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India: Gender Equality and Overpopulation

Introduction:

Overpopulation does not have borders. Though statistics can indicate where people reside, the local impact of high density countries can become an epicenter for global dilemmas. This report specifically recognizes how gender inequity has contributed to overpopulation in India and explores possible solutions using select United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals as a framework. India is projected to surpass China as the world's most populated country in 2027 (United Nations DESA, 2019). Though India has made progress minimizing their growth rate to 2.2% in 2017, there is still much work that needs to be done. The UN found that over 10 million Indian women undergo unplanned pregnancies annually in a country that largely favours sons and male heirs. Failure to stabilize India's population growth and shift from a patriarchal society not only has implications for women's rights but increases poverty and environmental degradation.

Country and Family:

The Republic of India is a federal democratic republic country in Southern Asia with a parliamentary system of government. Its federal legislative branch consists of the President, the Rajya Sabha as the upper house, and the Lok Sabha as the lower house (Ahmad, 2020). India currently has 1.391 billion people (Worldometer, 2021); with 65% of those living in rural areas, (World Bank, n.d). The household size of a typical Indian family is 4.4 people per household (ArcGis, 2021) compared to the average family size in the USA of 3.15 people as of 2020 (Statista, 2021), and 2.5 people in Canada (OECD, 2011).

The status of women in India is closely connected to fertility rates and family relations. In India the sex ratio is significantly imbalanced with over 70 million more males than females (Denyer & Gowen, 2018). For every 107 males born in India, there are 100 females, compared to the World Health Organization who reports the normal sex ratio at birth is 105 males for every 100 females in the world (McKirdy, 2018). This discrepancy is due to cultural and governing norms such as the custom of a dowry, the caste system, and ongoing parental care.

The marital practice of the dowry is the transfer of wealth from a bride's family to the husband's family for the welfare of their daughter as she is adopted into her in-law's household. These marriages are often arranged by the parents of both sides of the courtship; sometimes before the couple is of legal age (Denyer & Gowen, 2018). In addition, India still exercises a caste system that divides its society into a hierarchy based on socioeconomic status. Although the government banned the practice in India in 1950, its residual impact has disproportionately effected those living in poverty (these people are known as Dalits). Dalits are still marginalized and segregated from those in upper castes; often residing in areas of high crime and illiteracy (Borgen Project, 2020).

It is tradition that a son and his wife should care for his elderly family members both financially and in daily care. In India, there is no national pension or healthcare systems which means the elderly must instead rely on family members. However when a bride is married off, they often move far away from their home and it is expected that their primary attention be reserved for their in-laws. This leaves parents without sons with limited subsidy, medical support, and help with day to day assistance (Asian Scientist Newsroom, 2016). Though professional help could be an option, it is a luxury that not only comes at a high cost but is reflected as a dishonor to the family.

Challenge & Impact:

The male dominated generation has a significant impact on population explosion in India and continues to perpetuate gender bias. The partiality for boys, or *son meta-preference*, is caused by the cultural norm of male guardianship and the perceived economic burden of females for families (Breakthrough Voice, 2019). A boy is viewed as an investment whereas women are considered a financial liability largely due to the practiced dowry custom and caste system (Krishnan, 2018). This has led to the “birth of millions of unwanted girls” who are often reported as missing or resented by family. Furthermore, an Economic Survey report from India revealed that 55% of couples who have daughters keep trying to conceive until they have a boy (McKirdy, 2018).

This resolve has led to the increase of female infanticide, foetal sex determination and sex-selective abortion (gendercide). Although India prohibited prenatal sex determination in 1994, many women still undergo these sometimes dangerous procedures to ensure the birth of a male. Similarly, males and females living in poverty are more likely to put their (reproductive) health at risk by volunteering for sterilization (Green, 2018). This was especially popular in the 1970’s after India established a coercive policy dubbed “The Emergency” that forced poor men to be sterilized for financial compensation (Chandrashekhar, 2019). Similarly in 2012, the Human Rights Watch reported that district health workers in India targeted and pressured poorer women to undergo operations without being informed of other options for family planning (Chandrashekhar, 2019). Despite the India Supreme Court banning sterilization camps in 2016 and the complications and deaths that happened during these procedures, 39% of the women in India turn to the procedure as a form of birth control.

Furthermore, young females are at higher risk of rape, abuse, and human trafficking in impoverished communities. As males overwhelm the population and fewer suitors are available in respective caste systems; more cases of crime have been reported against girls. India has the highest number of child brides in the world because the dowry does not cost as much for younger prospects or brides who are mistreated because they cannot pay the expected price or make additional payments (McCarthy, 2017). Families keep their daughters from attending school because each year of formal schooling increases the price of the dowry. Education for their daughters is viewed as a “risky business” venture with little to no guarantee of return on investment. This choice is systemic and is reflected in the lack of women in the workforce of male-dominant professions and keeps females from economic independence of their spouse’s family (McCarthy, 2017). Though these patricentric beliefs monetize females in Indian society, there are hopes for equality and advocacy of women rights.

Recommendations:

My suggested calls to actions are embedded in Goal #4- Ensure inclusive and equitable quality of education, and Goal #5- Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Progressive programming for sex education needs to be sensitive to socioeconomic status and literacy recognizing the cultural and religious norms that believe talking about sexuality is taboo and its awareness may corrupt young adolescents (Acharyya, 2019). Proper education for all people in India is important. Providing education clarifies and informs students about the consequences of unsafe sex and preparing children for responsible family planning, creating a base for change in societal attitudes concerning family norms (Sandu & Sukiasyan, 2018). Education about sexual life, introducing male and female contraceptives, and family planning for students changes their understanding of sustainable families, helping them prepare for a better future for themselves and lowering birth rates for the country's benefit.

According to a report from Indian Asian News Service, nineteen million Indian women give birth on average to seven or more children. The majority of these women are uneducated, dwelling in poorer, rural areas in India (India Today, 2016). Sex Education and Family Studies could be incorporated in or outside of school programs. The obstacle is that this curriculum is far from being accepted as a necessary component of education and has constantly been rejected in numerous states in India (Acharyya, 2019). A further recommendation is to promote and fund sex education. This could be done through non-government organizations like Super School India (SSI). They offer workshops within rural areas (Chakrabarty, 2019), working with underserved students to equip them with relevant knowledge to succeed, be responsible, and informed members of society. They achieve their goals by designing and implementing programs, focusing on problems and needs of students and communities they work with. Online content on sex education in Hindi has become popular and the shareability of this content extends the reach. Having resident female educators like Radhika Mittal, founder of SSI and her colleagues is important because they are familiar with not only how to disseminate sex education but recognizing the local barriers of cultural and religious norms about sexuality (Chakrabarty, 2019). Radhika had planned a 'you for them' model for every privileged parent who pays and attends their 2-day training; they deliver the same workshop for an underserved parent. The funding could come from Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI). They promote and support the best education, development and well-being of children.

Rural women's organizations would be the best target for this project since women are more susceptible to rape, especially in the slums. This recommendation can control the population growth, improving food security because when women are educated about family planning and contraceptives, they are aware of different methods. Education levels across all of India increased over time, causing a lower fertility rate. This can predict a smaller population when accounting for education and increasing urbanization (Chakrabarty, 2019). The influence of education appears to dominate, resulting in a lower population projection. It magnifies the effects of improved sanitation, reducing the risk of conflict and improving food security. Children of more educated parents, especially more educated women, benefit from better feeding

practices, receive better prenatal care, and are less likely to be malnourished. Higher earnings among educated individuals mean better access to resources to buy nutritious food and more options to cope with price shocks and food shortages.

Only 47% of Indian households receive more than 12 hours of electricity and more than 36% of schools in India operate without electricity. Students from underprivileged backgrounds are more likely to fall behind due to the inaccessibility of technology and electricity, or their parents don't have enough knowledge to guide them through technical applications (Modi & Postaria, 2020). Radio can provide educational information, and is widely available, reaching 99% of the Indian population. Rural India depends on radios for information. It is inexpensive and portable. They're sold more cheaply than other devices. Audio programmes overcome barriers linked to literacy, allowing the illiterate to comprehend and absorb information (Ramakrishnan, 2018).

Rather than implementing coercive or punitive measures, a recommendation is to increase programming that empower girls and women. Programmes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP), established in 2015, work to provide education for girls and their welfare and independence (Agrawal, 2021). Changing societal attitudes is needed to make BBPD more resilient. Particularly ensuring improvement in girls' nutrition status, while enhancing access to improved sanitation facilities and increasing female school enrolment and attendance. When girls are empowered, especially at a young age, they'll start working and taking control of their future. This allows them to become a mother, understanding the issues that affects girls and their capabilities. World Vision could help with empowering women because they've been supporting women and girls through sponsorship programs, teaching them advocacy skills, as well as partnering with communities, faith leaders and governments to challenge and correct harmful social norms preventing females from their full potential (World Vision, n.d.).

Aside from changing societal attitudes to women's equality and family planning through education, women empowerment can be demonstrated in popular drama shows. There has been a 370% growth in the Indian viewership of Korean television serials, where "Indians turn away from the macho men of desi entertainment and towards the feisty heroines of K-drama" (Pal, 2021). Shows could be purposely used to address controversial topics because Korea demonstrates women empowerment as Korea's television industry has actively hired women writers. In 2019, Forbes Reported that almost 90% of Korean drama writers were women writing about strong female characters and sensitive male characters who support powerful women. In February, India announced that they'd spend nearly \$500 million on films produced in South Korea, which could influence a change in social norms for Indian entertainment, allowing viewers to acknowledge women for more than their roles in Indian culture (Pal, 2021).

My final recommendation would be to implement programming that would dissuade the dowry. India enacted the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961 but it is still widely accepted and continues to treat females as a currency. *Girls Not Brides* is a global network partnered with *Child Survival India* that commits to ending child marriage and advocate for girls to stay in school. They are currently present in New Delhi working to mobilize all necessary policy and provide financial

support (Girls Not Brides, n.d.). However, without tougher enforcement by the government or financially punitive consequences that outweigh the cost of the dowry, this demeaning practice will continue to infringe on women's rights and safety.

Conclusion:

India's population continues to grow. However, this growth is at the continued expense of women's rights. While the country has forbade the dowry system and sex determinative tests, the enforcement has not been followed through. By addressing the issues of gender discrimination and gendercide it not only addresses fundamental human rights but has the capacity to strengthen the workforce and slow population growth. The change in attitude from women as commodity of trade to an equal to that of men will be a slow process. My paper proposes recommendations that requires a societal shift in how the country values women by increasing programming that empowers women and ensures inclusive education and diversifying family planning. India is heavily regulated by the government but it is important movements for change are created with women so that their voices are heard and their stories are shared. Failure to take action not only will have continued implications for India's welfare but the planet as well.

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