

## Women's Empowerment and Gender Bias in the Birth and Survival of Girls in Urban India



Sucharita Sinha Mukherjee

The lower survival chances of girls relative to boys in India have drawn much attention from researchers, especially as successive Indian censuses show that child sex ratios (males per females) are becoming ever more masculine. According to the 2001 Census, around 110 boys were born per 100 girls in India; this ratio stands in alarming contrast to the global average of 105 boys born per 100 girls. Sucharita Sinha Mukherjee examines sex ratios at birth and during childhood until age 7 in urban India to determine whether the empowerment of women, as measured by women's employment and education, is an effective antidote for son preference.

Her analysis is based on a district-level dataset constructed from data provided by the 1991 and 2001 Censuses of India; it pertains to the urban areas of 430 districts in 1991 (redefined as 593 districts in the 2001 census). Her study is the first to specifically assess sex ratios at birth and child sex ratios across a broad span of urban India, where one commonly assumes less discrimination and weaker patriarchal norms. The cross-sectional regression analysis reaffirms the positive association between women's employment and the birth and survival of more girls. Yet it fails to confirm the oft-emphasized positive connection between women's education and increased survival of girls. Quite the contrary: not only are higher female literacy rates in urban areas associated with skewed child sex ratios, but also women's formal education beyond the middle-school level is strongly associated with higher sex ratios at birth –with son preference exercised through selective abortion.

Mukherjee's analysis shows that the widespread belief that education alone can reduce son preference in India, especially in the urban areas with greater resources, is flawed. Increased education does not seem to broaden horizons or raise the self-worth of women enough for them to discontinue son-preference. Mukherjee argues that these results are not surprising: in urban India, large numbers of educated women remain out of the paid work force; holding down a paid job is the province of less-educated women. While there are

signs the stigma attached to paid work may be starting to disappear, women's work participation rate still stands below 20 percent for women between the ages of 15 and 64, also reflecting the nonparticipation of women with college or technical degrees.

Women and families in urban India who can afford to pursue education seem to be using it to improve their marriage prospects rather than to seek employment. The greater resources and knowledge that educated women possess actually enhance their ability to selectively abort female fetuses. The goal? To have smaller families with sufficient male children -- who continue to be primary propagators of lineage and inheritors of property. Thus, it is hardly surprising that higher female education rates in urban India are not associated with increased survival of girls.

This research underscores the need to bring about broad, attitudinal changes to address the deep-rooted, patriarchal institutions that govern marriage, inheritance, and women's work in India. Implementing narrower solutions, such as education alone, will not do the job. Raising the value of daughters in India will require more than one approach.

Read the article in full at

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