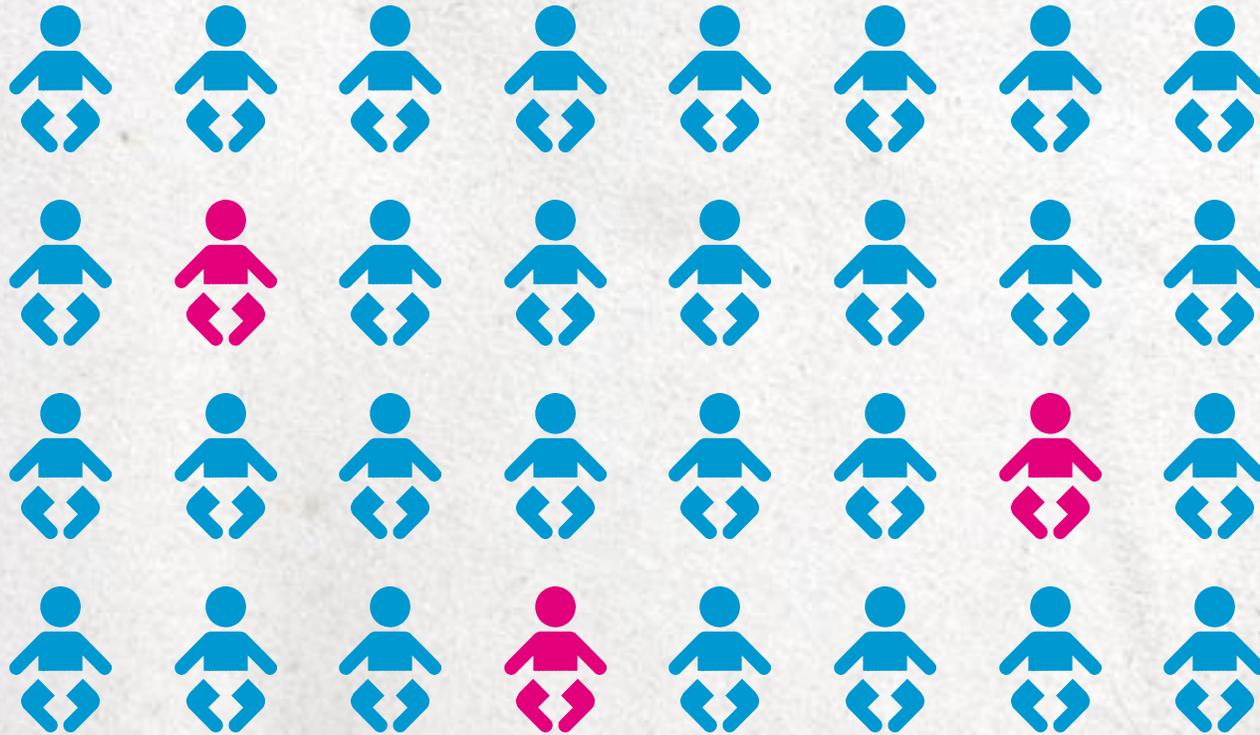


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~~Disappearing daughters~~



21-year-old Kanta's newborn son at Morena district hospital, Madhya Pradesh. Sons are increasingly preferred to daughters in northern India.

THE PROBLEM

India's daughters are disappearing. New research by ActionAid and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) shows that the number of girls born and surviving in northern India compared to boys falls far short of normal expectations, and continues to slide.

In a country with a long history of discrimination against women, the preference for sons over daughters has led to the number of girls under the age of six hitting an all-time low.

The introduction of sex-detection ultrasound technology, coupled with the long-term problem of the neglect of girls, means that millions of women are now 'missing' in India.

The research, conducted in sites across five states in north and northwest India reveals:

- ratios of girls to boys aged 0-6 across four out of five sites are now lower than in 2001
- ratios are declining fastest in comparatively prosperous urban areas
- in areas with limited access to public health facilities and modern ultrasound technology, girls are more likely to be born, but less likely to survive
- lower birth rates and higher mortality rates for second and third daughters through selective abortions and neglect

- a trend for smaller families is deepening the aversion to daughters
- laws banning prenatal sex detection and sex-selective abortions are being ignored as ultrasound technology is widely and explicitly used for sex selection
- given the enormous pressure on families to avoid having girls, the use of ultrasound technology is now considered a 'rational' way to plan a family
- despite policies to address girls' rights and improvements in women's literacy, education and employment, the pressure to produce a male heir remains.

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“It was a girl and we wanted to abort it. We paid 1,200 rupees [£14] and got it over with. What would we have done with another girl?”

Couple responding to survey in Kangra

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

Deeply entrenched discrimination against women has led to the survival rates of girls hitting an all-time low. With parts of society regarding girls as little more than economic and social burdens, families are going to extreme lengths to avoid having daughters.

ActionAid and IDRC’s research reveals that, despite policies to address girls’ rights and public information campaigns, sex-selective abortion and neglect are on the increase. In four of the five sites surveyed, the proportion of girls to boys has declined even further since 2001.

Although prenatal sex detection and sex-selective abortion is illegal, the law is not being enforced. Doctors, nurses and other medical practitioners are routinely violating the ban, performing abortions of female fetuses and benefiting financially.

It is estimated that around 10 million female fetuses may have been aborted in India over the last two decades. According to recent figures published in *The Lancet*, around 500,000 female fetuses are aborted every year.

In poorer communities, without such ready access to ultrasound scans, daughters are instead lost through neglect and a denial of medical care and nutrition.

Meanwhile, the underlying social and economic factors that underpin gender discrimination and drive people to make these decisions persists.



Babita, with her newborn baby boy.

FACT:

According to the country’s national 2001 census, 35 million women are 'missing' in India, the victims of discrimination, neglect and violence.



Pictures from an ultrasound scan at Dr Ritu Rath's surgery in Morena. Unlike some doctors, Ritu refuses to tell parents the sex of the fetus.



CASE STUDY: Renu*

Renu*, 25, and her husband are an educated and affluent married couple from Rohtak, Haryana. Renu already had a daughter when she became pregnant for the second time. She had an abortion after an ultrasound scan indicated the fetus was female. She later went on to have a son.

"When I got pregnant the second time, I told my husband that if I am pregnant with a girl, I would abort it. I got my ultrasound done and they told me my baby was a girl. I paid 500 rupees (about £5) for another ultrasound to make absolutely sure. When it was confirmed I spent 3,000 rupees (£35) for an abortion.

My husband and I fought over my desire to have an abortion. I told him that this society does not value girls and I do not want to give birth to another one. I told him that girls are a burden on the family.

They have to face violence in all spheres of life. If the girl commits even a small mistake she and her entire family have to bear the burden. When I gave birth to my first daughter everyone pitied me. They all told me that I could not have a son.

The taunts from society and from my in-laws that I would have faced for not having a son forced me to abort. I had no other option. Knowing the amount of harassment my baby would go through after her birth, I think it is much better to die."

*not her real name

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“We do not have money to spend on the treatment of girl children.”

A survey respondent

NEGLECT



Discrimination against daughters transcends class, caste and state barriers in India. Whilst abortions are increasingly used to prevent female births, the systematic neglect of girls in poorer communities without access to ultrasound technology is contributing to the country's highly distorted girl to boy ratios.

In poor rural communities such as Morena and Dhaulpur, deliberately poor post-natal care – such as allowing the umbilical cord to become infected – is being used by desperate families as a way to dispose of daughters.

Spending money on healthcare or nutrition for girls is often deemed an unworthy investment. In one village in Rohtak, Haryana, a family with five daughters allowed two of them to die. The opinion expressed to researchers by some of the villagers was that it was 'good riddance'.

Although there appears to be some improvement in the survival rates for first-born daughters, as family sizes get smaller and parents want fewer children, the survival chances of second and third daughters are plunging. Morena researchers found that a third daughter born into a family now has only half as much chance of survival as a son.



Nilam Tomar is an activist working at local level to raise awareness of the impact of sex-selective abortions and neglect of girls.



Men and boys gather and play in the village of Adroni. If current trends continue, there will be fewer and fewer girls in villages like this.

CASE STUDY: Kirpal Ojha*

Morena is one of the poorest rural districts in Madhya Pradesh and the neglect of girls is ingrained. Girl babies are seldom given access to medical treatment and, according to locals, female infanticide is widespread.

Kirpal Ojha's story tells of the fate awaiting unwanted girls in Morena

When his wife died, Kirpal had four daughters aged 5, 9, 10 and 12, but with so many girls his chances of finding a second wife were slim. Now only his youngest daughter is alive. Kirpal says the others fell ill and died through lack of access to medical treatment.

After his second marriage, his new wife Usha* gave birth to two daughters. Both died soon after birth. When her first child was sick, Usha's mother-

in-law banned her from sending for medical assistance. After the baby died, "I cried a lot, because she was my first child," says Usha.

"So God dropped three daughters to punish us." Neighbours claim that Usha and Kirpal's second daughter died after the mother-in-law stuffed tobacco in the baby's mouth. Usha suffered taunts and abuse from her family until she gave birth to a son.

*not their real names

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DISCRIMINATION

Like most other countries in the world, India has a long and entrenched history of gender discrimination. A complicated caste system, coupled with traditions such as providing dowries for girls and lack of inheritance rights for females, adds to the inequalities.

The development of India as an economic power has not changed the preference for sons over daughters. The practice of sex-selective abortion is not just rooted in the devaluation of daughters, but in attitudes towards mothers without sons as well.

The pressure on women to produce male heirs is still immense. Although women are routinely blamed for falling numbers of girls in India, they are also the victims of discrimination, denied many of their basic rights and driven to extreme lengths by the pressures they face.

Often a woman's husband and his family control a woman's reproductive health, and her status in the household is determined by her success in producing a son. Women interviewed for this research talked of their fear of the 'taunts' and abuse they would receive if they gave birth to daughters.

Although advertisements for ultrasounds which extolled families to "spend 500 rupees now and save 50,000 rupees later" were banned with the implementation of a law against prenatal sex determination tests in 1994, the belief that sex-selective abortions are a wise investment remains. Whilst boys are expected to bring wealth into a family, girls are seen by many as an 'expenditure'.

In many states, dowries and expensive marriages are inevitable outgoings for families with daughters. As daughters traditionally become part of another family after marriage, it is sons who are expected to provide for parents in their old age.



Meena Tomar, from the village of Gufapura, has two daughters. Despite pressure from her family she has decided not to have any more children.



Some doctors are flouting the law by using ultrasound to tell parents the sex of their foetus.

“Today’s women do not have to make guesses. Get your ultrasound done and you know what is there.”
Female survey respondent in Punjab

VIOLATION OF THE LAW

The decline in the number of girls after the introduction of ultrasound in the 1980s is no coincidence. Access to sex-detection ultrasounds makes it easier for women to find a ‘solution’ to the pressure they are facing to produce sons.

The Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act 1994, which outlaws sex determination leading to abortion, and the provisions of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, which prohibits sex-selective abortions, are not being enforced and are instead routinely violated. Not enough is done to tackle the deep-rooted discrimination that drives this cultural aversion to daughters.

The growing desire for just one or two children is seeing parents consciously determining the ‘ideal’ composition of their families, with an emphasis on sons and not daughters.

Doctors, nurses and medical practitioners are profiteering from the discrimination against daughters. Many of the 6,000 families interviewed for this research said clinics that carry out sex-detection scans and sex-selective abortions for a few thousand rupees are widespread.

Some medical professionals interviewed for this research justified sex-selective abortions as being a “social duty” which prevented the ill-treatment of unwanted daughters or helped with population control.



CASE STUDY: Dr Ritu Rathi

Dr Ritu Rathi, a GP from Morena. Although Ritu understands the enormous pressure that women are under, she refuses to tell her patients whether they are expecting a girl or boy.

“Every day families come to me for ultrasound scans and the first question they ask is not about whether their baby is healthy, but whether it is a boy or a girl.

Discrimination against women is so historically ingrained in our society that it's always exceptionally difficult to get parents to understand why I am refusing to tell them the sex of their unborn child. They will offer me any amount of money for sex determination tests in their desperation not to have any more daughters.

The problem is there are always other doctors who will do the test for them. Ultrasound is now so commonly misused for sex detection that it has become an accepted and convenient way of ensuring that unwanted girls aren't born in the first place.

Even though many families are happy to have a girl if they already have a son, the social stigma of just having girls is enormous. Just today I was treating a woman who has two daughters already and she is suffering acute anxiety that her third child will be another girl. The abuse she will receive from her in-laws and her husband will make her life very difficult if she has another daughter

There needs to be a serious step-change in attitudes. India might be developing economically, but in terms of our attitude to women, we're not moving forward at all.”

DETAILED FINDINGS

ActionAid and the IDRC conducted an in-depth study of girl to boy ratios in children aged 0-6 across urban and rural sites in five states in north and northwest India. Families in more than 6,000 households were interviewed and statistical comparisons made with national census data. The five districts covered were: Kangra in Himachal Pradesh, Morena in Madhya Pradesh, Dhaulpur in Rajasthan, Rohtak in Haryana and Fatehgarh Saheb in Punjab.

Under 'normal' circumstances, there should be around 950 girls born for every 1,000 boys. ActionAid and IDRC's fieldwork found that already low ratios of girls to boys are now even lower in all the rural and urban sites surveyed than in 2001, except for Rajasthan.

- in Kangra, Himachal Pradesh a decline from 900 to 789
- in Fatehgarh Saheb, Punjab a decline 765 to 734
- in Rohtak, Haryana a decline from 785 to 776
- in Morena, Madhya Pradesh a decline from 851 to 842
- in Dhaulpur, Rajasthan an increase from 819 to 871

Dhaulpur in Rajasthan seems to buck the trend. However, if we compare the fieldwork figures for the sites, with the 2001 census figures for the states as a whole, juvenile (0-6 years) girl to boy ratios are lower across all five states.

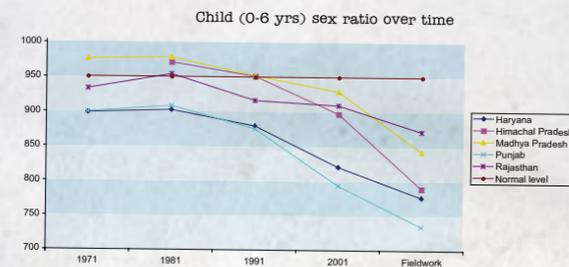
Ratios are declining fastest in urban areas

Despite their relative prosperity, urban areas are showing the greatest decline in ratios of girls to boys.

The fieldwork showed that:

- the ratio in urban areas in Himachal Pradesh fell from 841 in 2001 to 743 in 2003. This compared to figures of 974 to 835 in rural areas
- in the Punjab urban ratios fell from 803 in 2001 to 706 in 2005, while they increased from 735 to 762 in rural areas
- in Haryana in 2005, ratios in urban areas were 751 compared to 798 in rural areas.

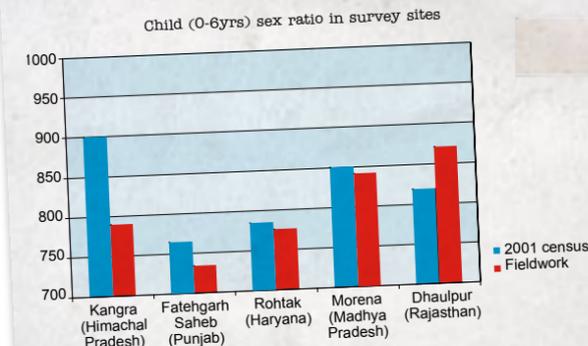
Graphs for sex ratios report



Census data taken between 1971 and 2001 shows that the proportion of girls declined substantially in the five surveyed states.

Under 'normal' circumstances, there should be around 950 girls born for every 1,000 boys.

The fieldwork – carried out in selected sites in each of the states – shows that this decline is accelerating.

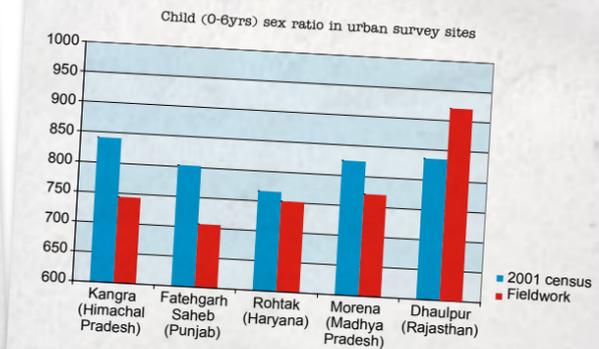


In four out of the five survey sites, the proportion of girls has decreased.

The most substantial decline, of 12 percentage points, has come in Kangra in Himachal Pradesh.

In Fatehgarh Saheb in the Punjab, the proportion of girls, already very low, fell a further four percentage points.

Only Dhaulpur in Rajasthan bucked the trend, but the fieldwork figure of 871 girls is still well below the 'normal' level of 950 girls for every 1,000 boys.



The steepest declines in the proportion of girls are in urban areas.

In Fatehgarh Saheb in the Punjab, although the overall decline was four percentage points, in urban areas it was 12 percentage points.

Similarly in Morena in Madhya Pradesh, the decline in urban areas was seven percentage points.

As with the overall figures, Dhaulpur in Rajasthan bucked the trend with a much needed improvement of nine percentage points in urban areas



DETAILED FINDINGS (CONT.)

Child survival is skewed against girls in areas with limited access to public health facilities and modern ultrasound technology

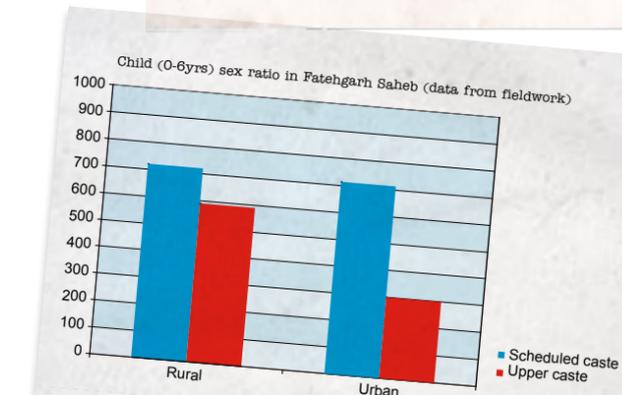
Amongst those poorer areas with less access to technology it is neglect that ensures there are fewer surviving daughters. Child mortality rates in two of the poorer sites researched showed significant skewing against girls. This was not the case in urban areas where declining ratios are the product of 'choices' around the number and sex composition of children and using sex-selection to achieve the desired result.

- In Morena, the skewing of ratios against girls is progressively worse for second and third-born daughters. Third-born girls are half as likely to survive as third-born boys.
- In Dhaulpur the desire for smaller families is also skewing mortality rates against daughters. Researchers noted 28 girl child mortalities compared to 18 boy child mortalities in third-born children.

The trend for smaller families is deepening the aversion to daughters

The move towards smaller families, ideally comprised of two children, is exacerbating discrimination against daughters. Fieldwork reveals a significant number of couples in Fatehgarh Sahib are having just one child.

- While boy-only families are on the rise, just 3% of families in Morena and Dhaulpur, 6% in urban Kangra and 2% in Fatehgarh Sahib have daughter-only families
- Data from Fatehgarh Sahib shows that families are increasingly stopping at one son. The chances of a second child being born are disproportionately higher if the first child is a daughter.

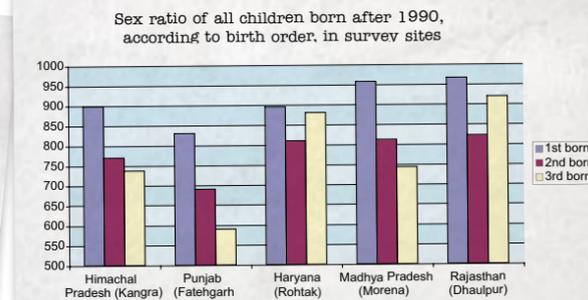


This graph gives an indication of the impact of caste.. Caste refers to different social classes in India. Scheduled caste refers to the lowest class of people in India, also called Dalits, while upper caste refers to the highest class people.

As the research shows, the problem of declining sex ratios cannot simply be attributed to poverty.

In both the rural and urban sites surveyed, the proportion of girls was significantly lower among those surveyed from the upper caste, compared to the lower caste.

Most shocking of all are the figures for high caste urban Punjabis, at just 300 girls for every 1,000 boys.



The best chances of being born and surviving as a girl often depend on birth order in the family.

All the survey sites show a decline in the proportion of girls among second-born children.

In three of the survey sites, for every 1,000 third-born boys, there are fewer than 500 girls.

The decline is particularly steep in Punjab, where there is a difference of 21 percentage points between the proportion of first and third-born girls. This figure is 13 percentage points for Madhya Pradesh.

CASE STUDY: Asha Singh

Asha is a women's rights campaigner with Prayatn, an ActionAid partner organisation dedicated to reversing the trend of India's disappearing daughters in Morena.

"Here in India women are blamed for all that is wrong in society. Men feel they can inflict pain, shame and dishonour on women because we are powerless to fight back.

I am determined to try and change this. I'm a trained lawyer but have been working as an activist fighting against sex discrimination for five years.

Every month I travel by motorbike to over 25 towns and villages talking to women about their rights and asking them to recognise the valuable place they hold in our society. I want to help reduce discrimination against women and stop the violence against girls happening at every level of our society.

India's disappearing daughters are a national shame. Sex-selective abortions are wrong and it's very difficult to witness parents determining that their baby is worthless because she is a girl.

It's also hard to witness how much neglect there is of girls in some of the villages I work in. I want to empower more and more women to come forward and with their help I can reach more villages and towns.

Change doesn't come easily but I am convinced we can change things for the better in India. I'm proud I've become a role model for many girls in rural areas."



Activist, Asha Singh travels by motorbike around Morena district to talk to women about their rights.

SOLUTIONS

The research starkly shows that women's rights continue to be systematically violated in India. The rise of sex-selective abortions and neglect of girls is simply the latest manifestation of entrenched gender discrimination, which denies women and girls their most basic rights.

The Indian government has expressed concern about the problem and has introduced a number of schemes to address it. These have included financial incentives to have daughters and monitoring of pregnant women in areas with very low numbers of girls. Efforts to implement the law banning sex detection and sex-selective abortion have so far been woefully inadequate.

In any case, none of these solutions addresses the much more complex underlying problem of why having daughters is so unwelcome for so many families.

There is a high premium placed on marriage in India, with the dowry a major source of pressure for families with daughters. Such practices must be challenged, if daughters are to be seen as anything other than an economic burden.

Improving the quality of and access to public health systems and government schools must also be a priority, so that poor families do not need to choose which child receives these basic services.

Raising awareness and working to change attitudes and behaviour towards women and girls is essential. ActionAid works with local organisations like Prayatn to support women to recognise and claim their rights, so that they can challenge the discrimination they face in their everyday lives.

Another ActionAid partner, the Jago Sakhi Sangathan women's alliance, has been addressing discrimination against women and declining numbers of girls in Rajasthan, including in Dhaulpur, the only site that showed an improvement in the research.

It is clear that without sustained action on many fronts, millions more women will go missing in India.



Very few young women attend this English class in Morena. Without action, the gender imbalance in the general population will get worse.



23-year-old Usha Sharma poses with four of her daughters in Barauli village, Morena, Madhya Pradesh. Her family insists on her having a son.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ActionAid has been working in India since 1972, strengthening alliances of poor people to claim their rights to food, shelter, education, work, healthcare and a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. Women, children, Dalit and indigenous people, Muslims and urban poor, who often face acute lack of access to and control over resources services and institutions, are at the centre of our work.

IDRC is a Canadian Crown corporation that works in close collaboration with researchers from the developing world in their search for the means to build healthier, more equitable, and more prosperous societies.

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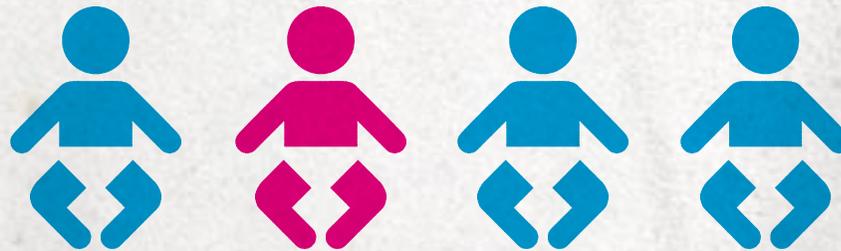
This booklet is based on the research report by ActionAid and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), *Planning families, planning gender: the adverse child sex ratio in selected districts of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab.*

The report was written by: Mary E. John, Ravinder Kaur, Rajni Palriwala, Saraswati Raju and Alpana Sagar.

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