

Cora Rubendall
Waukon High School
Waukon, IA
India, Factor 16

Why Sexism is Slowing India's Development

In rural India, agriculture and allied industrial sectors employ as much as 85.5% percent of the total female labor. In overall farm production, women's average contribution is estimated at 55% to 66% of the total labor. According to a 1991 World Bank report, women accounted for 94% of total employment in dairy production in India. Women constitute 51% of the total employed in forest-based small-scale enterprises, but yet make far less than a man.

An Indian individual who remains single has an incredibly hard lot, both socially and financially. Traditionally, single persons were supposed to be the responsibility of the extended family, but in poor families this is almost impossible because of the scarceness of funds in the first place. Being single is more acceptable for men than it is for women, for when a woman is not married, it is assumed that she has an unsolvable problem; and therefore she is single. Singles are not allowed to participate in religious activities and marriage celebrations because it is considered unlucky, and parents who cannot find a suitable match for their daughters are looked down on.

Divorce was not even a remote possibility or even thought of until recent times. In India, there is a cultural, religious, and social stigma associated with divorce. Community disapproval is stronger for divorced women than it is for divorced men, and because of that a woman without a husband (with the exception of a widowed mother) cannot be accommodated over the long term within the joint family structure without considerable compromise and tension.

After a divorce, Indian women also experience a multitude of problems in the social arena. Because there are very few divorced, separated, or single-parent families, minimal or little social support is available to them. Divorced Indian women encounter greater social barriers to dating and remarriage, and because of this women often experience serious financial problems. As a result, many of them are unable to provide food, clothing, and shelter for themselves and their children.

Let us start at the beginning, with conception. In most Indian villages, a female has limited access to clean drinking water, but can get a ultrasound. How? Every few weeks a van filled with ultrasound equipment pulls into the village. One ultra sound costs about 8 dollars which equates to about a weeks worth of wages. Sounds like a good deal right? But like everything this is either good or bad depending on how you use it. While this could be used to check for deadly genetic defects or other pre-birth problems, many families use it to make gender selective abortions, usually in favor of boys. If that doesn't work, the family will sometimes have the baby smothered by the midwife especially if said baby has a deformity or genetic defect. This treatment is usually reserved for females. The average payment for the act of smothering is between \$2.00 and \$3.00. Of course, in the situation that you don't have the cash to spring for that method, you could always go the tried and true way doing it yourself. The statistics on that particular atrocity are not incredibly high. However, there are still enough people who partake in that act to make somebody unable to believe that parents could do that to their own newly born offspring.

It is illegal to have a sex selective abortion, but this doesn't seem to prevent the activity from happening. Actually it is illegal to simply own a van full of unlicensed ultrasound equipment, or disclose the gender, let alone perform abortion on those grounds. The problem is that when you make something illegal the

price of the service goes up, attracting more sellers of said services. Currently there are 422 different criminal cases in the works of the Indian legal systems for the abortion of female fetuses. That doesn't account for the over 30,000 registered ultrasound clinics that operate legally, but could give away the gender for a small bribe, in which case the expecting mother just has to walk to a different clinic to have the abortion done. Even the Indian Ministry of Health admits that the legislation is having no effect on the recurring problem of illegal abortion, saying that the problem was the culture is the root of the problems not the governments lack of strictness.

Problems resulting from the male preference and the disproportional gap are already being seen. Girls that are being bought, bribed, or kidnapped from other impoverished countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal, or even from the absolute poorest or tribal areas in India are sold into marriage for somewhere in the range of 200 American dollars in a country in which a bull costs 1,000 American dollars. With 50 million girls already missing today, the result of this dangerous practice is actually condemning the future of the country; despite the fact that India is the world's second most populous country. Without enough women in the country, India will face a population decrease until things change.

While there is an undoubtedly large male to female ratio some are reluctant to blame the parents, at least directly. An American economist named Emily Oster started looking into countries with abnormally high ratios of male to female births, and found that many of these countries had large amounts of people that had hepatitis B, which is shown to kill female fetuses more often than male. Many people eagerly rushed to blame hepatitis B for the female deficit in India, so instead of the parents, they could blame an ineffective health system. However, upon closer inspection that theory crumbles, for even the most optimistic estimates account for less than 20% of the missing girls, leaving more than 50 million still unaccounted for.

The reason for this feticide varies from knowing that their female children would not make enough to support them when they become old and infirm, to wanting the son who would light the traditional funeral pyre, which according to the Hindu religion has to be performed by a male child or the parent will not reach enlightenment. The most prevalent reasons are ones concerning the dowry to pay for the groom to marry their daughter. The story of dowry is similar to the story of the sex-selective abortion.

The dowry is, just like feticide, completely outside of the law, but is similarly ignored. Dowry has risen in cost in the well-developed cities making the dowry price rise in the impoverished ghettos and rural areas of the country as well especially if you also factor in the fact that most families like to have their daughters marry up in society. This is not so much for the daughters sake as for the family to increase their own social standing, for the line of social standing is passed down through the family line. So while a female is pushed to marry someone above or equal to her social standing, the males are in the opposite way, encouraged to marry at or below their level, but are frowned upon if they marry above their class. In their eyes that pulls the bride down, bringing shame to her family and the man she is marrying as well. Marrying up has cost too, only this one is literal! The higher up in society you go the families require a larger dowry (so they can pay to have their daughters marry up without drowning in debt), often leading families to take on crushing, oppressive debt to get their daughters married off to someone of a higher social standing.

Expensive dowries are usually enough to keep a family from wishing for girls, or even keeping them around after birth. Unfortunately, there is a percentage of female children who die every day from parents withholding food, shelter, or medical attention, often in favor of a male brother. It is shown that there are roughly 795 women for every 1000 men. And that is just the current adult population. The gender selective abortion has only been around and used widely for the last 20 years. In the future, the Indian populace will face the problem that their precious sons cannot find wives to have their own sons because of their parent's decisions.

The trouble for females doesn't end with a marriage to their class-appropriate husbands. There is, as you would expect, an unfortunately high rate of spousal abuse. Like the previously mentioned factors, the Indian government has laws in place that should prevent the chain of abuse from beginning. Unfortunately, just like the other factors, the law is rarely observed, and poorly enforced or reported.

Part of the problems are rooted in the rich past traditions of the region. The practice of wife beating has been in India for hundreds of years. When that happens the behavioral problems are passed down from parents to children, the dominating, angry behavior from father to son, and the submissive, passive behaviors from mother to daughter. This pattern is hard enough to break by itself, let alone the fact that the learned behavior continues to keep the chain unbroken. The lack of education that females receive is the cause of this behavior.

The gap in education is staggering, not only in the urban areas versus rural areas but also in the gap between males and females. The difference between the total percentage of educated to non-educated people is that education is almost 23% higher in the cities than in rural areas. Another problem in the education system is that only three out of five girls make it to fifth grade whereas three out of four boys make it to fifth grade. That is a difference of almost 15%. Even the girls who did go past this point of education often were still saddled with a large amount of work at home, leading to amazingly large dropout rates for females.

More than 40% of women in India reported being beaten by their husbands, and many of the women surveyed thought that it was justified violence. According to India's most complete survey, which interviewed many women in 28 states of India and the national capital during 2005-2006, 41% of women justified wife beating if it was because they showed disrespect towards their married families while 35% women were fine with being assaulted by their husbands if they didn't do household chores or take care of their kids. Unsurprisingly, 51% of the 75,000 men interviewed didn't find anything wrong with assaulting their wives.

Obviously the female gender has serious hurdles to conquer in India and the only way to overcome the obstacles and procedures of the country are to make changes to the mindsets of the people that live there, because the current laws are not working to any satisfactory level. That means changing hundreds of years of culture and the minds of millions of both male and female citizens. The question is how?

There are many programs in the country such as "Apni Beti Apna Dhan Scheme-2005"(My Daughter My Pride) which is designed to help a girl get a higher education, but most these programs are only available to those living below the poverty line. There is also a large number of organizations in the micro-credit industry that offer small business loans with special rates to women. These programs often have a low success rate and are extraordinarily expensive to run.

I believe that the answer is in educating the people of India, for if the people of India resist the efforts of others trying to create a gender equalizing effect no one will get anywhere. If you have the support of the people things will run smoother and be more effective. Maybe, if you have full cooperation of every one

of the citizens of India there would be complete gender equality. Of course, this scenario is extraordinarily unlikely. The United States of America, with a shorter time period of history, religion, or culture to influence current customs, has not yet reached this pivotal bench mark of gender equality, with the American woman making 7% less than the American man. This is a vast improvement compared to the Indian women, but still unfair.

One of the ways to educate the populace would be to hold public awareness meetings in the villages. These meetings would be open to all and free to the public, and move from village to village every week to educate the public as much as possible. This method has been tried and, unfortunately, there were some problems that needed to be worked out such as getting anyone to show up. When anyone did show up, they were male and not the target audience of females.

A different way to achieve this goal is to have a class at local schools, much like sexual education. Have children go to classes that stress equal treatment and tolerance for all. It could also teach other things like safe sexual practices, contraceptive methods, and even first aid, but this plan also has holes in it just like the afore mentioned plan. The first is the retention of information shared in these classes. Think back to your “fun” experiences in sex education class. Do you remember anything pertinent from there? Of course not! You were too busy being embarrassed or enjoying the embarrassment of others. The culture difference may help but there are no solid numbers on that subject so you can’t be sure. There is also the fact that those who need it the most don’t usually go past primary school, making it an even less likely solution.

What we need is something that people like to do; something habit-forming that has a way of conveying information to the masses, and is yet entertaining.

Yes, I’m talking about television. Think about how the television has changed the American society and government. If we could create the same type of phenomenon in India we could, theoretically, change the country. In many villages where poverty is prevalent, televisions have been wired to meeting places. These villages look good with more girls going to school and have less children being born period, meaning the women have more say in such things. It appears that Indian women react better to the ‘do as I do’ not the ‘do as I say’ motto. And that is just the regular programming. Imagine the possibilities of success with programs that are intended for that purpose. Not educational television, that will just make people resist more, but regular programs with a good message. It could change the idea of what is acceptable in rural India.

So in conclusion, despite having the second-highest economic growth rate in the world, India has more impoverished people than 26 of Africa’s poorest countries put together. More than 650 million of India’s residents are engaged in and are living off agriculture as farmers or farm labor. But their combined efforts contribute less than 18% of India’s GDP. Look at the IT sector. It employs two tenths of a per cent of the population and accounts for 5% of India GDP. Sixty percent of India’s workforce is self-employed, and 90% is employed by the unorganized sector. True, they manage to get work only for a few months in the year, but it is better to be “underemployed” than to be a subsistence farmer. Even that is saying nothing of the homeless in the cities, who have no access to clean water, clean air, sanitation or medical care. They are shadows, living in the cracks that run between buildings and roads. They sleep on the streets, eat on the streets, raise their children, live and die on the streets.

They represent the more than 60 million people who have taken refuge, from rural destitution: from floods and drought (many of them man-made); from mines, steel factories and aluminum smelters; from highways and expressways; lakes made by the 3,300 big dams built since the Indian Independence and now by Special Economic Zones. They’re part of the 830 million people of India who live on less than twenty rupees a day(less than fifty cents in the U.S.), the ones who starve while millions of tons of food-

grain is either eaten by rats in government warehouses or burnt in bulk (because it is cheaper to burn food than to distribute it to poor people). They are the parents of the tens of millions of malnourished children in India, of the two million who die every year before they reach the age of five and the coming statistics say that they have the highest infant and maternal mortality rate in the world.

Right now India is going through a slow and painful industrialization. The per capita food-grain availability has actually decreased over the last 20 years, which happens to be the period of the most rapid economic and population growth. We are seeing the birth of a new India in which the one hundred richest people, millionaires and billionaires, hold assets worth a full 25% of the GDP. That is not our concern though, right now our concern is keeping everyone from starving.

Bibliography:

- Agnivesh, Swami, Rama Mani, and Angelika Köster-Lossack. "Missing: 50 Million Indian Girls." AVERTing Hiv and Aids. New York Times, 25 Nov. 2005. Web. 17 Aug. 2011. <<http://www.avert.org/india-hiv-aids-statistics.htm>>.
- Dubner, Stephen J., and Steven D. Levitt. "The Search for 100 Million Missing Women; An Economics Detective Story." UChicago. University of Chicago, 24 May 2005. Web. 17 Aug. 2011. <<http://pricetheory.uchicago.edu/levitt/Papers/100MillionWomen.pdf>>
- Katz, Neil S., and Marisa Sherry. "Rough Cut India: The Missing Girls, A Society out of Balance." Frontline. PBS. 26 Apr. 2007. Television. Transcript
- Levitt, Steven D., and Stephen J. Dubner. Super Freakonomics. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009. Print.
- Sinha, Kounteya. "Many Women Justify Wife Beating." The Times of India. 12 Oct. 2007. Web. 17 Aug. 2011. <http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2007-10-12/india/27963609_1_husbands-lakh-women-domestic-violence>.
- Wonacott, Peter. "India's Skewed Sex Ratio Puts GE Sales in Spotlight." Wall Street Journal [New York] 19 Apr. 2007. Print.