

Boys get to be born in better hospitals

Narendar Pani



All adorable And equally deserving of the best care MA Sriram

Technology has generally reinforced patriarchal forces. These tendencies are best checked by social rather than legal reform

As we marvel about what technology can do to ease the travails of life in our metropolises, it is easy to gloss over the misuse of technology, particularly in relation to women.

It is widely recognised that advances in medical technology have led to sex determination of foetuses and sometimes female foeticide. As is now the normal Indian response, we have fallen back on laws to counter this evil. And it is becoming painfully clear that the laws don't work well enough.

Two metropolises that pride themselves in being leaders in the information technology revolution have shocking sex ratios at birth. The National Family Health Survey records that in 2015-16, for every 1,000 boys born in Hyderabad, over the preceding five years there were only 827 girls. And the picture for the urban areas of Bengaluru district was even more shocking: just 729 girls for every 1000 boys.

The immediate picture that comes to mind, of a mass murder of female foetuses in India's IT capital, may be exaggerated. Rather than female foeticide the data may suggest a somewhat less brutal form of patriarchy. As these metros have the best medical facilities available, the higher number of boys may be the result of a wider bias. It would suggest that rural families that can afford it, first check the sex of the foetus. If it is female the birth is allowed to take place in rural or smaller urban centres, but if it is male the families are willing to bear the extra cost of having the child born in a nursing home or hospital in the metropolis.

As a result, the urban sex ratios at birth lean heavily in favour of the boy child, while the rural sex ratios at birth lean heavily in favour of the girl child. The rural areas of Bengaluru Rural district have a sex ratio at birth of 1305 girls for every 1000 boys.

This may seem a less brutal phenomenon than large-scale female foeticide in our modern metropolises. But it still does not augur too well for the kind of cities we are developing, for at least two reasons. To begin with, the preference for urban hospitals for the male child does not imply that the sex ratios in the urban centres are otherwise favourable. In order to remove the influence of the place of hospitalisation we could look at the child sex ratios, that is the sex ratios for those below the age of 6. The ratios that emerge for Bengaluru from the 2011 census are not particularly encouraging. Not only does the child sex ratio for Bengaluru go against the girl child, it is more so than in some of the most backward districts of Karnataka.

Biased before birth

The second factor is even more significant when seen in the context of the way technology is helping the institutionalisation of patriarchy. The girl child is discriminated against even before she is born. The very fact that she is given what the family believes to be inferior medical attention at the stage of birth itself, would adversely affect her ability to survive. And if she does get past that stage she is brought up in an environment where the diversion of resources towards the male child is accepted. It is easy to miss this reality as much of the attention in law is focused on the rights of the woman, rather than those of a girl child. A woman may be given an equal right to property but that does not mean the girl child has an equal right to resources when growing up.

What is even more striking about the story of urban sex ratios at birth is that it proves the limitations of using the law to control technology. There are clear laws against informing parents of the sex of a foetus. But as the data for some major urban centres shows us, they do not work very well. The latest technologies can be incorporated into all social practices, including the harassment of women. And sex determination tests are only one part of the larger use of technological change against women. The use of mobile phones and other elements of modern communication technologies to stalk women are now well documented.

The important task of making the use of technology in our cities more gender sensitive, and hence our cities safe for women, must then move beyond merely relying on the law. While policing and legal action will remain critical, they are not a bulwark against social attitudes that promote the misuse of technology. We cannot ignore the social dimensions of technology. The way towards gender sensitive cities lies more in the realm of social reform than just legal reform.

The writer is a professor at the School of Social Science, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru

(This article was published in the Business Line print edition dated August 24, 2016)

Printable version | Aug 26, 2016 4:45:25 PM | <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/boys-get-to-be-born-in-better-hospitals/article9023196.ece> © The Hindu Business Line

□