

# Why do daughters go missing?



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## Frequently Asked Questions on Pre-natal Sex Selection in India

## What is sex selection?

Sex selection is the practice of determining the sex of the unborn foetus and eliminating it if found to be female.

## How is sex selection done?

In recent years, the use of ultrasound technology has become the most common mode of sex determination followed by elimination of the female. Easy access to ultrasound since the early 1980s has contributed to increased sex selection and the rapid decline in the child sex ratio.

## What is the child sex ratio and sex ratio at birth?

This ratio is calculated as the number of girls per 1000 boys in the 0-6 years age group. In India, the ratio has shown a sharp decline from 976 girls to 1000 boys in 1961 to 927 as per the 2001 census. As per global trends, the normal child sex ratio should be above 950. However, in certain parts of the country such as Punjab and Haryana, there are less than 800 girls for every 1000 boys. The child sex ratio reflects the imbalance between the number of girls and boys, indicating that the practice of sex selection (along with other factors such as selective neglect of girls) have led to a drastic decline in the number of girls compared to the number of boys.

When the ratio is calculated at birth (i.e. the number of girls born per 1000 boys), it provides a clearer indication of sex selection, which happens before birth. The sex ratio at birth for the country for 2005-2007 is estimated at 901 girls born for every 1000 boys. This data is available as a three year moving average from the Sample Registration System. Though sex ratio at birth is a better indicator of pre-natal sex selection, the child sex ratio is still most widely quoted because of its easy availability at the district level and throughout the country.

## What is the root cause of sex selection?

Sex selection is not only about misuse of technology. At the heart of the matter, is the low status of women and girls, and the deep-rooted prejudices they face throughout life. The issue needs to be seen in the context of a male-dominated social and family structure and a value system based on son preference. Further, the practice of dowry and the tag of 'paraya dhan' translate into daughters being seen as liabilities.

Discrimination and neglect of the girl child, could be in terms of inadequate nutrition, denial or limited access to education and health, and domestic violence. In one of its worst forms, it leads to complete rejection of daughters even before birth, as practiced through sex selection.

## Is sex selection caused by poverty and illiteracy?

No, this is a myth. We see this practice prevalent right across the country, even in regions which are prosperous and people are literate. According to the 2001 census, this ratio has declined to less than 900 girls per 1000 boys in states such as Delhi, Punjab, Haryana and Gujarat. The ratio stands at a mere 766 in Fatehgarh Sahib district of Punjab. Kurukshetra district of Haryana has a ratio of 771, Ahmedabad 836, and the prosperous South West district of Delhi has 846 girls for 1000 boys. Mumbai too is down to 922. These regions are amongst the most prosperous in the country.



## What is the impact of sex selection?

The adverse child sex ratio can severely impact the delicate equilibrium of nature and damage the moral and social fabric. Contrary to what many believe, fewer girls in a society will not enhance their status. Instead, it could lead to increased violence against women, rape, abduction, trafficking and a resurgence of practices such as polyandry (more than one man marrying one woman). In some parts of the country, women are already being 'bought' as brides, making commodification of women a real threat.

## Is sex selection against the law?

The Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act regulates sex selection, before or after conception. The law was first enacted in 1994 and amended in 2003. Its purpose is to prevent misuse of technologies such as ultrasound that enable testing the sex of the foetus and eliminating girls. It is illegal to test the sex of the foetus for non-medical reasons. The law provides for imprisonment, which may extend to 3 years and fine up to Rs 10,000 for the first conviction. The law suffers from bottlenecks in implementation, and there have been few convictions so far. The major difficulty relates to proving the offence conducted with the agreement of the medical service provider and parents.



## But abortion is legal, is it not?

In India, abortion is legal under certain circumstances as defined by the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971. These reasons are, for example, danger to the mother's life, foetal abnormality, rape or contraceptive failure. However, the law does not permit abortion for the reason of sex selection. It is important to recognise this fact and not consider that abortion per se is illegal. A woman needs to have rightful access to safe and legal abortion services as per the MTP Act.

From a gender equality perspective, sex selection is a reflection of discrimination against girls and subordination of women as a group. Equally important is to remember that not providing women access to safe abortion services for legally valid reasons further deepens their subordination. Access to safe and legal abortion is also necessary to prevent maternal death and related ill health.

## Does a mother have the right to choose the sex of her future child?

Fears of violence and desertion, and also the desire to establish one's value in the family mean that women often feel pressured to have sons and therefore opt for sex selection. This can hardly be called as a mother's choice. In fact, there are many women who have courageously resisted pressure from family members and refused to go in for sex determination, even though this might mean desertion, rejection or violence by the family.

In 2005, a couple appealed to Mumbai High Court to allow sex selection as a matter of constitutional Right to Life and personal liberty. The High Court ruled that the right to bring into existence a life in future with a choice to determine the sex of that life cannot in itself be a right. The case was dismissed with the court upholding the view that sex selection cannot be



treated as a matter of right and choice as it promotes discrimination. The court also confirmed that right to personal liberty cannot be expanded to mean personal liberty to determine the sex of the child which may come into existence.

## What can I do?

Each one of us has a role to play – as parents, siblings, family members and friends. And as professionals, whether teachers, doctors, lawyers, judges, NGO workers, administrators, government officials, law enforcement personnel, elected representatives, journalists, writers, artists...

- Create awareness about this issue in homes, communities, neighbourhoods and the workplace
- Speak up against discrimination. For example, do not tolerate violence and abuse against women and girls, do not give or take dowry, stand up for equal property rights
- Find small and big ways to promote equality between boys and girls in your own surroundings
- Report the matter to the authorities if you know that the law is being infringed. Refer to <http://pnrt.gov.in> for the list of authorities/medical officers responsible for Act implementation in your area
- Link up and help groups actively involved in mobilizing the community against sex selection

## Sex Selection....

**Never commit, condone or remain silent**



## A Father's Dream

Birbal Chaurasia sells paan in front of the Indian Express Building at ITO in New Delhi. He says, he has done this from the time when only four cars were parked before the building. A couple of years back, when his own daughter walked into the building as part of an audit team looking into the newspaper accounts, he was over the moon. "India cannot become a great country it wants to be unless every woman is educated. Without education, women cannot be self-reliant and take independent decisions. That's what you need to progress" say Chaurasia, a Class VIII dropout.

Chaurasia always ensured his daughters got Rs. 10 each day to travel by bus to school and back. When they got into professional institutes, he made sure the tuition fees were paid. "When my elder daughter got over 80% marks in mathematics in her 12th examination, I knew she deserved more," he says. Chaurasia comes from Shadaha village in Pratapgarh district where girls seldom study after primary school and never step out unescorted after entering the teens.

His ideas of women's empowerment were shaped by his interaction with journalists who often came to his shop for paan or cigarettes. "Some of them were women. They were all intelligent and confident. I understood then that progress is linked to education", he says.

One night when he returned home late, his family gifted him a mobile phone. Last month, sometime in the afternoon, the phone rang. "You have become the father of a chartered accountant", the voice said. Says Chaurasia, "It took me some time to understand that my son was talking about his elder sister having passed her examination. That moment I realized my 30 years in the city were not wasted".

**Extracted from 'Dreams don't die, they go on to become Chartered Accountants'; Times of India, 25 February, 2007**