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"We want change for our daughters": Personal discourse about the daughter deficit in Andhra Pradesh ☆

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SYNOPSIS

Discourse about the skewed child sex ratio in India has given insufficient attention to individual mother's stories about raising daughters. The narratives women tell one another can have long-term impact, as new models of the family are slowly produced by a discursive emphasis on daughter's strengths. This micro-regional pilot study based on 25 interviews with mothers in Andhra Pradesh was undertaken to learn what women felt were the most crucial actions to erode son preference. Families were focused on daughters as bearers of family honor and fearful that daughters will be endangered in public spaces. According to the mothers, the two most important steps to address the daughter deficit are aiding women's economic independence and modifying men's set ideas about women's capabilities and value.
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Introduction

Skewed child sex ratios are present in many countries such as South Korea, China, Pakistan and Armenia, but India's conditions have drawn the most persistent attention because of a steadily growing imbalance. Each recent census shows that elimination of female fetuses remains a prevalent practice and, despite laws and greater attention by the government, the practice is increasing. Generally speaking, dominant discourse about this issue presents statistical facts, and describes efforts to minimize dowry exchange and governmental schemes to elevate women's status. These facts and descriptions are necessary and valuable; however, a quantitative and data-driven picture of missing births and of gender bias gives only a partial perspective. As Purewal (2010) asks, "where is the space for the voices of resistance" in this picture? (p. 21) Similarly, this researcher wondered what women are saying at the ground level about gender roles in the context of raising children. What words and patterns would come to the fore in a woman-centered conversation about the daughter deficit?

Only recently does the public have access to individuals' stories and to experiential dialog about raising daughters in comparison with sons. Ashok Prasad's BBC documentary *India's Missing Girls* (2007) helped to break ground, and such works as Sharada Shrinivasan's *Daughter Deficit: Sex Selection in Tamil Nadu* (2012) and Tulsi Patel's "The Mindset behind Eliminating the Female Fetus" (2007) allow us to hear more directly from parents and reveal how they justify a preference for a particular family composition. Of course self-representation through story is known to be somewhat unreliable. Despite this element of subjectivity, this study considers women's voices as vital. The role of community sharing and testimonial speech at the least exposes attitudes, learned tendencies to evaluate ideas in a particular way. Exposing these implicitly and explicitly expressed attitudes may in turn shape both theory and practice in relation to family formation, son preference, and the practice of sex-selective abortion. As Purewal's *Son Preference: Sex Selection Gender and Culture in South Asia* (2010) declares, women's voices are central to the issue and yet women tend to "be absent from public and academic reflections apart from … the lens of being either a victim or the self-inflicting aggressor" (p. 108). In fact, framing one's life in a particular way through story, and thus the narratives women tell one another, is a practice that slowly may help produce a greater variety of models for the family.

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For instance, Purewal's summary of attitudes expressed in 2008 at a public school and women's college in Punjab illustrates how young women modify the mold they are expected to follow. While many women, like their parents, expected a higher educational status would aid them in searching for a higher-earning marriage partner, they, in contrast to parents, intended to use their degree to help search for a man who additionally accepted a woman's desire to hold a job throughout her lifetime.

Gaining a more accurate picture of the complex situational constraints and emotions of women that lurk behind the number of missing girls requires analysis of women's dialog about these concerns. As a preliminary exploration, I carried out a qualitative study based on interviews with 25 women designed to study mothers' thoughts about rearing daughters, particularly how they differentiate between raising sons versus raising daughters. My hypothesis was that women would be more likely to praise the skills and talents of their sons, and they would be inclined to speak of raising a daughter as burdensome, particularly in relation to dowry. The resulting conversations undercut this supposition. While most of my respondents shared traditional ideas about women's roles, they were apt to bring up ideas not commonly mentioned with son preference such as fear of daughters receiving street harassment and a belief in men's inflexibility. Furthermore, taken together, the stories of my female co-collaborators constitute an indigenous grammar about girls' constraints and talents, and thus provide an important set of clues when seeking to understand factors that could improve a family's desire to raise their daughters and sons in a similar manner. Their discourse provides insights about empowerment, economic limitations, and ongoing negotiation strategies that can sharpen our understanding of not only why daughter neglect endures but also what factors would hasten its decline.

Introduction to the issue and to dominant discourse

Despite Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's speeches about the issue's importance, despite persistent efforts by NGOs, and despite adding stronger provisions to the 1996 PNDT (Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques) Act in 2002, son preference in India continues unabated, strengthened by the relatively easy access of pregnant women to portable ultrasound machines or reproductive health clinics. In 2011, the sex ratio is at 914:1000 with the ratio worsening in 27 states since 2001. A broad range of essays document the extent and long history of the problem as well as the neglect and abuse of living daughters (see, for instance, Ahmad, 2010; Hvistendahl 2011; Miller, 1981; Oldenburg, 2002; Pande & Malhotra, 2006; Shrinivasan, 2012). In reality, as Diamond-Smith, Luke, and McGarvey (2008) argue, the gravity of the problem is not captured by the phrase "son preference"; instead daughter aversion or devaluation is more accurate, and this devaluation goes beyond female feticide and infanticide and extends to living children: some parents provide unequal healthcare, nutrition, education, and household work in favor of sons over daughters.[1]

An Indian family's elimination of one or more children on the basis of sex is a decision arising from women's victimization by hetero-patriarchal cultures. A cluster of factors leads to girls being perceived as a burden or liability. A woman, particularly when living in a joint family, receives power from her in-laws and husband after bearing one or more sons (DasGupta, 2009; Dyson & Moore, 1983; Miller, 1981). Thus a firstborn daughter is often welcomed but a second or third may not be celebrated (Agarwal, 2008; DasGupta, 2009; Pande & Malhotra, 2006).[2]

The traditional familial belief that women belong to their future marital partners explains the commonplace saying that lavishing care on a daughter is like "watering a plant in another's courtyard." If a newborn baby is perceived to mainly benefit her future husband's family, investing deeply in that child's education and career-related skills is seen as somewhat illogical. However, as has been detailed in much of the literature, the desire to avoid having multiple daughters is most profoundly influenced by the routine expectation that the bride's family will give a dowry (Diamond-Smith et al., 2008; Rajan, 2003; Shrinivasan, 2012), usually 2–3× their yearly income (Mangai, 2000).

The literature is ambiguous on the part played by family wealth and education level in the decision to prefer or select for a son. While some scholars have suggested that greater education reduces both son preference and fertility (Drèze & Murthi, 2001), other studies maintain that while more educated women may desire fewer children, they have easier and more affordable access to new reproductive technologies and thus may select for sons more systematically (Chaudhuri, 2012). In a study of data collected from 50,000 rural women in the early 90s, Pande and Malhotra (2006) summarized the situation by stating, "Wealth and economic development do not reduce son preference," and that only "women in the wealthiest quintile of households show weaker son preference than the poorest" (4).[3] On a more hopeful note, they affirm that son preference, like other issues such as domestic violence, appears to be more widely resisted after women's repeated "exposure to various and wide-ranging media" that suggests other life scenarios for women (Pande and Malhotra 4).

Purpose of study

What is missing from dominant discourse is a thorough description of attitudes about bringing up daughters (and the complete set of choices parents make as they raise them) by women from differing religious, family/caste and class backgrounds. This micro regional study reports on information gathered by semi-structured interviews with 25 mothers in Andhra Pradesh. While Andhra Pradesh had 961 women per 1000 men in 2001, the ratio now stands at 943:1000 (2011). Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh contain the most dire child sex ratio imbalances[4]; Andhra Pradesh was selected because of the writer's long association with this state, specifically efforts to combat this issue in a town I will call Mandalam. This study explored how women speak about daughters in relation to sons and asked mothers what would most improve beliefs about daughters' value.

Methodology

I gathered observations from four stays in the city of Hyderabad and the 350,000+ town of Mandalam, including a month of volunteering at an orphanage and women's training center in January 2008, and three weeks of