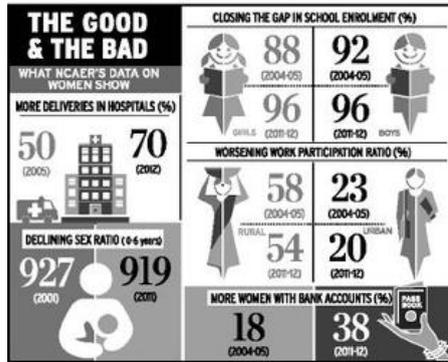


## Declining sex ratios seen in gender scorecard

Sonalde Desai

*While the stagnation in women's ability to control their own fate is disappointing, some of the other gender indicators are downright alarming*



On International Women's Day, the Election Commission of India held a special campaign to bring women voters to the polls. Although men and women vote at a more or less similar rate in State elections, women are 6-8 percentage points behind in the Lok Sabha elections where national issues dominate. These disparities prompt us to take a deeper stock of gender inequalities in Indian society.

India Human Development Survey (IHDS), a nationally representative survey of about 42,000 households conducted by researchers from the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and the University of Maryland, provides interesting insights for developing a gender scorecard covering the years of rapid economic growth between 2004-2005 and 2011-2012. NCAER is the oldest think tank in India, and the only one outside the government which carries out large independent household surveys on social and economic issues. The IHDS is carried out under oversight from an advisory panel comprising eminent academicians, representatives of civil society and those of a variety of statistical agencies. It is the only national panel survey covering the same households.

When it comes to changes in the nature of gender relations in India, IHDS records a story of both progress and disappointments. The scorecard on gender reflects a broad stagnation in social mores where some achievements are cancelled out by backsliding in other areas; broader economic impacts on gendered outcomes are by and large negative; and some remarkably successful policy initiatives have been overlooked in an era of overall disenchantment with public policies.

### Social stagnation

On social issues, IHDS paints a picture of overall stagnation, except for a few bright spots. The declining gap in school enrolment between boys and girls is the shining story of the past decade. In 2005, among children aged between 6-14, 88 per cent of girls and 92 per cent of boys entered school. By 2012, the percentage for both sexes rose to 96 per cent.

However, if we read this improvement in women's literacy to indicate an overall improvement in their status, we are in for a disappointment. Women remain bound by strict patriarchal norms that govern where they go (18 per cent don't even go to a *Kirana* shop), whether they can venture outside the home alone (50 per cent do not travel alone by bus/train even for a short distance), how much input they are allowed in household decisions vital to themselves and their children (only 25 per cent have the final authority on what to do when they are sick) and even whether they have any input in who they marry (only 25 per cent actually met their husbands before marriage). Rising incomes do little to improve women's status since richer households appear to be more determined to control their movements and autonomy than poor households.

Perhaps the greatest area of concern lies in steadily declining sex ratios. Census 2001 recorded only 927 girls between the ages 0-6 compared to 1,000 boys. This ratio dropped to 919 in 2011. It is a paradox that although today's parents are even more likely to prefer boys to girls than those of the last decade, often resorting to illegal sex-selection practices to ensure the desired sex composition, the discrimination against daughters in education is steadily declining.

While this stagnation in women's ability to control their own fate is disappointing, some of the other gender indicators are downright alarming. During years of rapid economic growth, women's employment has steadily

declined. In spite of the attempts the IHDS survey made to capture diverse sources of women's work, women's work participation rates for those between the ages 15-59 dropped from 58 to 54 per cent for rural women and from 23 to 20 per cent for urban women between 2005 and 2012. While rising household incomes may explain some of these declines, the consequences for women's empowerment are worrisome.

Moreover, women remain concentrated in the agricultural sector. In 2005, 73 per cent of the rural men did any agricultural work; by 2012 this number fell to 65 per cent. In contrast, the decline for women has been smaller, from 91 per cent to 86 per cent. Women's participation in non-farm work would have been even lesser without the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). With the slow but steady migration of men out of agriculture into non-farm economy, agricultural work is slowly becoming feminised, leaving women concentrated in an increasingly smaller portion of the economy.

### **Public policy successes**

What role do government policies play in shaping gendered outcomes? Here, there are a number of positive signs. Programmes like Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) have had a tremendous impact. Hospital delivery rates soared between 2005 and 2012. In 2005, before the implementation of JSY, which provides cash benefits of up to Rs.1,400 for a hospital delivery, only 50 per cent of the deliveries took place in a hospital; by 2012, this had risen to nearly 70 per cent. Implementation of the no-frills bank account has increased women's financial inclusion.

The proportion of women with their name on a bank account has risen from 18 per cent to a whopping 38 per cent in these seven years. Efforts aimed at ensuring women's participation in MGNREGS have also borne fruit. The scheme mandates that at least a third of beneficiaries should be women. IHDS records that 44 per cent of the beneficiaries are women.

While these major programmes have had an impact on women's lives, many other schemes have proven to be remarkably ineffectual.

Only about one per cent of households have registered their daughters for the much trumpeted girl-child schemes that provide cash incentives for the survival and education of girls. Moreover, even large schemes often suffer from operational difficulties; the demand for hospital-based deliveries has fast outpaced the ability of government hospitals to deliver reasonable quality care.

So how will the women voters react in the 2014 election? Would these policy achievements outweigh the social stagnation and economic concerns? I suspect not.

*(Sonalde Desai is senior fellow at the National Council of Applied Economic Research and professor of sociology at the University of Maryland. This is the first in a series of five opinion pieces based on the findings of the new IHDS. The views expressed are personal.)*

### **Only 25 per cent of women actually meet their husbands before marriage**

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