
DECLINING SEX RATIO IN PUNJAB: DETERMINANTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Mrs. Gurpreet Kaur Oberoi*

ABSTRACT

Like most Indian women, Punjabi women have lower social standing than men. Punjabi social scientists documenting sex-selective abortion trends in Punjab report deeply ingrained prejudice against girls. Punjabis see daughters as social and economic burdens. The high premium on sons and low demand for daughters explains the high demand for sex-selective abortions. Daughters' weddings impose a heavy financial burden on families because of the practice of dowry. Dowry constitutes the giving of money and other goods by a bride's family to a groom's family. It varies and increases depending on a family's economic status. Dowry crimes include threats to the bride's family and post-nuptial harassment of the bride to extract more money from her family.

In Punjabi families, women traditionally do not inherit property. This fear of ancestral property being usurped by another family (the daughter's in-laws) further increases prejudice against daughters and drives the desire for sons.

Families generally want at least one male child, if not two. Since they aim for a two-child family, women only have two chances at producing a male child. Studies show that women whose first child is a girl display higher son preference than women who have had one boy.

Finally, son preference and sex-selective abortions are not limited to the illiterate, rural, and poor populations. Punjab is generally seen as a prosperous Indian state that has experienced high levels of economic development. The relative economic prosperity does, however, raise some questions about the financial motivations associated with the practice of sex-selective abortions in Punjab in particular and declining sex ratio of Punjab in general. Many consider the advent of Punjab's relative economic prosperity synonymous with the "Green Revolution." The social impact of the Green Revolution affected Punjabi women intimately.)

(Keywords: *Declining Sex Ratio, Indian Women, Son Preference, Sex Selective Abortions, Patriarchal India)*

*Research Scholar, Punjabi University Patiala

INTRODUCTION

Chann Chadya Baap De Vehre, Veer Ghar Putt Jamaya!

((The moon has risen over my father's court yard, My brother's house has been blessed with a son!))

The seemingly innocuous congratulatory couplet from a Punjabi folk song reproduced above is extremely troubling in the present day context of Punjab. The couplet recognizes three generations of men in a family while celebrating the birth of another male heir. Here, congratulations are in order not only because a boy is born, but also because a girl is not. Was the boy's birth the happy result of probability? Or did the proud parents take steps to ensure a zero probability of having a female child?

Like most Indian women, Punjabi women have lower social standing than men. Despite this, Punjab is one of the most prosperous states in India. The high rate of feticide in a relatively prosperous state may seem counterintuitive. To shed light on this phenomenon, this Part of the Comment first examines the patriarchal system that characterizes much of India. It then explores two Punjab-specific phenomena which, when coupled with prevalent gender stereotyping, may help explain why people in this rather "prosperous" state are desperate to have sons.

Punjabi social scientists documenting sex-selective abortion trends in Punjab report deeply ingrained prejudice against girls. Dominant Indian culture that favors male children exists in Punjabi society as well, and some commentators suggest that patriarchic trends are stronger in Punjab than in other Indian states.¹ Punjabis see daughters as social and economic burdens. Parents must worry about the chastity of their daughters and about arranging suitable marriages for them.²³ Weddings impose serious economic strain on a bride's parents, who traditionally have to pay for the wedding and arrange for a hefty dowry.²

Also, traditionally, daughters do not contribute economically to the household or to their parents' care in old age. On the other hand, people equate sons with security. In the patriarchic system, only sons are rightful heirs and inherit the family name and property.³

Further, parents see sons as sources of support in their old age, since culture dictates that parents live in a joint family with their sons and daughters-in-law, not with their married

¹ Gupta, Monica Das. *Selective Discrimination Against Female Children in Rural Punjab, India*

² Punjab Human Development Report 2004

³ Talwar, Veena *Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime* (2002)

daughters. The high premium on sons and low demand for daughters explains the high demand for sex-selective abortions. Daughters' weddings impose a heavy financial burden on families because of the practice of dowry. Dowry constitutes the giving of money and other goods by a bride's family to a groom's family. The practice is socially justified as the "last expense" a girl's parents must bear—after her marriage the girl becomes the "responsibility" of her husband's family. A bride's parents traditionally have little bargaining power, and typically arrange the wedding in accordance with all of the groom's family's demands. This places them under extreme emotional, economic and social pressure. Often cloaked as "gift-giving," dowry demands have only grown greater in recent years. Dowry is not a fixed, flat rate for all. It varies and increases depending on a family's economic status. The practice thus successfully places a substantial burden on most girls' families, whether rich or poor. Poor, rural Punjabi farmers unable to re-pay large loans taken for their daughters' weddings have committed suicide. Urban families do not fare much better; many are forced into large debts.⁴

The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, strengthened through amendments in 1984 and 1986, legally eliminated dowry. Yet numerous media reports and studies indicate that both the practice of dowry and dowry-related crimes continue to thrive across India, including Punjab. Dowry crimes include threats to the bride's family and post-nuptial harassment of the bride to extract more money from her family.

However, prosecutions for these crimes are rare, even when the harassment results in the tragic deaths of young brides. The law has failed to provide an appropriate solution in the face of general societal sanction of the practice of dowry. Dowry persists unabated for the large part, contributing to the persistent belief that girls are a burden. This explains a popular advertisement for clinics that offer sex-determinative tests: "Spend Rs. 500 now, save Rs. 50,000 later." Since daughters continue to be viewed as a financial burden, dowry is reportedly one of the leading reasons for son preference by women who undergo sex-selective abortions.⁵

Women are generally not seen as financially independent actors, a consideration that promotes sex-selective abortions in a time of rising costs of living. Though many women in Punjabi cities and towns are leaving the domestic realm and contributing economically to their families, the domestic sphere continues to be considered a woman's rightful place. In

⁴ Talwar, Veena *Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime* (2002)

⁵ Bose, Shiva *Female Foeticide – A Sociological Perspective* (1998)

wealthier families, women often stay at home because not working outside the home is seen as a symbol of social status and economic prosperity. Of the total male population in Punjab, 54.1% were recorded as part of the workforce, while of the total female population only 18.7% participated. The women who do enter the workforce generally earn much less than their male counterparts. Further, workplace harassment serves as a barrier to women entering the professional realm. Women are not seen as qualified workers. The huge literacy gap between men and women, which results from a lack of emphasis on girls' education, serves as a disadvantage in the job market. As of the last census, the female literacy rate in rural Punjabi populations was 57.91%, compared to male literacy rate of 71.70%. In urban sections of Punjab the female and male literacy rates were 74.63% and 82.97% respectively.⁶

In Punjabi families, women traditionally do not inherit property. Though the law now allows daughters to receive their share, it is uncommon and frowned upon for daughters to inherit property. Some argue that legal developments designed to ensure a girl's share in family property have backfired. Parents now fear that the daughter's husband will try to gain control of their property unless he is paid a hefty dowry as a substitute for the daughter's share of inheritance. This fear of ancestral property being usurped by another family (the daughter's in-laws) further increases prejudice against daughters and drives the desire for sons.

Domestic violence is yet another reason why people perceive having a daughter as a liability and source of angst. Domestic violence is a common phenomenon in Indian and Punjabi marriages.

As discussed above, often deadly violence against women is perpetrated in dowry-related conflicts. Similar to other societies, domestic violence is believed to be under-reported in India and Punjab. When it is reported, police often ignore the issue and rarely enforce the laws against domestic violence.⁷

This, coupled with concerns about family harmony and social status, results in "family, in-laws, friends, and even neighbors" being reluctant to come to the aid of a woman who is suffering domestic violence. Girls' parents consider this very real threat of violence in their daughters' marriages not only with natural parental concern for a child's welfare but also as a potential source of dishonor and burden.

The Indian government's population-control campaigns over the last fifty years have further exacerbated son preference by preaching the merits of a small family. The merits of planning for small families and a two-child family norm are instilled into the public's psyche through

⁶ Bose, Shiva *Female Foeticide – A Sociological Perspective* (1998)

⁷ Martha, Nussbaum, *India: Implementing Sex Equality Through Law*(2008)

the popular government slogans like “Hum Do, Humare Do” (We are Two, and We will have Two). The Government is now attempting to promote the idea of a one-child family through messages such as “Have fun with One, Control Population,” highlighted on the website for the Department of Family Welfare. Families generally want at least one male child, if not two. Since they aim for a two-child family, women only have two chances at producing a male child. As a result, the sex-determinative tests and sex-selective abortions become all the more important. Studies show that women whose first child is a girl display higher son preference than women who have had one boy.⁸

Finally, son preference and sex-selective abortions are not limited to the illiterate, rural, and poor populations. Some Punjabi districts with the highest female literacy rates, such as Ludhiana and Fatehgarh Sahib, also have the worst sex ratios in the country. While Ludhiana is the industrial center of the state, Fatehgarh Sahib is semi-rural. The son preference cuts across class lines and plagues various strata of society. Though more educated, the urban elite also have easier access and greater financial resources for sex-determinative tests and abortions.⁹

What we have discussed till now are possible “negative notions” that could have been deeply affected the sex ratio in Punjab but their might also be other factors that might not be directly related but have far reaching consequences on sex ratio of regions like Punjab. Let us take into consideration the past developmental activity of Green Revolution that can also be a spoil sport in sex ratio development of the state. Punjab is generally seen as a prosperous Indian state that has experienced high levels of economic development. In 2001, the Human Development Index (HDI) for India was 0.472, compared to Punjab’s HDI of 0.537.¹⁰ This development does not alleviate son preference, as discussed above. The relative economic prosperity does, however, raise some questions about the financial motivations associated with the practice of sex-selective abortions in Punjab in particular and declining sex ratio of Punjab in general. Shouldn’t the relatively wealthy Punjabis be better able to support the economic burden of having daughters?

Part of the answer is that over time son preference has become entrenched as an accepted and rationalized part of Punjabi culture. Daughters are more than an economic burden—people see them as a social liability, their chastity and honor a matter of family concern. Further, it

⁸ S. Puri et al., *Gender Preference and Awareness Regarding Sex Determination Among Married Women in Slums of Chandigarh* (2008)

⁹ Scott, Baldauf. *India’s ‘Girl Deficit’ Deepest Among Educated*, *Christian Sci. Monitor*, Jan. 13, 2006, available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0113/p01s04-wosc.htm>

¹⁰ Punjab Human Development Report 2004

has been argued that despite its economic prosperity, Punjab's recent history has caused more feelings of discontent and instability in this state than in many others in India. Shiva, writing an acerbic review of the Green Revolution in Punjab, explains that this discontent results from "a sense of having been exploited and treated with discrimination."¹¹

Many consider the advent of Punjab's relative economic prosperity synonymous with the "Green Revolution." The Green Revolution refers to the development initiatives undertaken in the late 1960s and 1970s by developed countries to aid developing countries in increasing their crop yield. During this period, foreign developed seeds and equipment were introduced to Punjab's agriculture. Foreign agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and the Indian Government considered these new initiatives a miracle. The Green Revolution brought quick results and agricultural prosperity, but critics allege that return on crops began to decline quickly thereafter. After an early experience of prosperity, Punjab farmers were rapidly disillusioned. In 1971-72, the returns on wheat cultivation were 27% on investment. By 1977-78 cultivators complained that their returns had fallen to less than two percent of their investment." There is general agreement that this "Revolution" deeply affected the Punjabi agrarian society just as it did agrarian societies in other developing countries.¹²

The social impact of the Green Revolution affected Punjabi women intimately. Small landholdings became inefficient and poorer farmers could no longer sustain themselves off their land. New technologies generally replaced unskilled labor, which many women had contributed to the agrarian system. With the increased economic prosperity, larger landowners quickly pulled women back into the domestic realm as a sign of increased social standing. The Green Revolution also heralded the advent of consumerism and dowry demands increased. Thus, the source of prosperity for the state also caused discontent for the poor, heightened the demand on natural resources, and most relevant for the purposes of this Comment, decreased the "economic worth" of women in agrarian families while increasing their "economic liability."¹³

Punjab has excelled at the National and International level in various fields of life, but due to a strong desire for a son and a small family and other reasons as stated in the earlier chapters,

¹¹ Shiva, Vandana. *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics* (1991)

¹² Sharma, Rita & Poleman, Thomas. *The New Economics of India's Green Revolution* (1994)

¹³ Sharma, Rita & Poleman, Thomas. *The New Economics of India's Green Revolution* (1994)

the state has earned a bad name for the skewed child sex-ratio. Under the present scenario it is essential for the medical fraternity as also the public at large to understand the problem of skewed sex-ratio at the grass-root level.