Unwanted and Unwelcomed

Undernourishment in the Girl Child in India

Would you like to be born a girl in India?

Girls and women make up about half the total population of the world. Given an even chance, girls perform as well or better than boys in every field of social endeavour, be it academics, politics, commerce or even the military. Women are the child-bearers; and the health of newer generations born to society is dependent on their well being before and during pregnancy. Finally, in most societies it is women who are the caregivers in families. As such, they determine the growth and development of the young through their ability to capture value from societal resources.

Under 'normal' circumstances, better survivability ensures that girls make up a little more than half of the population. Examples of such states are the United States of America, United Kingdom, France, Germany and the Russian Federation. However, girls and women in India face discrimination in respect of opportunities and choices.

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If all the trees were one tree, what a great tree it would be; If all rivers were one river, what a great river it would be;

And I always feel

If all the women in the world speak in one voice,

what a great voice it will be to bring peace, prosperity and happiness in the world.

> Smt. Pratibha Patil Hon'ble President of India



Although girls enjoy a biological advantage in respect of survival, the adverse sex ratio at birth and at the end of the fifth year of life tells the sad story of the social disadvantages that she faces.

Prejudice attends every tentative footstep of the girl child from her birth until death, as she is systematically disinherited in the male dominated society of India. Unwanted, she faces the extreme hazards of foeticide and infanticide. Unwelcomed, she faces discrimination in every aspect of her rearing.

Survival of the girl child

In absolute terms, it is estimated that 50 million girls and women are missing from the Indian population. Analysts attribute this to the practice of sex selection - female feticide - and girl infanticide. The natural sex ratio at birth is skewed in favour of boys, with about 950 females born for every 1000 males. Although more girls than boys survive early childhood under normal circumstances, the ratio of female to male children aged 0-6 years (Census 2001) was only 927 females to 1000 males, much below the natural sex ratio at birth. Approximately five years later, the NFHS-3 found the child sex ratio (0-6 years) to be 918 for India, indicating a continuing downward trend.

Malnutrition

Malnutrition is a complex phenomenon. It is both the cause and effect of ill health and follows a cyclical, inter-generational pattern. It is inextricably linked with illiteracy, especially female illiteracy, gender discrimination against the girl child, lack of safe drinking water and proper sanitation. The enigma of persistent malnutrition in the face of significantly improved economic growth - termed the 'Asian Enigma' is a contributor. Political appreciation of this crisis of nutrition led Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to denounce it in his August 2008 Independence Day speech as "a curse that we must remove".

Health, adolescent marriage and childbearing

Young people in India have a wide array of unmet sexual and reproductive needs. First, marriage and childbearing take place in adolescence for significant proportions of young women. Nearly half (45%) of young women in India begin cohabiting with their husband before age 18, the legal age at marriage for women. Reflecting the country's Diversity, few women (12%) marry before 18 years of age in Goa and Himachal Pradesh, while nearly three-fifths (57 - 61%) do so in Rajasthan, Jharkhand and Bihar.

According to Jejeebhoy and Santhya, 16% of all girls aged 15-19 years have already experienced pregnancy or motherhood. Unplanned childbearing among adolescents is not uncommon - 14% of all adolescents' most recent births were unplanned in 2006, a proportion that has remained unchanged since 1993. Second, the use of sexual and reproductive health services by young people is far from universal, even among the married. Young people remain poorly informed on these issues harbouring misconceptions and/or having superficial information. An additional concern is HIV with 39% of all new infections taking place among women.

Education

Girls are denied the opportunity of going to school and enrolment of girls in schools is lower than that of boys. An astounding 34 percent of girls - one of every three girls enrolled drop out before they complete Class 5. Girls are consistently left out of education as evidenced by the continuing large literacy gap between men and women of over 20%. (Census 2001)

Disproportionate malnutrition among girls

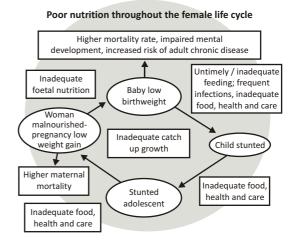
WHO has stressed that freedom from hunger and malnutrition is a basic human right and that their alleviation is a fundamental prerequisite for human and national development. The interaction of infection and malnutrition is also well documented. Better nutrition means stronger immune systems, less illness and better health. Healthy children learn better. Healthy people are stronger, are more productive and more able to create opportunities to gradually break the cycles of both poverty and hunger in a sustainable way. Thus better nutrition is a prime entry point to ending poverty and a milestone to achieving a better quality of life.

Unfortunately the root cause of malnutrition amongst girls is not just poverty and illiteracy, but also a lack of value attached to girls. (Refer figure A) A distinct preference for a male child, differential treatment of sons and daughters in terms of allocation of food, prevention and treatment of diseases and accidents have direct impact on the survival, growth and development of a girl child. Trends in India show that female mortality is higher especially during the post-neonatal and childhood stage (Report of Registrar General, 2003).

Shockingly, about 60 to 70 per cent of adolescent girls are anaemic in India. More than one-third (36 percent) of women age 15-49 years have a body mass index below 18.5 indicating chronic nutritional deficiency. Women and girls are often the last to eat as their role is to cook the

family meal and feed their husband and sons first, leading to malnutrition and anaemia.

Figure A: Poor nutrition in the female life cycle



Source: Adapted from the State of the World's Mothers 2006, Save the Children, US.

The consequences of inequity

Continuing social strictures on females

The socio-cultural set up prevalent in our country has immense repercussions on the present status of the girl child. The predominant patriarchal mind set, the labelling of women as the 'weaker sex', the low value assigned to women in society; all conspire to deny our girls their rightful social status. These translate into social strictures that are enforced through custom and social behaviour. For example, girls have circumscribed social mobility and play; they are expected to take on the role of caregivers at a very young age; they are forced to drop out of school for a variety of reasons including the attainment of puberty; and they are denied work and are paid less than men for the same work. Such social strictures not only deny the girl child her rightful due at every stage of her life, but also breed illiteracy, poor ability to leverage social resources and limit her capacity to voice her opinions and demands.

Inadequate protection of girls

In an effort to combat sex-selective abortions, the Government of India passed legislation in 1996 banning prenatal sex determination through ultrasound diagnosis. However, this law has done little to change the disturbing trend of missing girls.

The girl child is extremely susceptible to abuse, violence and exploitation within and outside her home. A study on Child Abuse carried out in 2007 indicates the rising tide of

violence across the country. Over 45% of girls in school report corporal punishment, and just under 50% report violence within their domestic environment. Over a third of ever-married women report spousal/domestic violence and only half of married women report participation in household decision making. Child marriages continue despite the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) with Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh having the highest incidence.

The ILO estimates that there are more girls under 16 years in domestic service than any other type of work. Adolescent girls are traded off as domestic servants, construction workers, labourers in sweat shops, on farms etc. There is also a growth in the numbers of girls being trafficked for sex work. Traffickers violate an array of human rights as victims are subjected to physical, psychological and sexual violence.

Adverse female health and nutrition indicators

In any review of health and nutritional indices, it is a matter of course that the indicators for girls and women will be poorer than those for boys and men. This is true across most geographies, communities, and social groups in India. In fact, when indicators favour women is it remarkable.

It has also been shown that poorly nourished mothers and those of young age have babies that are below the normal birth weight. The NFHS-3 showed that the percentage of low birth weight babies born to mothers below the age of 20 years was 6 percentage points higher than those older than 20 years.

Millennium Development Goals

Goal 3: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015.

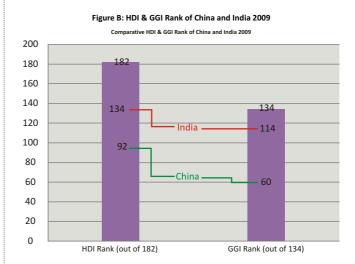
Goal 5: Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio. Achieve, by 2015, universal access to reproductive health.

Source: UN website- http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals

Much of the redress of the health and nutritional inequities can be mediated through improved health care that is non-discriminatory. Some can be encouraged through positive action and conditional cash transfer schemes such as the Janani Suraksha Yojana. But real improvement demands a social revolution which not only provides equal opportunity but also equal outcomes.

Failure to progress adequately on Millennium Development Goals and Gender Gap Index

Nutritional status is a key Millennium Development Goal indicator of poverty and hunger. Further, Goals 3 and 5 highlight the importance of promoting gender equality to prevent malnutrition among females. These serve as an important parameters to address the gender based inequities.



The Global Gender Gap Index examines the gap between men and women in four fundamental categories: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, political empowerment and health and survival. The Gender Gap Report documents India's dismal position on gender issues. Of the 134 countries surveyed in 2009, India comes in at the very low rank of 114, barely 20 ranks above the last. Furthermore, of the 182 countries surveyed for the Human Development Index, India (rank 134) trails behind China at 92 (Refer figure B).

Efforts by government to address poor nutrition

In planning for the XI Five Year Plan, the Planning Commission constituted a Working Group on 'Development of Children' with a sub-group on the 'Girl Child'. The objective during the XI Plan period is to holistically empower the girl child in all aspects so that she can become an equal partner with boys. This requires that the various constraints facing the girl child be addressed. Special importance is to be accorded to assure all girl children the right to life and liberty, to uphold their dignity and security within the family and society and ensure the utmost attention to their right to equality and social justice. The National Nutrition Policy, 1993, recognizes the stage of adolescence as a special period for a

multi-sectoral nutrition intervention for females among its other provisions. Towards this end, the strategy and activities laid out in the National Plan of Action for Children, 2005 are to serve as a basis to ensure focus on her survival, protection and wellbeing.

India has a legal framework for child protection that addresses the gambit of issues ranging from child labour, child marriage, female foeticide and infanticide and child sexual abuse. It includes:

- Child Marriage Bill 2006
- National Youth Policy 2003
- National Policy for the Empowerment of Women in India 2001
- The Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act 1994
- National Nutrition Policy 1993
- National Policy on Education 1986
- Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act 1986
- Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971

In addition to the laws enacted by the Indian Parliament, several schemes have also been put in place by national and state governments. Some of the schemes under implementation which covers nutritional aspects of the girl child are: Balika Samriddhi Yojana (1997), Kishori Shakti Yojana (2000), Nutritional Programme for Adolescent Girls (2002). Other schemes include the Child Survival and Safe Motherhood Programme, the Universal Immunization Programme, special health check up schemes for primary school students, and the Mid-Day Meal Scheme for primary school children.

The flagship scheme taken up by the government is the *Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)* Scheme which was launched in 1975. The Scheme provides integrated services for pregnant and lactating women and children below 6 years comprising supplementary nutrition, immunization, health check-up, referral services, pre-school non-formal education and nutrition & health education.

However, the implementation of these measures is both tardy as well as incomplete leading to limited impact of these programmes on girls' development.

Breaking the culture of silence

The plight of the girl child in India is marked by the eerie silence that surrounds it. Society adheres to a pervasive 'culture of silence' that overrides its sense of right and wrong. Girls are killed by their parents even as they begin their life in the womb or just after birth. No song is sung to mourn them. Girls are fed less than their brothers, taken for medical consultation and immunized less often than their brothers. No sound escapes. Adolescents face violence and discrimination. Young women die in childbirth and neglect. No one tells their story. It is time now that these shackles are broken and our sisters join us in song.

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This background was also used by Amaltas to develop the 'State of the Girl Child' report 2009 for Plan India and the report on the IFPRI Stakeholder Consultation on Agriculture, Nutrition and Health in India.