CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From a concern for the alarming decline in sex ratio in India, this study has sought to examine the socio-cultural and economic factors leading to the decline. It is premised on the recognition globally that the sex-ratio of a given population is favourable to women, unless socio-cultural factors intervene in ways that justify the elimination of the female. The rapid decline in female sex ratio in South Asian countries and China is attributed to the prevailing patrilineal descent and inheritance systems. These deep rooted cultural norms are exacerbated by a desire for small families.

THE STUDY

This study examines the factors responsible for the adverse sex-ratio, in the urban agglomeration of Vadodara--a region identified throughout history as culturally advanced and cosmopolitan. The identification of Vadodara as epitomizing the best of Gujarati culture is partly because of its geographical location on the trade routes to and from Gujarat and its historical antecedents, particularly during the reign of the Gaikwads. These forward looking rulers who governed Vadodara under the overarching protection of the British, sought to advance the economic and educational development of their subjects. These rulers introduced several forward looking legislations to eliminate child marriage and advance female education. This region continued to represent the flowering of Gujarati culture in the post-independence period and was identified as a progressive region. Since 1970s it is possible to see a steady decline in female sex ratio (particularly the child sex ratio) -- a decline that is sharply evident in the 1991 and 2001 census report. This is not to suggest that the adverse sex ratio/child sex ratio was a phenomenon that suddenly erupted on the socio-economic landscape in this period. A quick review of the census record since the first census enumeration of the population in India would reveal an embedded cultural prejudice against the girl child; but this prejudice has erupted into a full scale crisis since 1991 which coincidentally is also an era of cataclysmic socio-economic changes.

FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The focus of this study is restricted to an analysis of the factors responsible for the decline in child sex ratio. This is primarily because demographers see the CSR as a true indicator of the steady decline in the number of females compared to males. This assumption
is because the sex ratio of children below six years is uncontaminated by factors like under-
enumeration of females or male migration-factors which could distort the enumeration of the
overall sex ratio.

This study is informed by the demographic and statistical analysis of the declining
child sex ratio (CSR) widely undertaken by the researchers and scholars in India (as
discussed in chapter-II on review of literature) It also draws on field studies, aimed at
examining the socio-cultural factors for the trend, in rural Haryana, Punjab and other parts of
North India. These are places with a long history of adverse child sex ratio and the
consequences of the disproportionate rate of decline are evident. In recent years, Gujarat and
Maharashtra have also emerged as female deficit states. Demographic studies in Gujarat have
focussed on historically female deficit districts like Mehsana. There are however, no
significant, in-depth and micro level studies conducted in the urban areas of Vadodara,
despite the evidence of a sharp decline in the census records of 1991 and 2001. Unlike
Mehsana, Vadodara represents a paradox-of rapid economic progress co-existing with
regressive values that justify gender discrimination against the girl child. No doubt the factors
like son-preference and aversion of daughters are embedded in the culture. The question that
arises is why does this prejudice surface since the 1970s? Was it because of the easy access to
medical techniques facilitating sex discrimination tests and because of the possibility of sex
selective abortions? A corollary question that needs to be asked is why did this trend escalate
sharply in the decades since 1991? Was this to do with the increased economic aspirational
levels of people in the era of economic liberalization, or where there any other intervening
factors? On the plus side, the 2011 census records indicate a marginal improvement in CSR.
This may be due to various state and civil society interventions as well as the implementation
of the PCNDT Act. The question however remains on the effectiveness of the current
strategies. To what extent have the present strategies adopted by the state in partnership with
civil society succeeded in reversing the trend? And to what extent will these strategies
transform the existing gender relations?

To answer these questions the study examines the declining CSR in urban Vadodara,
Gujarat, within the broader socio-cultural and economic structures responsible for the adverse
trends in the colonial and post colonial periods. Seeking to understand the reasons for the
demographic trends, the study examines factors responsible for the decline. It then documents
the impact of the trend on the social fabric, in particular the institution of marriage.
Micro studies undertaken earlier in Haryana and Punjab (as discussed in chapter VII. B) have documented the impact of the decline in CSR. But there has been no study conducted in Vadodara, perhaps because the rapid decline of CSR evident in the census records is a new phenomenon; the impact caused by the decline on marriage and gender relationships is likely to hit the various communities at a much later date. There are however several anecdotal reports in the newspapers indicating the difficulties that families with only sons face in finding brides. There are reports of bride purchase from tribal areas as well as new forms of exchange marriage of siblings.

This study is developed on a large canvass: It was an attempt to bridge the gap between the available demographic and statistical records with experiential and empirical data collected through personal interviews and focused group discussions (FGDs). Since the population of Vadodara is heterogeneous, with considerable, class, caste and religious differences, the study has taken into account these variables. A total of 150 individual personal interviews and 5 FGDs (with 60 women participants from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds varying from wage labourers from slums to educated and employed women in government establishments) were undertaken. Moreover to ensure that the voices of all the stakeholders are heard, the researcher has also interviewed 11 doctors, 5 lawyers, 10 government officials, 9 civil society players and 5 marriage bureau operators. The study has been premised on the assumption that the reasons for the declining CSR are located in the normative structure defining gender relations and the prevailing patrilineal family and marriage systems. These factors however do not explain the rapid decline in CSR in the 1991 and 2001 census and need to be explained. On the positive side, no doubt, it is possible to discern a marginal improvement in the census records of 2011. Therefore, through extensive fieldwork, the study has sought to probe the specific reasons for the demographic trend in Vadodara city. Records prior to 1971-81 indicate that (although the marriage and kinship structure in Gujarat is similar to the North Indian system as indicated in chapter-VI) the sex ratio in Vadodara was better than most of the north and north-western areas of the country because of the better education, health and legal measures introduced during the Gaikwad regime. It is only after 1971-81 that the CSR began to decline. This was the decade when new reproductive technologies (NRTs) like amniocentesis and ultrasound sonography (USG) were introduced in India. The sharpest decline is seen in the decade of 1991-2001 which is also marked by a period of rapid economic growth in Gujarat.
FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

By and large this study reiterates the various studies conducted in other parts of India on the reasons for the decline in CSR. These studies (as discussed in detail in chapter-I on introduction and chapter-II on review of literature) indicate that there is a co-relation between the economic and literacy levels of families with the proportionate decline in CSR. It is in short a class phenomenon: for the more urbanised, literate, and economically prosperous, the family is, the more likely it is to opt for the use of technology to eliminate the girl child. The prevalence of small family norms and the increased economic aspirational levels of urban families coupled with the easy access to modern reproductive technologies are responsible for the trend. In Vadodara the rapid decline in CSR is visible since the 1991 census. This was also a period of economic liberalization and globalization. It may not be possible to make a one to one correlation between neo-economic policies and declining CSR. There is, however, a correlation between rising economic aspirations in society, the easy availability of new reproductive technologies and choices made by families on family size and sex of the child.

Causes

The use of technology does not exist in a cultural vacuum. The study establishes that the causes for the misuse of technology can be traced to the larger normative construction of a girl child within Gujarati family structure with its strong son-preference. These norms, as delineated in chapter VI, are shaped through the prevailing rituals, and cultural practices. The patrilineal descent and marriage systems deny the girl child her entitlements in the family and community. Her status in her marital home is dependent on becoming a mother of a son. The reasons for the desirability of a son is because of the existing patrilineal descent/inheritance pattern and because sons are seen as old age security. A few of the older respondents referred to the religious need for a son, but by and large the prevalence of son-preference was linked to old-age security. At the same time the high dowry/marriage costs was the reason given for aversion to daughters. The continuation of the dowry system is because women do not have equal property rights. Dowry is seen as pre-mortem inheritance in lieu of property rights for women. Similarly, higher education with its promise of empowerment, for girls is seen as a threat to their marriage prospects. These factors reinforce son-preference. This study strengthens the observations of researchers for declining CSR in Kerala and Maharashtra, where the pernicious spread of the dowry system is leading to the rising trend in declining child sex ratio (as discussed in chapter-I)
The factor that aggravates the embedded norms of son-preference and daughter aversion is the desire for small families. While there is a growing trend emphasising a one child norm, the majority of the respondents stressed the two children (with at least one son) as their ideal family size. The preference for a son is apparent from the fact that if the first child is a girl, the chances of sex selective abortions are higher during the second and third pregnancies. These decisions on family size and composition are not just choices made by couples but are influenced by the joint family.

The extent of this problem can be gauged from the fact that The majority of the respondents admitted to awareness of the occurrence of SD and SSA either in their vicinity or among their acquaintances. They were able to reveal the names of the clinics in the vicinity where such tests were conducted and also the names of doctors who conducted such abortions. From the 23% of women who admitted of undergoing abortions, almost half of them had undergone a sex determination test followed by sex selective abortion. What emerges through the study is the widespread misuse of technology.

**Religion as a determinant**

Another point addressed in the study, was to what extent does religion influence the family size and composition? In the course of this study, it becomes apparent that while there is a son-preference even among the Muslims, there is no concomitant daughter aversion. The desire for sons among the Muslims and Christians (unlike the Hindus) does not have religious overtones.¹ Therefore, while the chances of survival of the girl child is higher among the Muslims and Christians, the girl child may not necessarily enjoy the same rights and entitlements as her brother does.

Religious dictates however is not always a deterrent to the practice of sex selective abortions. The Jains, for instance, a community that ascribes to the norms of non-violence also has an adverse sex ratio in Vadodara (as per the census records analysed in chapter V.B). It may be deduced that patriarchal cultural norms and the need for male heirs among the propertied class overlay any religious dictate against abortion. It was also possible to discern variations in trends in CSR on the lines of caste. The CSR was more favourable among the tribal and the Schedule Caste population, although there were indications that the practice of SSA was spreading.
Impact

An equally important component of the study was to examine to possible impact of the declining sex ratio on families and kinship networks. Since the declining CSR is a fairly recent phenomenon in Vadodara, it is perhaps a little early to establish a causal link between the rise in incidents of bride purchase and trafficking and increased violence against women. Although the dearth of brides has not reached an alarming proportion, newspaper reports and anecdotal accounts of respondents reveal this scarcity felt by all communities and caste groups. This problem is likely to become more acute in a few years from now: The impact of the overt masculinization of the child sex ratio experienced since 1991 will be felt in a few years when the boys reach the marriageable age. The even sharper decline evident in the 2001 census will mean the surplus of 200 men per 1000 population. This imbalance could well lead to a rise in violence against women in Vadodara as evident in the studies conducted by scholars earlier in northern India (as indicated in chapter VII.B).

Action for change

The initiatives taken by the state government and NGOs have to some extent reversed the trend. These initiatives however have failed to address the deep rooted malaise in society, namely the secondary status of women. The government has, for instance, sought to involve religious leaders and community based organizations in its campaign against CSR. The language of discourse which equates SSA with killing of the unborn child inadvertently impinges on women’s right to self-determination and right to abortion. The discourse also stresses traditional familial relationships and the girl child is represented as daughter, sister or mother. Failing to address the deep-rooted issue of son-preference and the conversely discrimination against the girl child, these efforts do not address other forms of discriminations that the girl child experiences.

The government has also initiated a scheme to prevent the practice of SSAs by offering cash benefits to parents with daughters. Insofar as the scheme focuses on meeting the marriage and wedding expenses of the girl child, it fails to establish the rights and entitlements of the girl child to health, education and independence. Additionally, the scheme (which focusses on the economically weaker sections of society) inadvertently encourages these communities to aspire to upper caste status markers of dowry and lavish weddings. Instead, the scheme would yield long term dividend if it focused more on the girl child’s right to education and the resources in the family. This would not only improve the enrolment ratio.
in schools, but indirectly help in delaying the age of marriage. The focus of the campaigns by both the state and civil society should be on the issue of gender equality and not merely on SD or SSA undertaken with a limited aim of reversing the demographic trend.

The marginal improvement in the CSR in 2011 census can be attributed to the partial success of the campaigns and the implementation of PCPNDT Act of 2004. However, the ratio still lags way behind the national average. The existing loopholes in the Act and the standards of investigation as well as compliance with the provisions of the Act need to be examined. What was noted through discussions with doctors (especially those who have been identified as practicing SSA) was that they feel victimized by the provisions of the Act. These doctors tended to argue that the choice for SSA is made by the woman herself and that they are merely operating the machine. They see the service they offer as ‘helping women, by enabling her to meet the demands of the family.’ The overwhelming feeling was that the PCPNDT Committee was arbitrary and high-handed in its action. While it had ordered the arrest and the sealing of some ultra-sonography machines in some clinics, it tended to turn a blind-eye to the wrong-doings of others. There is a nexus between the medical fraternity and the law enforcement agencies preventing the strict implementation of the Act.

The study reveals that the problem of the decline in sex ratio has reached an alarming level. The efforts to forestall the trend have not made an appreciable difference. The implications of this failure, is likely to surface only a decade or two later. A clear and co-ordinated action plan needs to be developed through state and civil society partnership. The plan should be based on well defined goals that clearly articulate gender rights/equality. Planners and development agencies can no longer remain in denial mode and the problem needs to be addressed on a war-footing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following are some of the suggestions drawn from the interviews conducted with civil society organisations, academicians, and legal professionals.

INITIATING SOCIAL CHANGE

➢ The problem of declining sex ratio is a symptom of the overall poor status of women. To counter the problem it is necessary to ameliorate the status of women in the family and
society. The various awareness generation programmes and the legal framework should make concerted efforts to improve the rights and entitlements of women and girls.

- Customs like dowry and lavish wedding celebrations enhance daughter aversion in society. There is a need to create social sanctions against such lavish display through awareness generation campaigns and programmes.
- The practice of dowry is justified as pre-mortem inheritance; therefore the problem can only be eradicated through the concomitant recognition of women’s right to inheritance in the family property.
- Currently the programmes conducted to raise awareness on the evils of CSR emphasis women’s familial roles as daughter, sister wife and mother. These metaphors fail to have a long term impact because it does not recognize women’s autonomous identities with clear entitlements and rights.
- The language of the discourse should be located in the broad framework of gender and should not be an appeal to morality and good conscience.
- The discourse needs to change the existing nomenclature from foeticide to sex selective abortion. This is because the latter communicates an anti-abortion message which could impinge on women’s right to abortion, while the term sex determination test clearly nails the problem. Any attack on women’s right to abortion could lead to unsafe abortions, resulting in higher mortality of women. Better maternal and reproductive health services provided to women should be the goal.
- Attempts to raise awareness through messages stating that deficit CSR would in the long run impact the availability of marriage partners, cannot influence people’s behaviour. The concern should focus on the fact that daughters are not a liability but an asset.
- The state initiate to ‘save the girl child’ or ‘beti bachao’ should carry positive messages such as ‘beti vadhao’ or ‘dikrio ne tak appo’ (celebrate daughters or ‘give them a chance’).
- There is a need to ensure that the media and popular culture address the problem by creating positive images of women and through stories of women achievers.
- Sexism in school text-books should be addressed. Care is required to ensure that gender stereotypes are reinforced in the text books and through class-room practices.
- There is a need for research to document the impact of decline in CSR and on the growing problems of bride scarcity and bride purchase/trafficking.
- Initiating and promoting medico-psychoanalytical studies of impact of SSA on women’s physical and mental health should be undertaken at the earliest.
ON LEGAL AND POLITICAL LEVEL

- Stringent implementation of the Dowry Prohibition Act as well as laws that ensure equal property rights to girls is necessary to improve CSR.
- Knee-jerk reaction of sealing sonography machines may not always be the solution. For it may prevent access to technology necessary for a woman’s health. It is more important to sensitize the medical professionals on the seriousness of the problem and make them aware of the PCNDT Act. This study reveals that many doctors were unaware of the Act.
- NGOs and social scientists expressed unhappiness about the quantum of the punishment. There is a need for stringent legal provisions to punish the wrong. There is also a need for foolproof methods of investigation.
- The committee constituted under the PCNDT Act does not have sufficient resources to carry out surprise checks on clinics and radiology centres. Better resources and training in investigation procedures is the need of the hour.
- The Medical Council of India should take up the issue seriously and cooperate in cancelling the license of the doctors.
- Under the provisions of the act the District Health Officer (who is the appropriate authority) to investigate complaints of violation of the Act has unlimited power. This has led to charges against the Committee of corruption and misuse of power. There is a need to develop mechanisms by which such corruption is curbed.
- The increased recognition in official documents and by law that the mother is the natural guardian of the child may to an extent contribute to changing perceptions about the girl child.
- Similarly, societal values and the legal framework must recognize the daughter is also a core member of the family with equal responsibility towards her natal family. This will ensure the property rights and entitlements of the girl child.

NOTES
1. The census report of 2001 and 2011 indicate a higher CSR amongst Muslims and Christians compared to Hindus, Jains and Sikhs. But since the composition of Christians in Vadodara’s population is very small, they are not covered in the field work.