

No One Wants a Baby Girl: Analyzing Gendercide in China and India

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Abstract

In recent years, India's and China's rapid economic has caught the eye of developed nations. While it confuses some and sings praises from others, India and China's rise to competitive economic powers is a sign that their status as developing nations could change sooner than many would have expected. Despite their rapid development, India and China's neglect of gender inequality, especially the gendercide phenomenon, not only draws harsh criticisms from world governments, but also affects their ability to compete in the global economy because it perpetuates issues such as poverty, violence, and dramatically reduces human capital. This article focuses on the factors that explain gendercide in India and China.

I. Introduction

India and China have been among the most influential countries in the world for centuries. From the early days of trade with silk, tea and spices, to their recent economic rise in the global market, India and China have continuously captivated the interest of Western powers. However, with this praise and attention comes scrutiny and even outrage at commonplace cultural norms that most would deem unacceptable by global standards. Yet, as they continue to develop their economies, little is being done to address some of the social ills.

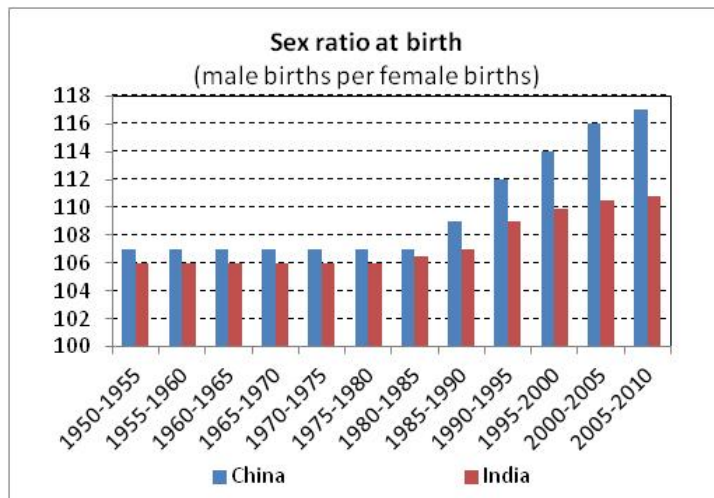
For both India and China, the most prevalent issue is the alarming levels of inequality between men and women. India and China are traditionally patriarchal cultures, meaning there is a higher value, socially and monetarily, on males. Women are subject to severe mistreatment, neglect, and abuse by not only their societies, but also by the very families that should support them. Indian and Chinese baby girls are victims of a unique, but highly alarming trend known as gendercide: the systemic annihilation of female fetuses solely for their sex in preference of their male counterpart. This systemic destruction has led to a phenomenon called “missing girls”,¹ meaning that there are as many as 200 million girls missing in the world today because baby girls are killed,

¹ According to Subramanya Dehejia (2011), the term “missing women” was first coined by Nobel economist, Amartya Sen in 1990, referring to the excess mortality of women in the developing world.

aborted and abandoned simply because they are girls.²

Figure 1 shows the ratio of live births of males to females over the last six decades. The natural sex ratio is about 106 males for every 100 females born,³ although the exact value is subject to debate in the scientific community. Both, China and India were very close to the natural ratio from 1950 to 1985. However, as Figure 1 shows, the ratio started to increase in the mid-1980s. By 2005-2010, the ratio was 111 in India and an alarmingly off balance value of 117 in China.

Figure 1: Sex Ratio at Birth (male births per female births), 1950-2010



Source: Created by author based on United Nations (2013).

The Indian and Chinese governments have done little to address gender issues. They fail to realize that, if they made a serious effort towards addressing gender inequality, it would ultimately aid in their development by increasing human capital and employment, and end major issues like poverty and violence. This article addresses the key factors contributing to gendercide in China and India, which are discussed following a brief literature review and some empirical background. The last section provides some conclusions.

II. Brief Literature Review

Separately for each country, there are various scholarly articles, books, reports, and documentaries on gender inequality. However, articles comparing their progress are only just emerging, and mostly focus on summaries of their overall progress as opposed to comparing specific issues related to their progress.

- In an article entitled “The Many Faces of Gender Inequality”, Amartya Sen (2001) talks about the various types of gender inequality that plague women in developing countries. The article highlights many of the key features the women of these two countries, especially women India, are currently facing in regards to gender inequality like access to high-paying jobs and division of household labor. Sen also notes that because gender

² *It's a Girl* (2012), Synopsis, see: <http://www.itsagirlmovie.com/en/synopsis>.

³ Grech, Savona-Ventura and Vassallo-Agius (2002).

inequality utilizes so many different facets, there is no cure-all remedy for it--and for that reason--countries can typically shift from one form of gender inequality to another when there is reform.

- In a more recent article by Amartya Sen (2011), entitled “Quality of Life: India vs. China”, Sen first addresses the recent hype surrounding India’s rising gross national product (GNP) and how it may overtake China’s. He then goes on to show how India’s rising GNP will not be important unless it can also catch up in terms of living standards. Sen states that India’s single-minded goal of strengthening the economy without reinforcing support for social issues will only allow it to grow within a certain limit.
- Yuping Zhang, Grace Kao, and Emily Hannum (2007) study whether women in rural areas of China practice gender equality or conform to stricter, gender biases. Zhang et al. studied women and children in rural farmlands across China for their results. Based on their findings, they concluded that, despite what common conceptions may be, rural mothers are fairly egalitarian in terms of gender equality. While differences in terms of prioritizing education for boys and girls were apparent, there was still a decent push for higher education. They also discovered that since mothers in rural areas are the primary care givers that rear and socialize children, their individual attitudes and personal experiences with education are major factors for whether they will push their daughters to pursue higher education.
- In a 2011 article in *The Economist*, entitled “Growth is not Enough”, *The Economist* analyzes how discrimination against women is independent of economic growth. While the idea of male preferences is strongly imbedded in Asian society and is reinforced by lower pay and employment rates for women, the article points out that even the richest areas of China show strong preferences for male babies, despite the fact that they have the disposable income to care for girls.
- Elizabeth Vargas (2011) explores India’s gendercide based on a fact finding trip to India in June 2011. She reports that India undergoes a systematic, widespread, shocking elimination of India’s baby girls. Some 50,000 female fetuses are aborted every month in India. Among those who are born, many are killed at birth by either throwing them into rivers or leaving them to die in garbage dumps. She reports that it is estimated that one million girls in India “disappear” every year. Vargas also looks into some of the reasons for India’s gendercide.
- In “Gender Differentials in Literacy in India”, Aparna Sundaram and Reeve Vanneman (2008) draw attention to a surprising trend in increased labor participation and lower literacy rates for Indian women. In an analysis conducted in over 400 districts throughout India, results showed that women in areas with higher workforce participation actually had lower literacy rates than their counterparts in areas where women in the workforce were less prevalent. Sundaram and Vanneman hypothesize that, particularly in poorer districts, families who have mothers and daughters that enter the workforce, or have traditional patriarchal family systems, are more likely to keep them out of school in exchange for higher economic returns. While Sundaram and Vanneman understand that not all types of employment would hinder girls’ education, they note that allowing them to work in certain industries easily hinders their ability to receive education on par with boys because they are hazardous, time consuming, or give such good pay that parents are more willing to keep

them working than in school.

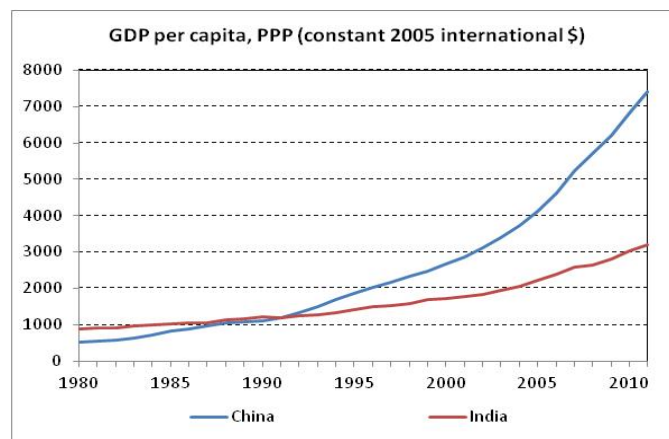
- On the positive side, Tania Branigan (2011) wrote an interesting news article for *The Guardian*, in which she looked at how the shortage of brides in China has started to a) reduce the traditional preferences for boys and b) created a positive change in attitudes towards women, even though China is far from reaching gender equality.

III. Empirical Background

China's and India's gendercide stems from a collection of cultural, economic, and, population trends that ultimately hinder both national and social development. While each trend contributes to gender inequality in its own right, all are connected through overlapping factors that not only continue this vicious cycle, but also fuel worsening conditions for women in both countries. We will cover these connections in-depth in the next section. This section provides some empirical background on the evolution of GDP per capita, life expectancy, poverty gaps, and the sex ratios at birth over the last few decades.

Currently, China and India are the two fastest growing economies in Asia. With average annual GDP growth rates at about 10 percent and 8 percent, respectively, over the last few decades, China and India have flourishing economies. Figure 2 shows that China's GDP per capita (adjusted for differences in purchasing power) increased more than ten times between 1980 (\$524) and 2011 (\$7,418), while that of India increased nearly four times during the same time period.

Figure 2: GDP per capita (in constant 2005 international \$, PPP), 1980-2011



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2013).

Matching rising incomes per capita, Figure 3 shows the progress made in reducing the headcount ratio of poverty in China and India. China has seen a solid decrease in the percentage of its citizens living below the \$1.25-a-day and \$2.00-a-day poverty lines. Despite some spikes, the decrease has been stable and steady since the late 1990s. With about 12 percent of its population living below \$1.25-a-day and about 30 percent living below \$2-a-day, this makes China a developing nation with a prevalent upper middle class. Though there is much less data available for India, India seems to have made more steady progress in decreasing poverty. However, the decrease has not been as substantial as China's, considering that more than 30 percent of India's population lived below \$1.25-a-day and nearly 70 percent of its population lived below \$2-a-day in 2010. While India has

a growing middle class, they are mostly lower middle income. India still has a long way to go to reduce poverty.

Figure 3: Chinese and Indian Poverty Headcounts at \$1.25 and \$2.00, all available years

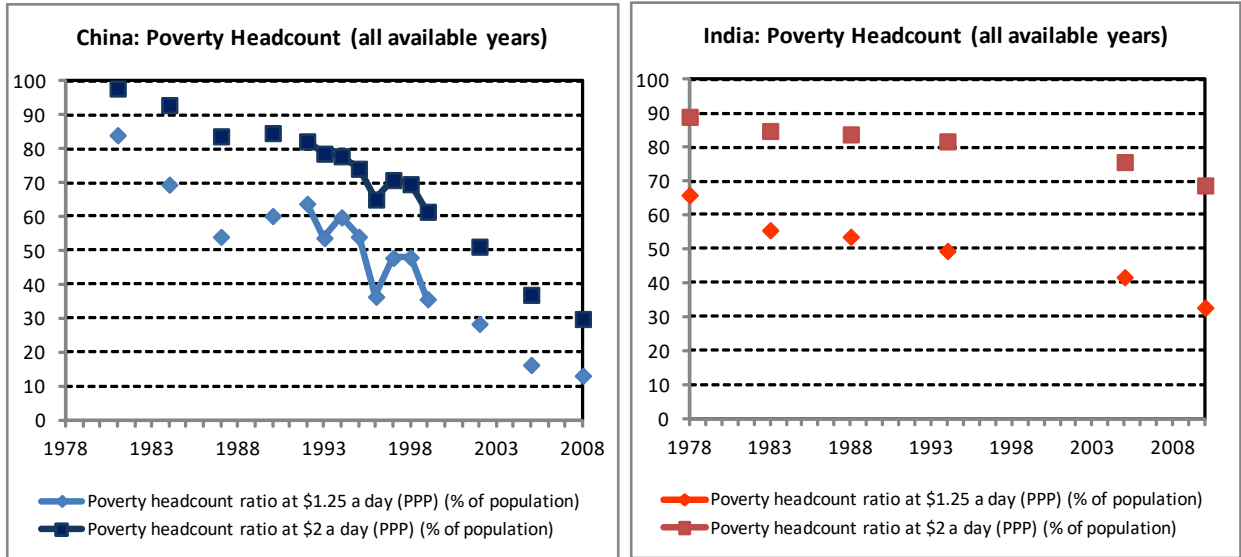
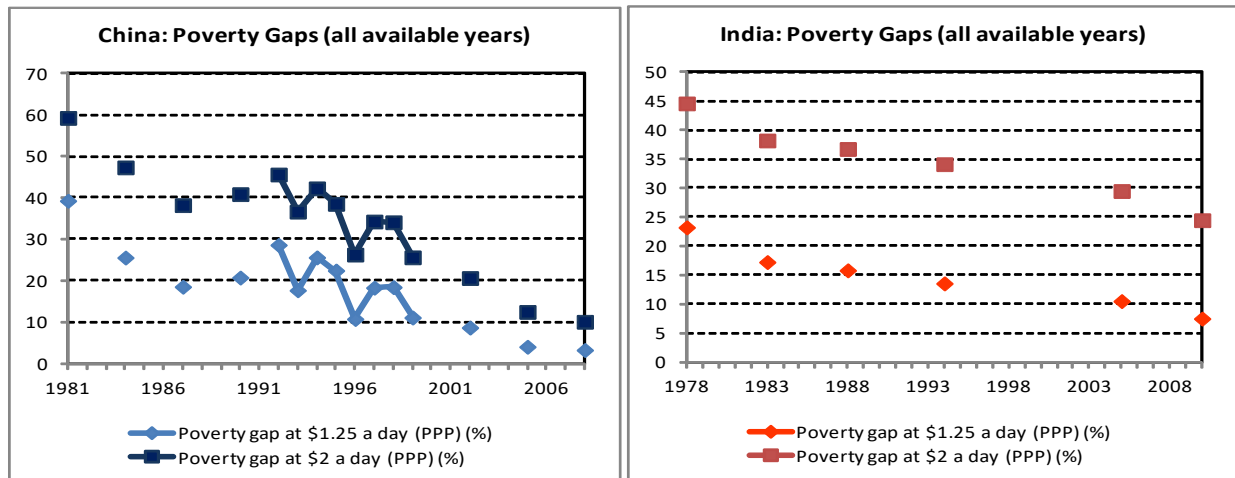


Figure 4 shows that the progress made with reducing the depth of poverty (measured by the poverty gap) is highly correlated to each country's progress made in reducing the poverty incidence. Despite some spikes, China has seen a solid decrease in the depth of poverty, while India's decrease in the depth of poverty has been more limited.

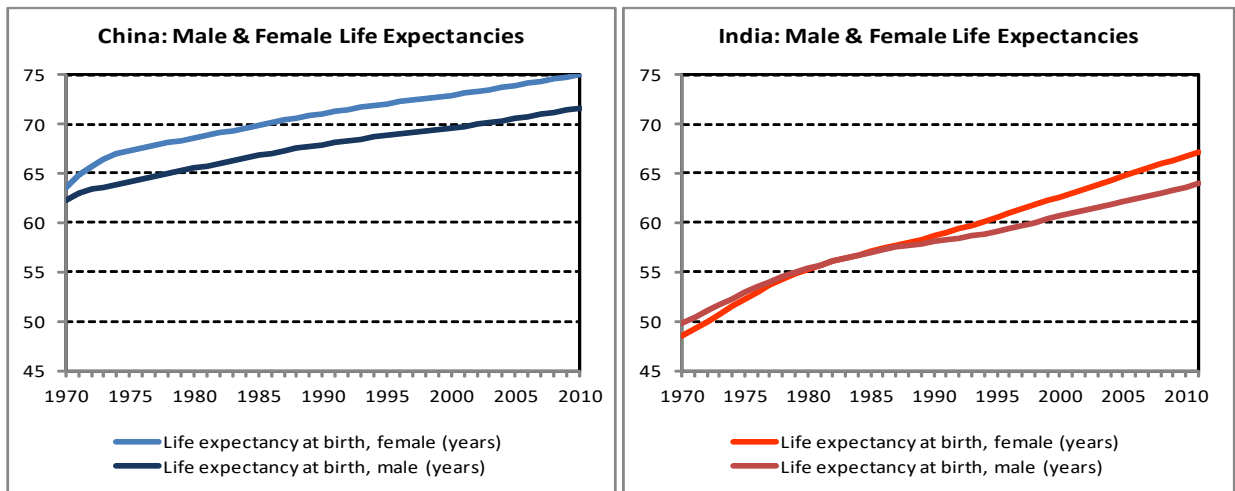
Figure 4: Chinese and Indian Poverty Gaps at \$1.25 and \$2.00, all available years



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2013).

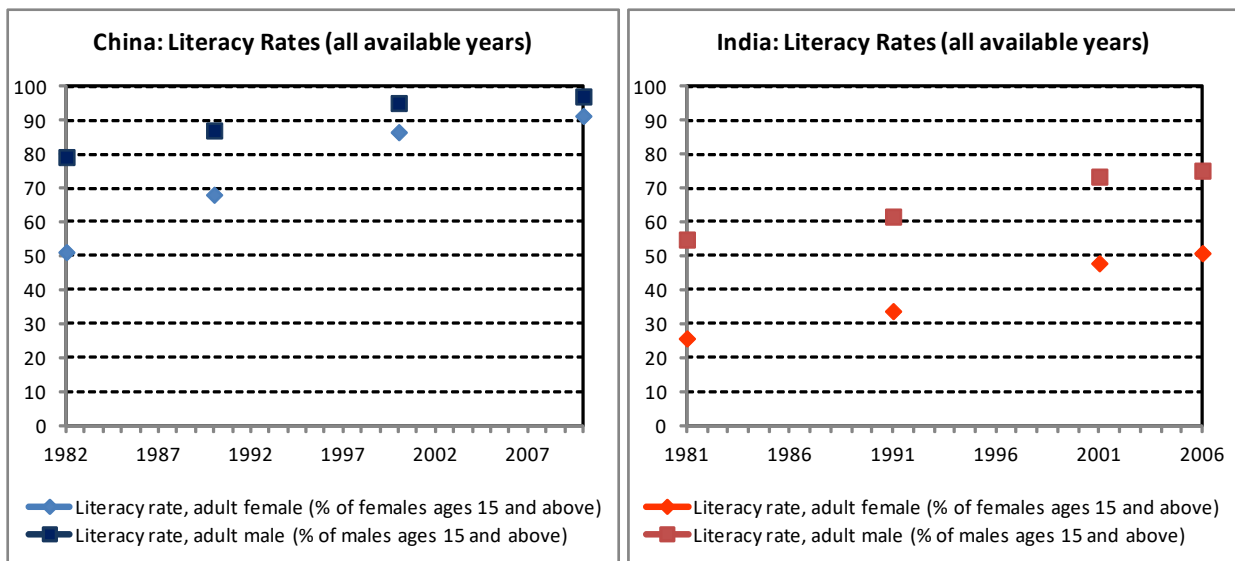
Figure 5 shows the evolution of female and male life expectancies from 1970 to 2011 for both countries. As is the case in most countries, females can currently expect to live about 3 years longer than males in both, China and India. This difference in life expectancy has been relatively stable during the last three decades in China. However, in India, males were expected to live longer than females until 1981. For the subsequent four years (1982-1985), the female and male life expectancies were basically the same (the difference was less than one month). Since 1986, the female life expectancy has grown slightly faster than that of the males, reaching a difference of 3.1 years by 2011.

Figure 5: Female & Male Life Expectancies for China & India (in years), 1970-2011



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2013).

Figure 6: Female and Male Literacy Rates in China and India, all available years



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2013).

Despite the progress made in terms of life expectancies, Figure 6 above shows that female literacy rates still lack behind those for males, especially in India. While China has made significant progress in reducing the gap (and has also far higher literacy rates for males than India), the gap between male and female literacy rates has remained nearly stable at around 25-30 percentage points in India. Looking at India's literacy rates strongly echoes Sen's (2011) statement that India's rising income will not be important unless it can also catch up in terms of living standards. In terms of literacy rates, India is today about where China was in the early 1980s.

IV. Discussion

IV.1. Cultural Reasons for Gendercide

India and China's society venerate patriarchies, meaning they favor males in family units over females. As with any society of this nature, it is expected that there will be some notable inequalities between genders. However, China and India have taken these cultural norms to such an extreme that it has perpetuated significantly conditions for women and girls now more than ever before. According to "*It's a Girl*," a documentary that discusses female gendercide in China and India, there are over 200,000 "missing" or aborted girls in India each year. In both China and India, there are as many as 1,500 sex-selective abortions conducted each hour (*It's a Girl*, 2012).

In interviews and discussions, Indian women have admitted to killing their baby girls because they would not want them to suffer in the dehumanizing environment they have been subjected to all their lives (*It's a Girl*, 2012). Families will also abort females because they will cost the family more money in the long-run, and therefore come with a higher opportunity cost than males within Chinese and Indian cultures. Moreover, as a result of these practices, it is no coincidence that China has the highest rate of female suicide in the world (*It's a Girl*, 2012). Nor is surprising that women and girls in China are more likely than women in other countries to be kidnapped and sold into sex slavery or as future brides for families with sons who fear they may not find someone marry.

Since males are culturally more desirable, it is not surprising that families would choose to have a male child over a female child when presented with a choice. There are gruesome stories of mothers who had murdered their daughters. As reported by Izri (2012), the "*It's a Girl*" documentary shows that some mothers crushed their baby girls' necks, poisoned their milk or used damp cloths to suffocate them. All these mothers killed their baby girls to save their daughters from lives in poverty and violence. If cultural norms continue to push for a society that treats women as commodities and machines with no recognition of their own wants and needs, Indian and Chinese women will continue to suffer as their countries develop.

IV.2. Financial Reasons for Gendercide

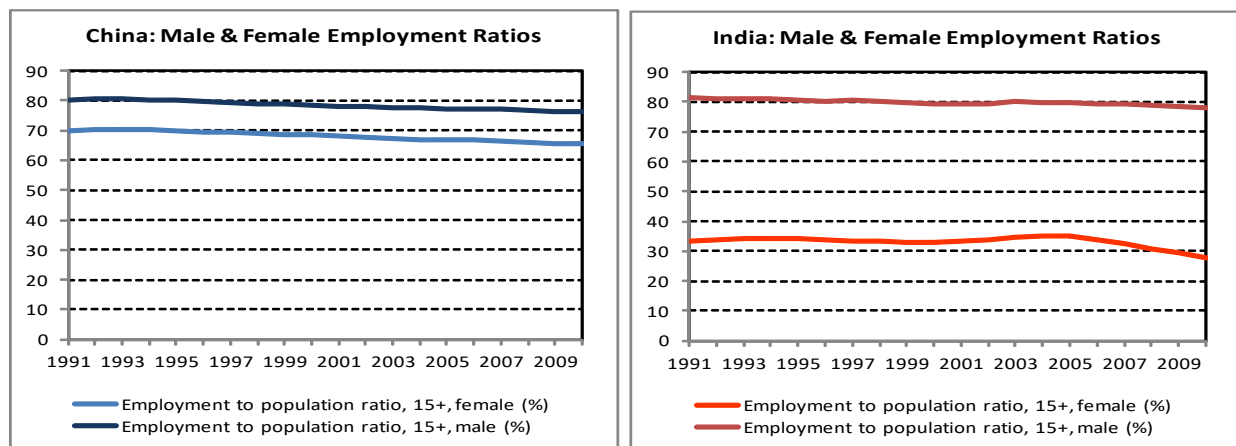
China and India have attributed monetary values based on sex. Sons are primarily the ones that gain, property, inheritance and own land, so they represent the bulk of wealth in these cultures. Daughters, on the other hand, usually gain nothing, and when they are given away during marriage, are expected to bring a dowry with them from their families, despite the fact that the practice has been outlawed for decades. Families that bear daughters not only suffer emotional loss, but monetary loss as well, and for that reason, would rather abandon, kill, or abort girls in a part of the world whose focus at the moment is to gain financially.

The empirical data suggests that gender norms coupled with rampant poverty place a real value on children: males represent a potential positive financial gain for the families, while females

represent a debt or loss to the household. Since men are the ones who typically inherit property, control family wealth, and take care of aging parents, they provide a net gain for the household. Females on the other hand are not considered do contribute to the household's wealth. Instead, females are a poor investment for families as they must pay an exorbitant amount of money to her husband and lose her from their family unit once they get married. This is definitely still the case in India (and was to a lower degree also the case until recently in China). When the cultural and financial issues collide it perpetuates gendercide. There is no financial reason to have a girl child, subsequently, infant mortality rates are significantly higher for females than males in both countries (It's a Girl, 2012).⁴

Looking at Figure 7 on the next page, it is quite obvious that men are the breadwinners in China and especially in India. In India, the male labor force participation rate has hovered around 80 percent for the last 20 years, while that of women has been around 32 percent until it even fell below 30 percent in the last few years. While the gender gap has been far lower in China (amounting to about 10 percentage points), the data does not indicate any narrowing of the gender gap during the last two decades in either country. Women remain to be expected to care for the household and many have no way of proving that they can be a financial benefit to their families.

Figure 7: Male and Female Employment Population Ratios for China and India, 1991-2010



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2013).

IV.3. Drivers of Gendercide

The main driver for gendercide in India continues to be poverty. Poverty forces families to choose what gender their children have. Unlike boys, female children are considered to come with a set of fixed costs and no returns. Among the most significant costs, is dowry, which is more or less a percentage of the families' net wealth. Both the wealthy and the poor alike are financially burdened by dowry. While the Indian government outlawed the dowry system more than 50 years ago, many families are still expected to provide gifts and property to their sons-in-law (Izry, 2012).

Moreover, since fewer Indian women are allowed into the workforce, women represent a financial

⁴ This claim is supported by data from the World Bank (2013), which shows that during the last ten years, female child mortality rates have been about one third higher than male child mortality rates in India. There is no such data available in World Bank (2013) for China.

burden throughout their lives. Arguably, if the culture did not treat this way, there would be more women participating in the economy. However, because women are at the behest of their fathers and husbands, they are yet another commodity, worth no more than their ability to produce a son. Gendercide is sustained by poverty, and gendercide keeps India from developing alongside China at the same rate.

Where poverty does not act as an instigator is in the upper and middle class. Instead, culture itself acts as an instigator. The upper and middle class of India favors a form of gendercide called “sex-selective abortion” (Pörtner, 2014). Through sex-selective abortion, upper class caste families can maintain their coveted small families, guarantee male heirs, and ensure that they do not have to pay a lavish dowry (*It’s a Girl*, 2012). Although dowry is a key issue that fuels gendercide, there is no single cause of the problem. Instead, this issue is the product of when culture and tough economic circumstances collide.

In China, while poverty still contributes to gender inequality, the major instigator for Chinese gendercide is, without a doubt, the controversial One Child Policy. The One Child Policy was originally implemented because of fears of overpopulation, but modern medical tools like ultrasound allows parents to be more selective with regards to the gender of the one child they plan to have. The Chinese authorities enforce the One Child policy through what is known as the Family Planning Police that does routine sweeps in towns and cities. If women are found “out of compliance”, meaning that they are bearing a second or third child, they are rounded up, fined, and even sent to clinics for forced abortions (*It’s a Girl*, 2012). Since men are more culturally more desirable, it is not surprising that families would choose to have a boy over a girl when presented with a choice. Some parents risk having a second child if knowing that it will be a son.

IV.4. Social and Economic Costs of Surplus Men

“Bare Branches” is a popular Chinese phrase for men who will never get the chance to make families of their own since their marriage prospects are so slim (Hudson and den Boer, 2002, p. 8). If gender ratios are not stabilized soon, there will most likely be a whole generation of Bare Branches, both from India and China that can cause detrimental damage to these economies.

A critical factor to surplus men is the possibility of overwhelming dependency ratios in the future. Along with the financial strain of taking care of themselves with no spouse to add income to a household, Bare Branches are tasked with caring for elderly parents by themselves. They have no siblings to share the burden with, no spouse to aid in care, and now, no children to do the same for them in the future.

This is best put in terms of supply and demand. While the demand for boys is high right now, at some point the demand for girls will go up when there is a need for brides in the future. Since the supply of girls will be nowhere near equal to that of boys, they will be in high demand; so much so, that it could eventually lead to unrest until the demand is met. It also may lead to the commodification of girls, and increased instances of human trafficking. Instead of gendercide, the scarcity of females within society may lead to poorer families selling their female children for profit to families looking for future brides.

V. Conclusion

China and India are developing rapidly. However, their growth comes at the cost of millions of baby girls, who have their most basic human right (to live) taken from them. Sex-selective abortions act as both a symptom and a pathogen to this vicious cycle that prevents the Indian and Chinese economies from raising living standards at a higher rate. While both India and China have implemented policy solutions, such as outlawing dowries and sex determinative ultrasounds, these laws have been poorly implemented and are not enforced.

In order to stop gendercide, these governments, especially India's needs to get serious about carrying out the laws they put in place. If financial insecurity is such a concern among poor and rural populations, Indian and Chinese governments could possibly give subsidies to families that have girls, offering incentives for raising them and keeping them in school so that there is no need to keep them from their right to learn.

Eventually, this could lead to a boom of women capable of entering the workforce, and participating in the economy alongside men. Possibly the most obvious remedy to this solution, especially in China, would be repealing the One Child Policy so that parents would not be forced to either abort or abandon their daughters. While some exceptions to the One Child Policy has been introduced recently (like if both parents are coming from single-child families), even these families may still prefer boys over girls as girls continue to be undervalued, and cannot properly grow in an environment that pressures them into believing they should not exist.

Women are not commodities subject to trade, theft or destruction. Gender preference is already having catastrophic effects on China and India's economies, and if they do not address gendercide as a serious and critical threat, it will not only ruin their development efforts, but could completely unravel the economies they worked so hard to build.

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