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As Wealth and Literacy Rise in India, Report Says, So Do Sex-Selective Abortions

By JIM YARDLEY

NEW DELHI — India's increasing wealth and improving literacy are apparently contributing to a national crisis of "missing girls," with the number of sex-selective abortions up sharply among more affluent, educated families during the past two decades, according to a new study.

The study found the problem of sex-selective abortions of girls has spread steadily across India after once being confined largely to a handful of conservative northern states. Researchers also found that women from higher-income, better-educated families were far more likely than poorer women to abort a girl, especially during a second pregnancy if the firstborn was a girl.

"This has deep implications," Shailaja Chandra, one of the study's authors and the former director of the National Population Stabilization Fund, said Tuesday during a panel discussion after the release of the findings. "The scale is very large and requires intervention beyond what has been done so far."

The study, being published in the British medical journal *The Lancet*, is the latest evidence of India's worsening imbalance in the ratio of boys to girls. The 2011 Indian census found 914 girls for every 1,000 boys among children 6 or younger, the lowest ratio of girls since the country gained independence in 1947. The new study estimated that 4 million to 12 million selective abortions of girls have occurred in India in the past three decades.

The government has enacted legislation intended to prevent parents from using ultrasound screenings or other technologies to decide whether to abort a girl. Yet despite such laws, the situation has not improved. Few medical practitioners who violated the law have been prosecuted, while regulation of private health care providers is very limited.

India is similar to many Asian countries in that many families prefer boys. In Hindu funeral rituals, only males, preferably a son of the deceased, may perform last rites; sons also usually inherit property (while daughters are married into other families) and carry on the family

name. A cultural preference for sons is also common among many Indian Muslims.

Dr. Prabhat Jha, a lead author of the study, noted that the use of sex-selective abortions expanded throughout the country as the use of ultrasound equipment became more widespread. Typically, women from wealthier, better-educated families are more likely to undergo an ultrasound, Mr. Jha said, and researchers found that these families are far more likely to abort a girl if the firstborn is a daughter.

“This is really a phenomenon of the educated and the wealthy that we are seeing in India,” said Mr. Jha, director of the Center for Global Health Research at the University of Toronto.

Census data has already confirmed that the problem has accelerated since 2001. The 2011 census found about 7.1 million fewer girls than boys under the age of 6, compared with a gap of roughly 6 million girls a decade earlier.

The Lancet study was conducted by researchers from several partner institutions, with the United States National Institutes of Health providing some of the financing. About 250,000 births from 1990 to 2005 were examined, using data from surveys conducted by India’s National Family Health Survey, as well as census data from 1991 to 2011.