

## Are we losing the war on missing girls?

Systematic gender-based neglect and violence has been a chronic social problem encompassing the entire lifespan for women in India. Ram and colleagues (October issue)<sup>1</sup> reiterate this point in their Article indicating higher mortality in girls than in boys younger than 5 years in almost all districts of India, even in high-literacy states. Evidently, decades of policy changes, improved literacy, economic development, and social opportunities for women have not had a major effect.<sup>2</sup>

Crime, sexual assaults, and the general climate of violence against women continue to rise in areas where there are skewed sex ratios. Greater societal controls are imposed, especially on women (eg, early marriage and pregnancy, poor maternal nutrition, low literacy, and denial of opportunities for economic mobility).<sup>3</sup> Thus, son preference, and ensuing missing girls,<sup>4</sup> presents an escalating burden in other areas of gender-imbalanced health and safety. Furthermore, son preference also prevails as a cultural problem in some land-owning groups, legitimised by centuries of patriarchal resource control.<sup>3</sup> The psychological notion of masculinity and valuation of female chastity might also be a reason for why women are married early and have lower access to education and nutritional resources.<sup>5</sup>

Even though disentanglement of ecological, cultural, and psychological factors is crucial to reduce day-to-day perpetration of gender-based neglect within families, there is no theoretical, evidence-based policy, and targeted implementation framework to do so. Cultural psychological research findings in the communities with male-biased sex ratios suggest that even women prefer sons who have more boys than they do sons who have more girls.<sup>5</sup> Women who internalise patriarchal

values might continue to practise preferential treatment of sons despite their educational and economic empowerment. At an individual level, internalisation of patriarchal gender beliefs might reduce incentives for academic achievement among girls in these communities.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, literacy and economic development in themselves, and if only directed at girls or women, are insufficient to address the problem of missing girls. There is a great need for evidence-based multimodal approaches to combat son preference and gender-based neglect. Community education programmes that raise awareness about the effect of gender disparities across the lifespan and improve the safety and wellbeing of communities should be developed. Additionally, curricula, such as around dialogue between boys and girls about gender, directed at masculinity attitudes, need to be introduced at an early stage for both boys and girls. Mobile technology could be of substantial use in this process.

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