

POLICY BRIEF

Balancing Sex Ratios

Pathways of Change

The United Nations Population Fund: Delivering a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled



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CURRENT SCENARIO

Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB)

India's sex ratio at birth (SRB) declined progressively during the first half of the decade 2000-10 reaching an all-time low of 880 girls born for every 1000 boys born in the period 2003-05.¹

Post 2005 the SRB improved steadily and had plateaued in the range of 906-908 girls born for every 1000 boys born during 2007-2013. However thereafter, data from the Sample Registration System (SRS 2015-17) has recorded a decline in SRB to 896 girls.

Figure 1: Trends in Sex Ratio at Birth, India, SRS, 2000-02 to 2015-17

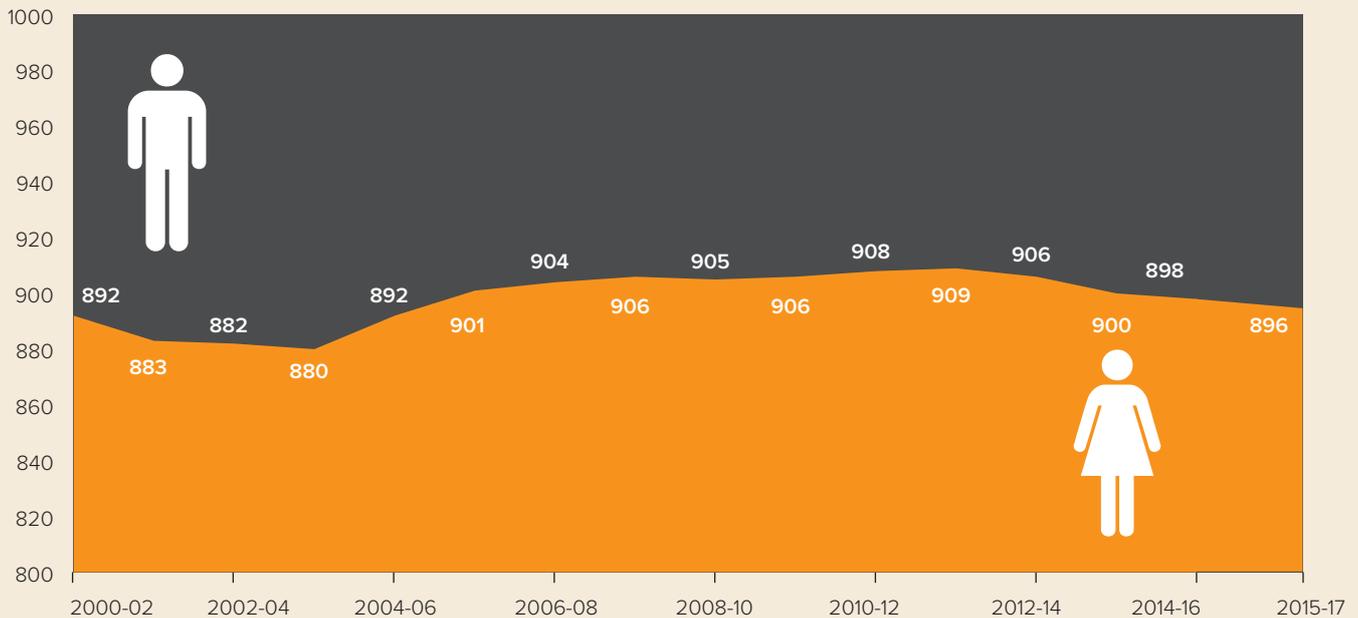
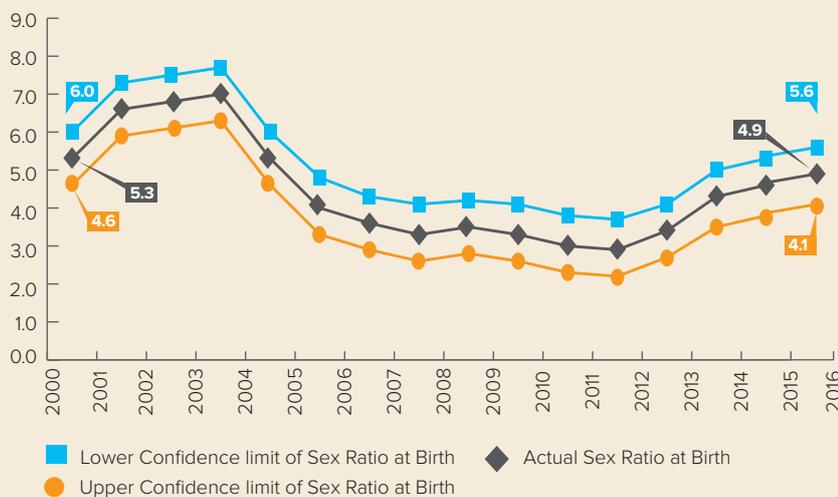


Figure 2: Annual Trends in Estimated Number of Girls Missing at Birth in India (in Lakh), 2001-2016



On an average, **4.5 lakh** girls were missing annually during the period 2001 - 2016.

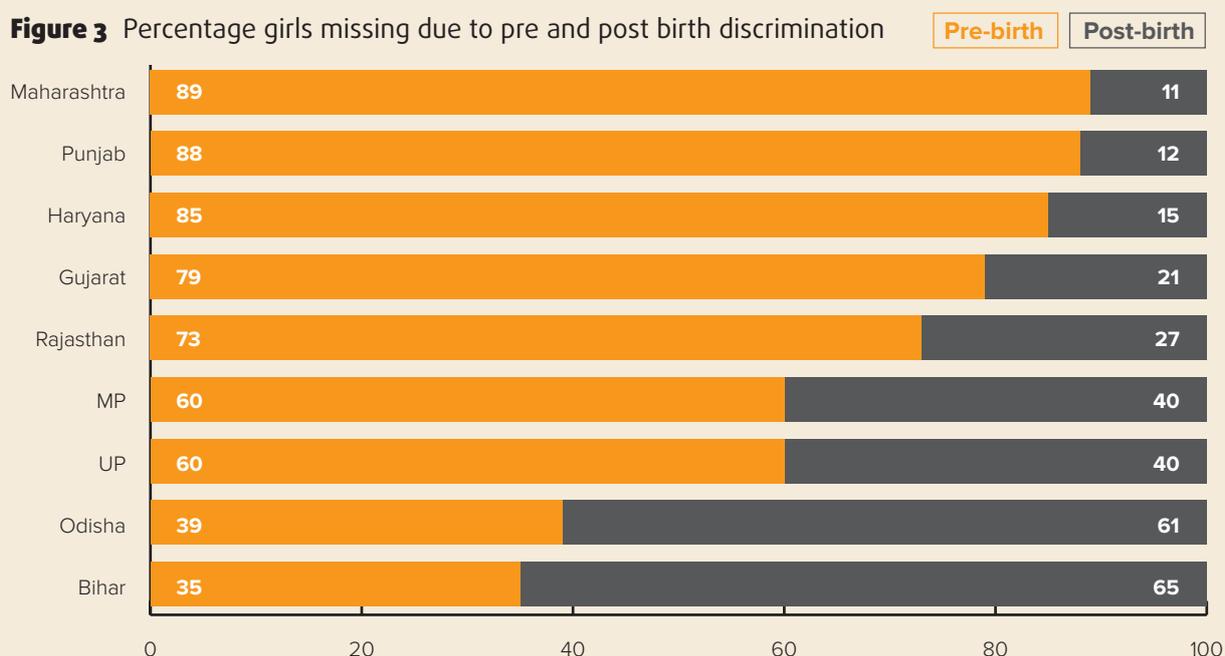
1. Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner India. Sex Ratio at Birth, Sample Registration System. Government of India

Not Only about Discrimination at Birth

The estimation of missing girls due to pre and post birth discrimination can be derived from Census data for the number of girls in the 0-6 year age group.

The decomposition of the estimates for missing number of girls based on Census 2011, reveals that in India, 66 percent of the total missing girls are due to sex selection (including pre conception and prenatal) and remaining one third girls are missing due to excess mortality of girls. The decomposition varies across states.

Figure 3 Percentage girls missing due to pre and post birth discrimination



More than 86 percent of missing girls are due to sex selection in Punjab, Maharashtra and Haryana- these are also states with low fertility.

In moving towards high fertility states, the contribution of post birth discrimination increases as is evident in the states of MP, UP, Odisha and Bihar signifying that as fertility falls in these states SRB may become more adverse than they are now.

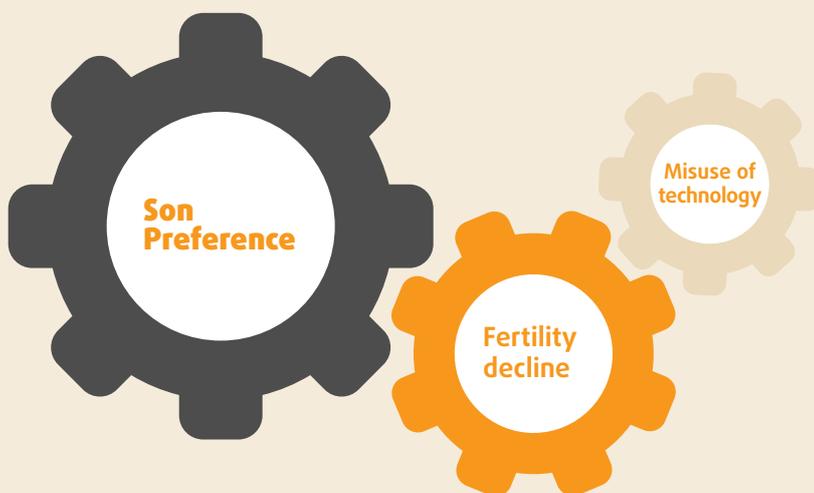
Overall for India, this might mean the average SRB may not change too much with improvement in some states but a commensurate or larger decline in large states like UP and Bihar. These large states that are expected to experience decline in SRB in the future need urgent attention to stem the overall decline.

This data highlights the cycle of discrimination that needs to be addressed in the early years of girls' lives after birth.

Drivers of Sex Ratio Imbalance

Major pre-conditions:

1. Able- it is possible to sex select- availability and misuse of technology
2. Ready- it is considered worthwhile to do it- economic and social considerations motivating son preference and daughter unwantedness
3. Small families- it is considered necessary as increasingly more people opt for small families but with sons



Conditional sex ratio²:

- Sex ratio at birth for second birth, if previous child is a girl: **860**
- Sex ratio at birth for third birth, if previous two children are girls: **708**

Economic and social motives- NOT about 'cultural mindset alone'

- Rising financial costs of raising children and the relative costs of raising daughters
- An aspiring middle class believes it can ill-afford a daughter in their desire to climb the economic ladder
- Patrilineal household structures- ensure resources are pooled between parents and sons
- Dowry, and wedding expenses ensure that parents of the bride incur large expenses
- Compulsory nature of marriage and norms related to marriage- patrilocal (practice of brides moving out of the natal home after marriage) and 'marrying up' (women marrying men of higher socio-economic backgrounds)
- Concerns for old age security in the absence of pension benefits and social security- daughters are not perceived as support during old age; also restrictions on women's mobility and women's limited control over financial resources limits their ability to provide support to their parents
- Safety concerns and need to control girls' sexuality as girls are perceived to carry family honour- girls are thus perceived to be especially vulnerable and a liability

2. Computed from NFHS 4 data files (UNFPA, 2019)

Understanding the Emerging Patterns of Change- Synthesizing Evidence

Restraining forces

Emerging middle class (UNFPA, 2017)

- With every 10 percent increase in the size of the emerging middle class, the sex ratio declines by 0.7 percent points and with each 10 percent increase in the stable middle class, there is an improvement of the sex ratio by the same magnitude

Urbanizing India (UNFPA-UN Women, 2018)

- Findings from a two state study (Haryana and Maharashtra) indicated that – urban towns are where sex selection plays out in social and economic spheres [Census 2011 netted largest ever increase in the number of urban towns]
- For women especially, work opportunities in urban towns are limited compared to either rural locations or larger cities. 70 percent are housewives, 15 percent are self-employed, often at very modest levels, (tailoring, school tuitions, beauty parlour), 10 percent salary- wage workers (schools and municipality)
- Takeaway- Urban towns should occupy a much more central focus for addressing sex ratio imbalance through effective economic planning

Positive forces

Women's work

- Increased women's work force participation improves their participation in decision-making, and overtime may lead to decline in son-preference
- Withdrawal from work=> reduced 'value' of women and girls; dowry demand emerges and son-preference grows
- Gender parity in India will increase GDP by 16 percent, if gender gaps are to be tackled (McKinsey & Company, 2015) - especially so in Bihar, UP, MP, Assam, Jharkhand with poor gender parity and with 35 percent of female working age population
- 70 percent of that increase will occur when female labour force participation goes up by just 10 percent from current 31 percent by 2025, bringing 68 million women into economy; this requires:
 - Investment in secondary and tertiary education
 - Skill training
 - Enabling women entrepreneurs
 - Strengthening legal provisions
 - Improving infrastructure and services to address high burden of domestic and carework
 - Reshaping deep-rooted attitudes about role of women in work and insociety

Women's asset ownership- (KHAS, IIM-Bangalore, 2011)

- Evidence indicates that women's asset ownership reduces their vulnerability; the Karnataka Household Asset Survey (KHAS) highlighted that women owned fewer assets, and of lesser value
- Women were under represented among asset owners across nearly all areas and asset categories
- Chief mode of acquisition-inheritance for men and marriage for women (joint or upon death of spouse)

Financial incentives- (UNFPA, 2015)

- Necessary but not sufficient – ensures well-being but cannot tackle daughter un-wantedness
- Incentives need to work with other cross-sectoral measures in enhancing education and employability
- Structuring matters - delink incentives from marriage – state shouldn't position incentives as 'compensation' for the perceived 'burden' of a daughter; delink from sterilisation;
- Target at critical milestones – for e.g. tied to completing higher education or starting an entrepreneurial venture

Way Forward for Strengthening Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)

Bottomline indicated by evidence- SKILLS, JOBS, ASSETS have the potential to significantly reduce daughter un-wantedness and shift perception about girls from a 'liability' to an 'asset'.

Economic value will enable women and girls to exert agency, which in turn will also impact their social value; parallel efforts are required to address barriers created by discriminatory norms and structures. Suggestions below are based on the understanding that the agency of women and girls and their ability to redefine norms is built through- education, life skills, vocational skills, employment and low risk of violence.

BBBP in its current form: One of the strengths of BBBP has been in the use of communication strategies; Going forward what more needs to be done

- Develop and track a comprehensive behavior change communication strategy deployed at the level of community, family and individual (e.g. Swachh Bharat strategy)
- Devise strategies for building collective disapproval on prevailing discriminatory norms and stereotypes- focusing on women's work, old age support, living arrangements
- Strengthen gender champions programme for more systematic outreach to men and boys (standardized curriculum, invest in male animators in and outside education Institutions)

BBBP in the next phase: Focus on building self-reliance- thrust on financial independence

- Promote higher education and skills (paid jobs)- enable girls to stay in school and achieve higher education- hostels and boarding facilities in upcoming towns, linkage with open schools and bridge schooling, scholarships for higher education, address basic things like toilets, access to schools and safety within educational institutions and on the way to schools/colleges
- Focus on Asset building- promote women's ability to earn, own, and inherit assets
- Advocate for skilling of girls and women outside of traditional 'feminine' roles and professions
- Sustained focus on safety and mobility- Safety in schools, colleges, training institutions, work spaces,

and in public spaces needs to be addressed to ensure that girls realize their full potential and exercise their agency in an environment that is conducive for change

Leverage other large scale programmes

- Skills mission- Proactive outreach to girls in training and placement and integrate life skills (ability to communicate, negotiate, make decisions) in vocational skill building
- Financial inclusion- bank accounts, and access to credit, banking products
- Housing for all (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-PMAY)- thrust on women's home ownership
- Smart cities (include safety and mobility); peripheral urban towns need attention; work opportunities, transport facilities designed with women's lives and duties in mind, boarding facilities for girls and women pursuing education and employment
- Swachh Bharat- ensuring sanitation and linkage to girls' safety and dignity

Tracking change

- Initiate periodic status survey- with data on indicators that enable tracking of improved value and position, not only limited to condition; data particularly needed on asset ownership, prevalence of violence against women and girls (district and block data as well) and time use surveys- this has also been recommended in the vision document developed by Niti Aayog
- Emphasize collection and use of gender sensitive data in all aspects- not only why women and men differ in their needs and ability to access services and opportunities but how they differ- reasons behind gaps in development outcomes and barriers in achieving them

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