



PAINTING BY NUMBERS: LOCATING MISSING GIRLS IN THE SEX RATIO

By discoversociety March 04, 2014 Articles, Issue 6

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The Independent recently reported that it had commissioned the analysis of a series of tables showing the gender of second-born children to parents by country of birth. The aim was to find out whether the practice of sex selective abortion has come to Britain through the reproductive habits of ethnic communities in Britain. The findings, generated out of data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), were that, in two-child families in some first-generation migrant families, there was a higher chance of girls being aborted when the first child was a daughter. Unsurprisingly, however, the findings were mixed and at best elusive and inconclusive, despite the headline “Shock figures call into question official assurances that gender ratio for British births is ‘normal’.”

The presentation of the findings highlights the dangers of taking such studies at face value and of making sweeping judgments about the reproductive patterns and practices of identified communities without considering what the data does and does not tell us. The “don’t stop until you get a boy” syndrome, which the Imperial College statisticians identified for the Independent, points to the anomalies found in two-child families in India, China and other parts East Asia, but does not explain patterns in other South Asian communities. This shows the inconclusive nature of what the data has revealed, whose social realities the data are reflecting, and the weaknesses of analysing the data in isolation.

Lost in the Data

Following the investigation of two GPs found to have arranged terminations where the motivation was alleged to be sex selection, Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt made a statement in 2013 calling for clearer guidelines on abortion to be given to doctors in the UK where abortion is legal, though termination on the basis of gender alone is less clear in the Abortion Act 1967. According to the latter, the gender of the fetus could be interpreted as a “contraindication of pregnancy” and the continuation of the pregnancy could be interpreted to present more danger to a woman’s physical and mental well-being than the abortion.

With such ambiguity, it is not surprising that neither of the doctors was charged by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). The Independent’s commissioned study places Britain within this broader context of the ethics of sex selection and of sex ratios by turning the spotlight onto its ethnic communities as evidence of sex selection being practiced now, not only in those places where sons are preferred such as India, but also here ‘at home’ in Britain’s migrant communities.

The sex ratio is one indicator of gender bias, and it is consistently used as the primary source of knowledge about culture and gender particularly about South Asia and China, where the sex ratios are at their most severe (Table 1). The hard statistical evidence of the sex ratio has contributed to the global public discourse on how gender discrimination operates in the bio-politics of sex selection.

Table 1. Sex Ratio* in Selected Countries

Country	2001	2011
World	986	944
China	944	926
India	933	940
Pakistan	938	943
Bangladesh	958	978
Indonesia	1004	988
U.S.A.	1029	1025
Brazil	1025	1042
Japan	1041	1055
Russia	1140	1167

Sources:

2001: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Population Prospects, mid year estimates 1998.

2011: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision, New York, 2009.

* Ratio of women to every 1000 males

The revelations of the Independent’s study on sex ratios in South Asian communities in Britain need to be understood within the current political context around immigration, migration, and a narrowing of borders in which migrants and their cultures are under the scrutiny of the media and border agencies. The sex ratio, it seems, has now entered the debate on Britain’s ‘migration crisis’.

This process had begun in 2007 when Sylvie Dubuc and David Coleman (1), drawing on ONS data, set out to find out whether similar trends to those of increasing sex ratios in China and India could be found in Britain. Their findings pointed to a four-point increase in the sex ratio for mothers born in India, with no evidence of this trend amongst UK-born South Asian mothers. The speculative nature of the findings and the lack of analytical insight into the dynamics of community, migration and gender should not be seen as surprising given the connections between this research and the organisation Migration Watch UK.

Professor David Coleman, who is co-founder of Migration Watch UK though officially acts as an honorary consultant for them, has been criticised for his involvement in the anti-immigration pressure group which, in projecting itself as an independent think tank, states that its purpose “is to monitor developments, conduct research, and provide the public with full and accurate facts placed in their proper context.” Whether it be controls on the rights of Romanian and Bulgarian migrants to claim benefits, vigilant policing of net migration statistics, or of demographic characteristics of ethnic communities, Migration Watch UK provides a databank resource for those interested in flagging up the ‘crises’ of migration. If organisations like Migration Watch UK can have such influence with the backing of academic and political interests, it seems likely that any constructive public debates on the nature of Britain’s diverse cultural milieu will be lost in the data.

Disciplining the Sex Ratio

The moral panic surrounding increasing sex ratios is, of course, not limited to this narrow and negative view of culture and migration in Britain. In other socio-cultural contexts, reproductive technologies and skewed sex ratios are also at the forefront of public debate shaped, however, by the localised challenges of formulating policy, engaging civil society, penetrating the family and gender contexts of reproductive choice, and shifting popular conceptions and preference for sons as they relate to pregnancy and childbirth.

Female feticide, or the termination of female-identified foetuses, has been identified as the main cause for increasing sex ratios against females in India where it has consistently been documented with each census cycle. In India too, the sex ratio data provides the platform from which policy and legal frameworks are shaped in addressing the sex ratio crisis.

Despite anti-female feticide legislation passed in 1994 and 2003 which made sex selective abortion and pre-selective technologies illegal in India, the continually increasing ratios and available underground scanning services have shown the ineffectiveness of laws and lack of implementation, where hardly any individuals have been prosecuted to date and son preference remains at the forefront of reproductive decision-making.

The disciplinary domain of female feticide in India is one where punishment is severe, but is reserved for the purposes of erecting spectacles of state power rather than actually executing it. As a result, the disciplinary power of the Indian state in its various incarnations aims to both deter behaviours and to offer incentives for the public to behave morally and “normally” in not aborting female fetuses. These parameters of normativity and morality, while driven by global discourses on saving the “girl child” and informed by the sex ratio, emphasise a disciplinary rather than transformative or empowering approach.

Girls and women are not only missing from the sex ratio data results, but also are missing from having agency in the policies and campaigns that attempt to discipline female feticide, apart from as victims or perpetrators of sex selection. Women’s and feminist organisations in India such as All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) have highlighted this and have been at the forefront of campaigning against female feticide and gender violence, despite remaining on the fringes of state-generated discourse. As a lobbying voice, organisations such as AIDWA have been influential in inserting critical engagement with issues of social justice, the devaluation of women in the political economy of the household, and the need to pay more attention to property rights.

The narrow focus on the sex ratio data lends itself to media headlines, community stereotyping, spectacles, and disciplinary power, whether it be India or communities from the Indian subcontinent settled in Britain. In order to conceptually and not just statistically locate the missing girls in the data, there is need to look beneath and beyond the data and to consider the broader sociological contexts of power within which reproductive choices are made and acted upon.

References:

- (1) Dubuc S. and D. Coleman (2007) ‘An Increase in the Sex Ratio of Births to India-born Mothers in England and Wales: Evidence for Sex-Selective Abortion’, Population and Development Review 33(2), June: 383–400.
- (2) Purewal, N. (2014) ‘Disciplining the Sex Ratio: Exploring the Governmentality of Female Feticide in India,’ Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power.

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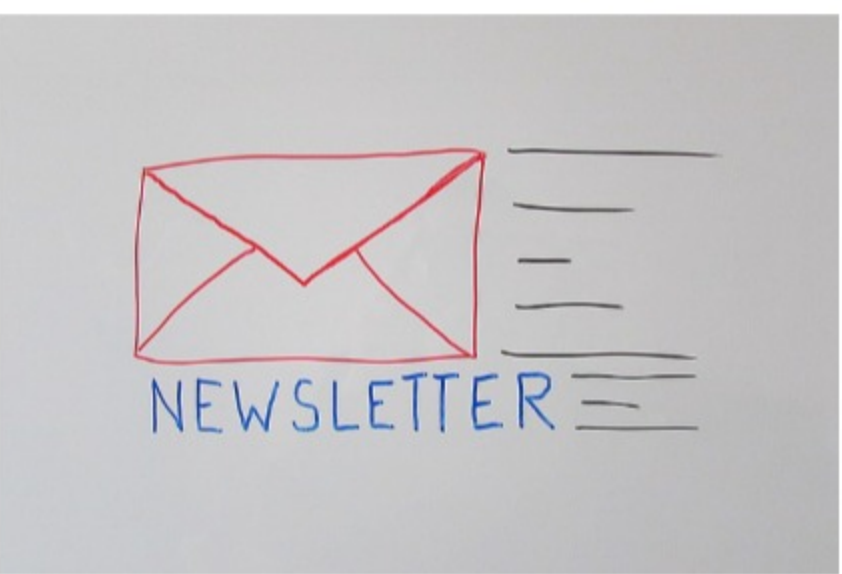
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