceived as consumers but their role as producers remains largely unrecognised. Their role as creators of demand in almost all sectors of economy has remained masked. Women's participation in economic activities should be an essential part of the planning process. Corporate sector should realise that enhanced economic power of women would give rise to enduring demand. Therefore, the corporate sector should supplement the government's as well as the society's efforts to ensure the safety of women and girls at all stages. Social discourses should contribute to raising awareness among people to save the girl child and desist from practices such as foeticide otherwise their own life will suffer. The stage is set for a coordinated effort of various groups with the intention to establish a mission to reverse the trend of declining sex ratio by the next census. Reversal of the declining trend is a must to ensure stable economic and societal growth.]*

Women and girls in India have more than matched with men and boys in national reconstruction and have contributed significantly to economic growth and social upliftment of the country. As on date, women who are handling the offices of the President, Speaker of Lok Sabha, and Leader of the opposition in Lok Sabha are doing so with aplomb and grace. President of the ruling party and Chief Ministers of politically significant states like Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal are women who have come to occupy these offices by virtue of their demonstrated capacity of winning the confidence of people of diverse strata. In various sports like athletics, lawn games, golf, hockey, cricket, volleyball, basket ball, swimming, mountaineering, paragliding, weightlifting, etc., girls have come of age and have outshone the boys in many of these sports. Performance of girls in academics and competitive examinations has been as good, if not better, than boys. Even though women and girls are stepping out of the traditional occupation of agriculture and are marching ahead in the service sector, manufacturing and I.T. industry, they continue

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to maintain their hold on traditional arts and crafts. They have proved their mettle in the adventurous fields of aviation and armed forces. Their contributions in medicine and science and technology have been as significant as those of men. In the fields of fine arts, theatre and cinema, women have made a name for themselves and have earned international recognition. Among all nations, Mrs. Indira Gandhi of India was the first and to date the longest serving female Prime Minister who has left an indelible mark on the Indian polity and international affairs.

India's history abounds with brave facts detailing illustrious women—women sages like Gargi and Maitreyi, warriors like Rani Durgavati, Chand Bibi and Rani Jhansi, and preceptor like Jijabai—who dared to fight all odds. The rise of Razia Begum in the Sultanate era demonstrates the inherent skill of women to outshine their adversaries in the most hostile environments. During the freedom movement, the contribution of women like Kasturba, Annie Beasant, Sarojini Naidu and others is deeply etched in the Indian psyche.

Women have been accorded a place of honour and worshiped as goddesses of learning, wealth and destroyer of evil. Men, in order to propitiate gods, worship the virgin goddesses—who represent purity and innocence—with reverence.

Even an ordinary woman in an Indian household keeps the family together through her services as a householder without expecting any reward and remuneration. In economic terms, a woman performs sundry household jobs without being paid to do it and the national accounting systems do not include the monetary value of the household jobs performed. According to an estimate<sup>1</sup>, value of unpaid work is about 30% of State Domestic Product in Haryana and 29% in Gujarat. Share of women in these percentages are 28% in Haryana and 26% in Gujarat. Thus, ordinary housewives contribute enormously through their unpaid work at homes on the one hand and on the other, their faithful services at home encourage menfolk to go to work without worrying about their households.

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<sup>1</sup> Pandey, R.N. "Women's Contribution To The Economy Through Their Unpaid Household Work." Web.

Despite such impeccable credentials, Indian women and girls have not been able to get an equal space under the sky. Rather, the declining sex ratio for children in the age group of 0–6 over the succeeding censuses exhibits a growing aversion to the girl child. In the 2011 Census, this ratio has come down to 914 per 1000 boys from 927 in 2001. Preference for a male child has spread to places that were once neutral about the sex composition of children.<sup>2</sup>

Amartya Sen (1990)<sup>3</sup> analysed that a great many more than 100 million women have gone missing from this planet because of the consequences of worsening gender ratio in India, China, South Asia, West Asia and North Africa. Sen, on the basis of research, argued that if men and women receive similar nutritional and medical attention and general healthcare, women tend to live noticeably longer than men. Sen dismissed arguments that sex ratio would be determined by cultural differences of societies towards gender or by the degree of development of societies. He further argued that besides the above aggregate factors, the sex ratio would be subject to many social conditions. For example, while it may be expected that economically rich countries would have less or no deficit of women on account of better nutrition and health facilities, there are poor regions in Sub-Saharan Africa where women outnumber men. There are regions like Punjab and Haryana in India where there is deficit of women compared to their poorer counterparts. Thus, economic development may result in relative worsening of the rate of survival of women. Economic development does not invariably reduce women's disadvantages in mortality<sup>4</sup>. According to Sen, status and power of women in a family differ greatly from one region to another and these social features would be related to economic role and independence of women. Employment outside the home and viewing assets can be important for women's economic independence and power. This would affect the perception of respective contributions to the family's prosperity and productivity and in turn determine the degree of gender inequality even in

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<sup>2</sup> "India's skewed sex ratio: Seven Brothers." *The Economist* 7 April 2011. Web. 23 August 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Sen, Amartya. "More Than 100 Million Women Are Missing." *The New York Review of Books* 37.20 (1990). Web. 18 August 2011.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

developed countries. In his analysis Sen concludes that in division of a family's joint benefits, the conditions would be less unfavourable to women if:

1. They can earn an outside income;
2. Their work is recognised as productive—such recognition would be easier to achieve with work done outside the home;
3. They own some economic resources and have some rights to fall back on; and
4. There is a clear headed understanding of the ways in which women are deprived, and recognition of the possibilities of changing this situation, for example, through the education of women and by participatory political action.

Advancing the above conclusions, Sen arrived at the conclusion that when women establish conditions for higher contributions to the economic growth of the family in the form of secure job, they have a 'demonstration effect' to counter the relative neglect of girls as they grow up. A female child would also be perceived as economic security and thus would get due recognition leading to better care. Sen attributes the adverse sex ratio in Punjab to the fact that outside employment of women in Punjab is one of the lowest in the country.

Since Sen's analysis, three census operations have taken place and India has qualified as a major emerging economy in the world. A large number of women are employed in well-paying secure jobs and are demonstrably contributing towards the costs of maintaining living standards. Undoubtedly, women have demonstrated that through educational support for enhancing their knowledge and skills they can play a crucial role in providing support to their families. However, the trend of declining sex ratio continues unabated and is spreading across the regions. Girls are still going missing at an alarming rate. As per the analysis of Sen, there are certain inherent social underlying causes which make the upward mobile society maintain its aversion to the girl child.

There have been studies by scholars in different regions of the country covering almost all the states and union territories. In one such study, conducted by Ajinder Walia<sup>5</sup> to study the practice of female foeticide in Punjab, an attempt was made to explore the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of the practice. According to this study, birth of a girl child is considered a bad investment for future. She is labelled a 'consumer' rather than a producer, and this traditional view of the Indian patriarchal society has led to horrid practices like female infanticide and female foeticide. Majority of the respondents in diverse regions of the State approved of the practice of foeticide citing the escalating demands of dowry as the main reason for it. The other reason was the inability of daughters to provide social security to parents—since they move out of their paternal homes upon marriage and are considered a resource through which the in-laws can attain greater wealth.

Many studies have been undertaken in different regions of the country with a view to determining the underlying causes which continue to negatively impact the efforts (of all governments and civil society)\_underway to reverse the trend. A comprehensive study<sup>6</sup>, spanning five states of India, namely, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand shows that "progressive areas" of India have a lower child sex ratio. The study claims that ill-focussed development is triggering a conscious choice to eliminate the girl child from the family. This study has revealed that in all the above-mentioned five states, the less prosperous villages had a healthy ratio while their wealthier neighbours, with higher indices of education and development, lodged lesser number of children. There has been a strong shift from "son preference to active daughter discrimination". Factors like nuclear families, high education cost and access to technology contribute to it. Discrimination against girls is much higher where mothers are literate. In most cases, literacy is just confined to formal degrees; mindsets are primitive. It is easy to detect the sex of the child with improved technology and nuclear families make frequent use of sex determination techniques to do away with "unwanted" girls. This study

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<sup>5</sup> Walia, Ajinder. "Female Foeticide In Punjab: Exploring the socio-economic and cultural dimensions." *IDEA*. Web. 30 August 2011.

<sup>6</sup> "New female foeticide study." Sikh Philosophy Network, *Hindustan Times* ePaper. Web. 5 September 2011.

also concurs with Walia in assuring that sons have traditionally been strongly preferred to daughters, especially by couples who opt for a single child. They feel that the returns of cost and time investments in a male child will be much higher compared to a female child, who eventually moves to her husband's home after marriage. This study also underscores the belief that sons carry forward the bloodline. Further, there is concern about the right of a married daughter to share in the family property, apart from dowry, which leaves the parents with little or no savings. Therefore, a 'son' is the preferred choice of the proprietor class as also of the educated and the worldly wise. Social discrimination against women, so deeply entrenched in Indian society, has been spurred by technological developments that today allow mobile sex selection clinics to drive into almost any village or neighbourhood unchecked.

The above state of affairs belies the expectation of Sen that women's increasing capacity to find secure employment, to improve literacy standards and their increased participation in out-of-home social activities by outside mobility, would improve the chances of survival of the female child. Rather the impact has been adverse.

Even the well-meaning campaign of smaller families which is being increasingly adopted by families of different strata is negatively impacting the sex ratio. Because of the still dominant patriarchal mindset of the families in India, parents use the sex selection tests to select the gender of their offspring, and obviously they would prefer that it be a boy than a girl. When people were not accustomed to living in small families, a larger brood would ensure a somewhat balanced sex ratio, at least at the time of birth.

One of the obvious consequences of the continued skewed sex ratio would be the shortage of brides. Sociologists agree that such a state of affairs encourages abuse, notably in the trafficking, drug abuse and physical violence against women. "Put bluntly, it's a competition over scarce women."<sup>7</sup> Societies with adverse female sex ratio have indicated the presence of customs like polyandry, abduction and purchase

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<sup>7</sup> *Op.cit.*, 2

of women. It is strongly felt that contrary to raising the status of women, adverse sex ratio would increase the incidence of rape, prostitution and violence against women<sup>8</sup>.

Due to the shortage of brides, men belonging to the lower social class are pushed to the receiving end. Women in India are encouraged to move into a higher income bracket and/or caste, so richer men find it easier to get a bride. The poor are forced into a long or permanent bachelorhood—a status widely frowned upon in India. The poorer among the farming community in Malwa region of Punjab are forced to practice polyandry for the twin reasons of scarcity of women and for warding off the fragmentation of smaller land holdings.<sup>9</sup>

As stated above, the shortage of women in society leads to violence against women rather than improving their status. The situation is made still more complex since couples do not wish to beget girls as they fear that it would be difficult to bring them up with dignity and also because of the continued threat of violence they may have to face. Therefore, the society is caught in a vicious circle. In a recent study conducted in Haryana by the Centre for Social Research, it has been understood that fear of violence towards women is a cause for female foeticide. The study also reveals that a woman who has only daughters is a victim of domestic violence because of her incapacity to have male children<sup>10</sup>.

It has been brought out that throughout human history, young men have been responsible for the vast preponderance of crime and violence, especially single men, in countries where status and social acceptance depend upon being married and having children, as it does in China and India. A rising population of single men spells trouble<sup>11</sup>. There is a correlation between provincial crime rates and sex ratios. Such a

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<sup>8</sup> Dubey, Leela. "Misadventure in Amniocentesis." *Economic and Political Weekly* 18.8 (1983): 279–80.

<sup>9</sup> Garg, Balwant. "Draupadis bloom in rural Punjab." *The Times of India*, 26 July 2005.

<sup>10</sup> "Violence towards women cause for female foeticide." *Times of India* 3 September 2011. See also, Jha, Durgesh Nandan. "Sex detection: 2 south Delhi clinics raided." *Times of India* 3 September 2011.

<sup>11</sup> "Gendercide: The worldwide war on baby girls." *The Economist* 4 March 2010.

state of affairs would lead to more authoritarian policing in an effort to crack down on crimes and gangs.<sup>12</sup>

Governments and civil society in India have taken recourse to legislative measures, welfare measures and have devised schemes to create positive discrimination in favour of the girl child. The continued decline of the sex ratio among children of 0–6 years, over the succeeding censuses is signalling a ubiquitous trend. The overall steep and consistent decline in the ratio mandates serious review in the face of surveys which rank India as the fourth most dangerous country for women, primarily due to the high female foeticide and infanticide rates.<sup>13</sup>

According to the prevalent view, the social system of patriarchy with the male as the primary authority upholds the institutions of male rule and privilege and mandates female subordination. Patriarchy manifests itself in social, religious, legal, political and economic organisation of society. It continues to strongly influence Indian society, despite the Constitution's attempt to bring about an egalitarian social order<sup>14</sup>. In patriarchy, a compulsory preference for boys would get built in and there would be corresponding discrimination against a girl child. The prevalent patriarchal framework places an ideological bar on the discussion of alternative approaches to achieve gender equality. In order to maintain the patriarchal order, ethics are allowed to fade away and never given serious consideration, and, thinking and behaviour are conditioned accordingly. Overall, male chauvinism is detrimental to women's empowerment—women as an active agent for development, participation in and guiding their own development.

The continued failure of the efforts of government and civil society—despite comprehensive legislations as well as welfare schemes—should motivate us to think out of the box and with an impassioned approach free us from the systemic bias towards patriarchal interests. Undoubtedly, strict implementation of well-meaning legislations and welfare schemes would serve some purpose and should be pursued

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Jacob. K.S. "Sex ratio, patriarchy, and ethics." *The Hindu* 29 April 2011.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

with vigorous efforts. It is argued that lasting and effective solutions lie in recognising that the system of patriarchy is causal and needs to be interrogated and laid bare<sup>15</sup>. This would require exploring alternative approaches for gender justice thereby reversing the trend towards declining sex ratios.

To deal with patriarchy in a complex society like ours may be set as the ultimate goal to address gender issues, but the process would be fairly complex and can take a long time through dialogues and discussions among the segments of society with a view to achieving a system where both men and women have equal status and say in determining the course of society as well as individual family development. Alongside, short-term measures need to be worked out to mitigate the existing state of affairs. There are some hopeful signals, though already faint. Though the sex ratio has been worsening for decades, the pace seems slow. The figure in 2001 was 1.9% worse than it had been in 1991. The figure in 2011 was 1.5% worse than in 2001—an improvement of sorts. Even the sex ratio at birth is improving, not worsening. In 2003–05, the figure was 880 girls born per 1000 boys. In 2004–06, it rose to 892 and in 2006–08 to 904. Perhaps they reveal a recent change in Indian attitudes towards the value of daughters<sup>16</sup>. Such signals, though faint at this stage, give rise to a belief that the situation may take a turn for the better with more focus and backed by reinforcing efforts of all segments of society.

So far the efforts towards gender equality, including prevention of discrimination against girls and women, have been largely from the side of government and civil society groups. Such efforts have been supplemented by advances in medicine and child care techniques and improved extension services. There have been significant positive outcomes which have been recounted in the introductory paragraphs of this note. However, the full potential of the fair gender is yet to be harnessed and is waiting to be tapped for greater economic growth of the country. Such a potential must become visible to families, communities and the country so that all sections of society understand that their own welfare lies in the enhancement of the status of

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Op.cit.*, 2

women and girls and accordingly develop personal stakes in raising their number to a level that corresponds to the natural mix of male and female children.

The reality is that women's contribution towards the economic status of the family and towards the country's development remains invisible to men and women alike. Women's contribution to the economy is not clearly articulated. It is still seen and addressed as a social domain issue. But the fact is that women's labour contribution has become the backbone of the Indian economy's current growth path.<sup>17</sup> They are the critical workers in the lead sectors that are triggering India's growth rate and comfortable domestic savings ratio. It is also through supporting their efforts in the Indian political economy that we can hope to reach some of our declared goals. For example, women constitute 40% of the agricultural workforce and the percentage is rising; 85% of rural women workers are in agriculture and at the lowest end in terms of the drudgery and wages. As men switch to non-farm activities, women are increasingly becoming the primary cultivators, but without land rights<sup>18</sup>.

Therefore, achieving growth target in agriculture will depend increasingly on women and the sustenance of this growth will depend on the efficiency of women farmers by encouraging them to take ownership of land and property. Government schemes aimed at boosting agricultural development must focus on women and also on developing their collective power.

With social security schemes like NREGA assuring decent wages, women's economic force is coming to the fore. Such schemes would make the contribution of women and girls to the family income visible and they would become an economic source, and not merely a social burden<sup>19</sup>. Extending the logic of Pranab Bardhan<sup>20</sup> explaining better sex ratio in the eastern part of India over that in the NW part because of the perceived necessity of girls and women to contribute to paddy cultivation, schemes

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<sup>17</sup> Jain, Devaki. "Numbers on half the sky." *Karmyog*. Web. 11 August 2011.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> Jagannathan, R. "How economics will drive women power." *DNA*. Web. 30 August 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Bardhan, Pranab. "Little Girls and Death in India." *Economic and Political Weekly* 17.6 (1982): 1448–1450.

like NREGA and others—which help increase efficiency of women in agricultural operations—would bode well for increasing the male-female sex ratio.

In industry, the unorganised sector's contribution to overall GDP is 56.71% and women involved in various modes of production are the main workers, paid and unpaid. 53% of all women workers are home-based and 73% of informal workers' contributions come from home-based jobs. Further, 44% of all women workers are involved in unpaid work<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, if a policy instrument impacts on the contribution of SME's, say, by way of dereservation, the women's groups would be negatively impacted at a stage when their contribution is sought to be made more visible.

In the export oriented production of goods and services, women are the predominant group of value adders, whether it is in the BPO's, SEZ's or in some of the sunrise industries like garment export firms, processed food and even in service sectors like hospitality industry.

Besides articulating the contribution of women to economic growth, it has to be realised that women are the face of consumer power. Women have traditionally done most of the household shopping, and, with more money in their hands their role as consumers gets enhanced. Surveys suggest that women make perhaps 80% of consumers' buying decisions—from healthcare and homes to furniture and food<sup>22</sup>. According to the results of a survey that was carried out in Japan, a basket of 115 Japanese companies has been worked out that would benefit from women's rising purchasing power and changing lives as more of them go to work. It includes industries such as financial services as well as online retailing, beauty, clothing and prepared foods. Value of shares of such companies has increased manifold over the average increase of shares in the stock market.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Op.cit.*, 17

<sup>22</sup> "Women and the world economy: A guide to womenomics." *The Economist* 12 April 2006. Web. 23 August 2011.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

It would make business sense if industrial and service sectors in India recognise and admit the importance of women and girls as the primary consumers and devise suitable strategies to increase such an influential segment of customers. It should be understood by the industry and service sectors, as empirical evidence shows, that women and girls do most of the shopping. They constantly look for ways to spend their family's disposable income on furnishing, beauty care, healthcare, etc., and also on investments in real estate and durables. If the numbers of women in the population mix contracts, the expansion of consumer base would be adversely affected. The consumer base, on the other side, would expand faster, if more and more women join the workforce. Thus, women are not only important producers of goods and services, but also constitute the influential group of consumers. Thus, the wheels of economic activity are driven by women and girls.

Therefore, it makes sense that Industry as a whole not only contributes meaningfully towards ensuring the rightful proportion of women of all ages in the population mix, but also devises meaningful programmes thus making them highly employable in various segments of the economy as per market requirements. Clearly, engagement with women and girls is increasingly critical to sustainable growth for every industry.

If the Corporate sector recognises that its own growth depends upon the contribution of women and children, then they should be making visible efforts as a part of their social responsibility to ensure the well-being of females from the womb onwards. Industry Associations at the open level and their respective chapters at the regional levels should be undertaking area specific programmes from their earmarked resources as necessary investment on their behalf for higher future returns recognising, in the process, the role of females of all ages in the growth of industrial and service sectors. UNICEF, recognizing the imperative of investing in children (read females in particular in Indian context) as a necessary prelude to economic growth of communities, has started involving economists to help highlight as to how the needs of children could be integrated with the objectives of development, and how to extend the horizon of the country's development plans to

look for ways in which an investment made now could result in significant returns 15–20 years later<sup>24</sup>.

In light of the above, corporate sector should take a serious note of the dwindling female population over the last century and reflect upon the total accumulated losses due to the disappearance of more than a million females from the subcontinent. The corporate sector should be proactive in involving itself in the governmental efforts and civil society initiatives in saving the disappearing girls—before it's too late. Perhaps this entire decade should be dedicated to this cause with the objective of reversing the declining trend by the next census.

India abounds in excellent public communicators who have sway over millions of men and women. They glorify the ancient Indian culture and provide discourses on art of living a peaceful and trouble-free life by assimilating healthier habits into the lifestyle, and, detached living. Such communicators, who have been blessed with the power of addressing millions, should work towards improving the quality of their discourses if they choose to speak on social issues and reviving ethics. The subject of dwindling population of females and their unequal treatment would surely be an issue which would beg the attention of such communications. Surely the learned amongst the social communicators do realise that among the followers, women steadily adhere to their teachings and also significantly influence their families (including husbands and children) to swell the ranks. A dwindling female population may thus have an impact on the strength and quality of their gatherings in the long run. Such communicators, through their discourses, aim at creating brotherhood in the society towards making it as orderly as possible. Such objectives would be countered by such factors as skewed sex ratio in the society which as explained earlier in this Note would set a chain of events leading to violent behaviours. Therefore, their learned discourses would be complete in the context of harmony if they consider including in their addresses issues pertaining to girl child. In the interest of the society at large, the followers must be told to shun such evil practices of female foeticide and infanticide otherwise their own lives would remain disturbed

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<sup>24</sup> Jonsson, Urban. "Children and Society." *The Economic Significance of Investing in Children*, Chapter 2.

for being part of such unpardonable crimes. No amount of yogic discipline or abstinence would be of any avail.

The concerns regarding declining female population in India is to rise above the social domain issue to become a political, economic and reformist issue and the entire society must be sensitised. We are living through a 'civilization crises'. The challenge can only be met by all-round realisation that even in the patriarchal set up, it is essential to maintain a natural balance between the sexes failing which not only the social system, but also entire economic system would get damaged beyond repair. In order to marshal support of various groups and channelising the efforts in a focussed manner, government may take a lead in establishing a mission for balancing the sex ratio by the next census operation through a coordinated mix of reinforcement programmes and support mechanism.