IMAGES AND ICONS: Harnessing the Power of Mass Media to Promote Gender Equality and Reduce Practices of Sex Selection

Farah Naqvi

A
**BBC World
Service Trust**
Feasibility
Study

Delhi

Haryana

Punjab

Rajasthan

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A BBC World Service Trust Feasibility Study

Four Target States
Delhi, Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan

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in developing and transitional countries to improve
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Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Executive Summary	vii
1. Background to the Feasibility Study	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Background: The BBC World Service Trust	3
1.3 Justification and Objectives of the Feasibility Study	3
1.4 Dilemmas of a Messaging Strategy	4
1.5 Approach and Methodology of the Feasibility Study	5
1.5.1 Determining the Target Group	6
1.5.2 Primary Research: Objectives and Design	7
1.5.2.1 Sample selection and size	8
2. Practices of Sex Selection in India: An Overview	10
2.1 Introduction	10
2.2 Reasons for the Spread of Sex selection	10
2.2.1 Son preference	10
2.2.2 The two child norm and the decline in fertility	12
2.2.3 The availability of technology	12
2.3 Who Decides?	12
2.4 The Law	15
3. Using Mass Media to Reduce Sex Selection: An Evaluation of Messages	17
3.1 Introduction	17
3.2 Government Mass Media Outputs	18
3.3 Private Productions: TV Drama Serials	19
3.4 Private Productions: Feature Films	21

3.5	NGO Communication Material	21
3.6	Evaluation of Communication Messages	22
3.7	Conclusion: Does the issue of sex selection lend itself to mass media messaging?	24
4.	Towards a Mass Media Campaign: Analysing the relationship between target audiences and mass media	26
4.1	Introduction	26
4.2	Media Habits in the Target States	26
4.2.1	Television	26
4.2.2	Print	28
4.2.3	Radio	29
4.3	Reaching Rajasthan	29
4.4	Relationship between Target Audiences and Mass Media	29
4.4.1	Women and television	30
4.4.2	Men and television	31
4.4.3	The Saas-Bahu serials	32
4.4.4	Television and social messaging	35
4.4.5	Relationship with other mass media: radio and print	35
4.5	Conclusion	35
5.	Knowledge and Attitudes to Abortion and Sex Selection	37
5.1	Introduction	37
5.2	Reproductive Rights	37
5.3	Abortion	38
5.4	Sex Selection	39
5.5	Women's Health	40
5.6	Conclusion	41
6.	Impact of Social Change: Unravelling and Challenging Attitudes that Fuel Sex Selection	42
6.1	Introduction	42
6.2	Profile of a Sex Selective Abortion Seeker	43
6.3	Men's Attitudes to Women in the Context of Social Change	44
6.4	Women's Aspirations and Anxieties in the Context of Social Change	50
6.5	Conclusion	53
6.6	Why Jhunjhunu (Rajasthan) is Different?	56

7. Recommendations	58
7.1 Introduction	58
7.2 The Primary Target Audience: The Service Recipient	58
7.3 The Secondary Target Audience: The Environment	59
7.4 Messages	60
7.4.1 Message Group A: Filling the knowledge gaps	60
7.4.2 Message Group B: Unravelling and challenging social and cultural attitudes	62
7.5 Media Platform	63
7.6 Programme Format and Language	63
7.7 Messengers	65
7.8 Other Recommendations	66
Bibliography	67

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Executive Summary

Sex selection and the abortion of foetuses because they are female is a profound and increasing problem in India. It is a complex issue occurring at the interface of cultural attitudes, prejudices and modern technology, and a sensitive issue because it directly enters the private arena of pregnancy, reproductive rights and abortion. Public discourse surrounding sex selection, including previous mass media outputs, has focused largely on the act of abortions without substantively addressing the context that creates a demand for sex selection. This feasibility study examined the prevailing knowledge levels and attitudes related to sex selection together with an analysis of mass media consumption patterns and concludes that mass media is an effective vehicle to promote gender equality and reduce sex selection.

The primary target group for a mass media campaign seeking to change sex selective behaviour should be those who seek the services to determine the sex of the foetus and later to abort it. This “service recipient group” consists of women, husbands and natal and conjugal families. While acknowledging the need to address the supply of sex selection services, a mass media campaign by definition reaches a ‘mass audience,’ and thus it is not effective to target medical practitioners who supply these services exclusively through mass media.

Of the service recipient group, the core target group should be young unmarried women. Young women are the most open to questioning inherited values and behaviours, display the greatest conflict with choices forced upon them, express discomfort with practices of sex selection, and appear to be the most amenable to behaviour change. This target group also has the highest stake in changing traditional gender-determined roles. However, since young women are part of a social web, behaviour change will be contingent upon others, both men and women. As television viewing is not, for the most part, a private affair, any television campaign will have to take on board the concerns and sensitivities of the larger family.

For the primary target group, there are two main directions for mass media messaging seeking to change the behaviour of the potential sex selection seeker:

- Filling the *knowledge* gaps that play a role in sex selection and unsafe abortion decisions.
- Unravelling and challenging social and cultural *attitudes* that fuel sex selection.

There is a need to raise awareness about reproductive rights, laws relating to abortion and sex selection, and women's health. For example, simultaneous publicity about laws related to women's right to abortion and the prohibition of sex determination tests will help avoid the inadvertent impression that abortions are illegal. There is also a need for awareness about safe and unsafe abortion, and about the impact of repeated, late-term abortions on a woman's health. Messages that address the relationship between body care and respect for body can aim to tap women's latent desire for autonomy over their bodies and explore resentment about family control on reproductive decisions.

The second message direction for the primary target audience is to unravel and challenge social and cultural attitudes that fuel sex selection. Traditional basis for son preference and sex selection continue to be relevant today. The conventional image of the son as the financial provider and the daughter as a burden remains pertinent. The increasing materialism of the modern age and the emphasis on obtaining consumer lifestyle products has exacerbated the problem of dowry. These perceptions need to be continually challenged through a host of positive images of women in general.

Social change is creating new attitudes towards women – both positive and negative. On the one hand, women are gaining equal access to educational and job opportunities. At the same time, they are being held back by traditional barriers. There is a reluctance to allow women to abdicate their primary responsibility to home and family. Their career prospects are limited to jobs that do not take them out of the home for too long. The value of women's careers is not seen as helping them achieve autonomy, but rather as a supplement to the family income.

Despite social and economic change, there continues to be restrictions placed on women's mobility. This is motivated in large part by constant media representation of sexually explicit images of the female body. The traditional notion of family honour being vested in the sexual chastity of girls and women is strong, and those aspects of social change that contain the threat of female sexual liberation directly challenge traditional patriarchal control over female sexuality. All of this is compounded by increasing violence against women. Thus, a mass media campaign that seeks to create positive images of women also needs to engage with the anxieties held by men, as brothers, fathers and husbands. Campaign messages also need to affirm and strengthen young women's search for autonomy and resistance to inherited patterns of behaviour, including social curbs on their mobility.

The challenge for a mass media messaging strategy will lie in being able to blur the lines between the "good traditional" and "bad modern" images of women. Images have to be constructed such that some behavioural attributes of the modern woman (working, earning, taking her own decisions, including her reproductive decisions) do not lead to a fear of all the other deleterious effects of "modern culture", namely promiscuity, loss of culture and family honour.

Moral messaging does not have relevance in the context of sex selection. A moral sense of “right” and “wrong” and “sin” (*paap*) does not play an important role in decisions around abortion or sex selection. Practical and immediate concerns override any moral hesitation.

Messages that attempt to dissuade people from sex selection by focusing on the act of the abortion itself (through medical images of foetuses and ultrasound machines) rather than on socio-cultural motivations have the affect of promoting a bias against safe and legal abortions. There is an urgent need to address the increasing anti-abortion discourse surrounding this issue. Any proposed mass media campaign on sex selection should not have the inadvertent effect of restricting women’s reproductive rights.

Television is a suitable driver for a mass media campaign. It is an immensely popular platform and has a more intimate and influential relationship with viewers than other mass media platforms. The most appropriate media format to explore social and cultural attitudes that fuel sex selection is the fiction drama. The issue has certain critical attributes that makes it particularly amenable to a fiction drama series. Sex selection is embedded in the space of intimate family relations, involving inter-generational conflict (between in-laws and the couple). It operates within the arena of power and control and directly engages with volatile issues of sexuality, reproduction and gender conflict (between the husband and the wife). These are precisely the elements that form the core of mainstream fictional dramas. The issue thus lends itself well to family drama serial formats. Fiction drama was also found to be the most popular genre among the core target audience – young women.

Background to the Feasibility Study

1

1.1 Introduction

Sex selection and the abortion of fetuses because they are female is a profound and increasing problem in India. The 2001 Census revealed a sharp drop in the child sex ratio from 945 girls per 1000 boys in 1991 to 927 girls per 1000 boys. Current disparities in sex ratio in India are among the worst in the world, and the absolute difference between men and women in India is about 36 million.¹

There are arguably many reasons for a skewed sex ratio, including the fact that the natural sex ratio at birth is slightly tilted in favour of boys. The biological norm is approximately 105 boys born for every 100 girls.² But that alone is not enough to explain the scale of disparity. Another factor is mortality inequality. In the 1980s, following from Amartya Sen's classic formulation on the "missing women," India began to focus on mortality inequality and the many structural and socio-economic factors that affected women's chances of survival. Research examined patterns of systemic gender discrimination, including infant mortality, malnourishment, lack of immunisation, lack of healthcare, gender-based violence and high maternal mortality, as key determinants of the high female mortality rates. But, increasingly, the search for the "missing women" has shifted focus to "natality inequality," which is the when far fewer females than males are born.

In the 2001 Census of India for example, the adult sex ratio improved marginally from 927 to 933 (females per 1000 males) from 1991, reflecting a decline in female mortality and better healthcare. But the juvenile sex ratio (0-6 years) declined from 945 to 927. In some states in north India, the female to male ratio declined to alarming levels. In the last two decades, enough evidence has been gathered to show that the shortage of girls in India's juvenile population is not happening by chance. It is the result of deliberate intervention. Analysis of India's first and second National Family Health Surveys (NFHS-I and NFHS-II)³ revealed an unusually large number of male births among certain populations, suggesting that female fetuses

¹ Census of India 2001, (online) Available at: www.censusindia.net

² Sex ratio in India is defined as the number of females per 1000 males. Internationally, sex ratio is defined as number of males per 100 females.

³ India's National Family Health Survey I and II editions, (online) Available at: <http://nfhsindia.org/index.html>

were being aborted.⁴ A recent study in Delhi by the Christian Medical Association of India reviewed over 375,000 births over a 10-year period (1993-2002) in eight leading hospitals and found some startling patterns:⁵

- The overall Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) was 869 girls for every 1000 boys;
- SRB for second child when the first is a son was 959;
- SRB for second child when the first is a daughter was 542;
- SRB for third child when both previous children are boys was 894;
- SRB for third child when the previous children were one girl and one boy was 558;
- SRB for third child when the two previous children are female dropped to a low of 219.

Clearly, sex determination tests followed by sex selective abortions were responsible for manipulating the sex ratio at birth in the Delhi study. In 2002, a group of researchers, using NFHS-II data estimated that over 100,000 female foetuses were being aborted annually in India following either ultrasound or amniocentesis.⁶ A recent Lancet study suggested that 10 million female births have been averted in the last 20 years, based on estimates of 500,000 sex selective abortions annually.⁷ Although many researchers in India have dismissed the Lancet figures as alarmist, the more conservative and perhaps accurate estimate of five million female births averted in the last two decades is no less worrying.

Intervening with natural demography on this scale is unprecedented. Practices of sex selection, including prenatal diagnostics and sex selective abortion, are artificially altering the demographic landscape of India. There is broad consensus that a shortage of millions of women has immediate negative implications not only for gender equality but also for greater social violence, development and democracy.

Of the many ways to approach the problem, one possible route is to raise awareness and seek attitudinal and behaviour change through well-researched and pre-tested mass media messages. Mass media has already proved to be an effective means to reach millions of people in India with a range of development messages. Based on a review of secondary literature, an evaluation of existing mass media messaging and qualitative primary field research in the states of Delhi, Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan, this report assesses the feasibility of mass media messaging on the issue of sex selection and proposes directions for a potential mass media campaign.

⁴ Retherford, R. and Roy, T.K. 2003, 'Factors affecting sex-selective abortion in India', *National Family Health Survey Bulletin*, Number 17, January, p.1.

⁵ Varghese, J. Aruldas, V., and Jeemon P. 2005, *Analysis of trends in sex ratio at birth of hospitalized deliveries in the State of Delhi*, Christian Medical Association of India, July, New Delhi.

⁶ Arnold, F., Kishor, S. and Roy, T.K. 2002, 'Sex selective abortions in India', *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 28 (4). December.

⁷ Jha, P., Kumar, R., Vasa P., et al, 2006, 'Low male-to-female sex ratio of children born in India: national survey of 1.1 million households' *The Lancet* (online) Available at www.thelancet.com

1.2 Background: The BBC World Service Trust

The BBC World Service Trust works with people in developing and transitional countries to improve the quality of their lives through the innovative use of the media. In India, the Trust has worked in partnership with the Government of India implementing several mass media campaigns since 1999. In particular, the Trust has conducted mass media campaigns to raise awareness about leprosy and HIV/AIDS. The impact of these campaigns has subsequently been evaluated using knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) studies. The leprosy media campaign contributed to more than 200,000 new leprosy patients seeking treatment, is attributed to changing the attitudes of about people's willingness to sit beside a leprosy patient, and to dissuading people of the belief that leprosy is communicable by touch.⁸ The HIV/AIDS KAP findings revealed an increase in those seeking health information, using condoms and reducing the number of sexual partners as a result of exposure to the campaign.

The BBC World Service Trust's HIV/AIDS television drama serial,⁹ reality based youth show¹⁰ and public service advertisements, have received national and international awards for their educational and entertainment value. These HIV/AIDS media outputs have reached approximately 250 million people in India alone (and are also being broadcast elsewhere in Asia).

1.3 Justification and Objectives of the Feasibility Study

Sex selection is a complex phenomenon, occurring as it does at the interface of cultural attitudes, deep-rooted prejudices, socio-economic pressures, and the spread and misuse of modern medical technology. An additional and necessary layer of complexity is the issue of women's reproductive choice and their right to a safe and legal abortion. In the context of mass media messaging, it is a valid concern whether or not such a complex issue lends itself to a mass media initiative, and whether it can be tackled through the use of mass media.

To address these concerns and to begin a process of sensitive engagement with the issue of sex selection, the BBC World Service Trust conducted the present feasibility study from January to September 2006.

The feasibility study has attempted to answer the following questions:

1. Is mass media a suitable vehicle to address the attitudes and behaviours that determine gender inequality and sex selection? If so, how can mass media be used to transmit messages that promote gender equality and reduce sex selection?

⁸ ORG Centre for Social Research 2001, *Impact Evaluation of the Modified Leprosy Elimination Campaign: Endline KAP Survey*, New Delhi.

⁹ *Jasoos Vijay* is a weekly detective drama serial aired on Doordarshan. The aim is to use TV entertainment to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and other health and social messages.

¹⁰ *Haath Se Haath Milaa*, or "Let's Join Hands" is a weekly, youth focused, reality television serial aired on Doordarshan. The show uses the appeal of the Indian film industry to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS.

2. Whom should a mass media campaign target?
3. What kind of mass media platform (e.g. television, radio, print) would be most suitable for messages around sex selection?
4. What kind of mass media format (e.g. drama serials, talk shows, reality television, radio call-in, music videos, print articles, hoardings) would be most suitable for messaging on gender equality and sex selection?
5. What should be the tenor and content of the messaging:
 - a. information and awareness; and/or
 - b. unpacking cultural attitudes and behaviour?

The results of this study are intended to provide government and the NGO community with feasible recommendations, including specific directions and justification for a potential mass media campaign.

1.4 Dilemmas of a Messaging Strategy

The study was designed with sensitivity to the fact that mass media messaging should not:

- stigmatise the act of abortion,
- compromise access to safe and legal abortion,
- dilute women's reproductive rights, and
- compromise women's right to choose.

The moral and intellectual debates around the issue of sex selection hinge largely on one aspect – the right of women to make reproductive choices versus the right of females to be born and of society to preserve a gender balance. How does a mass media message create an environment against one type of abortion (of a foetus *only* because it is female), and not end up stigmatising all other abortions?

Tension between those who support safe and legal access to abortion and an anti-sex selection position is

evident in the semantic debates over the actual naming of the phenomenon. The most commonly used English descriptor is “female foeticide”, which is considered a pejorative term (like homicide, patricide and matricide) as it associates the practice with criminality and creates moral censure. The term ‘foeticide’ simply means ‘killing/ murder of a foetus’ and since all abortions involve ‘killing’ of a foetus, this language indirectly seeks to criminalise the act of abortion itself and create an environment against abortion rights. Further, the term is often used loosely as just ‘foeticide’ without the critical qualifying prefix – ‘female’.

Similarly, the most often used Hindi descriptor is ‘*kanya brun hatya*’ literally meaning ‘the foetal murder of a young girl’. It is common to use the phrase ‘*brun hatya*’ without the critical qualifying ‘*kanya*’. Another term is ‘pre-birth elimination of daughters’. Once again, the language contributes to an atmosphere in which all abortions are seen as ‘bad’ or ‘immoral’ because it invests the foetus with human life and viability as a ‘daughter’. Thus, to conceptually invest the foetus with human life and human rights in order to stop sex selection is a somewhat dangerous strategy, with negative implications for women's rights over their bodies. There is clearly a need to find a media language, which does not stigmatise abortion per se.

Perhaps the trickiest dilemma in the sex selection debate is the notion of *choice*. On the one hand, liberal advocates demand women's right to choose, to control their bodies, to make reproductive choices, to control fertility and to have access to safe and legal abortions. What should be done when women 'choose' sex selective practices? Most would agree that it is a 'false choice' made within a framework of patriarchal compulsions. Women are making these choices because they know that their own valuation depends on their ability to produce sons. Otherwise, they face the threat of ill treatment, desertion and divorce. They also do not want the burden of large families and repeated pregnancies.

While gender empowerment and enhancement of women's agency generally has a host of positive implications for women, in the case of sex selection, where women themselves display a high degree of son preference, there is need for a new understanding. Amartya Sen offers this insight:

"When women in some regions themselves strongly prefer having boys to girls, the remedying of the natality equality calls for at least far broader demands on women's agency.... [T]here is a need to go beyond just the agency of the woman, but to look for more critical assessment of received values... When anti-female bias in action (such as sex specific abortion) reflects the hold of traditional masculine values from which mothers themselves may not be immune, what is needed is not just freedom of action but also freedom of thought – in women's ability and willingness to question received values."¹¹

The question is whether and how mass media messaging in India can encourage a questioning of received values as a way of promoting gender inequality and reducing sex selection. The primary research component of this study has looked for answers to this question and has explored directions for possible mass media messaging.

1.5 Approach and Methodology of the Feasibility Study

The study adopted a combination of primary and secondary, qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, specifically:

- review of existing research on sex selection, including ethnographic studies and surveys;
- review of previous mass media outputs and messages on sex selection;
- in-depth interviews with experts;
- analysis of media consumption patterns, using National Readership Survey (NRS) and Television Audience Measurement (TAM);¹² and

¹¹ Sen, A. 2001, 'Many Faces of Gender Equality', *Frontline*, vol. 18, Issue 22.

¹² The National Readership Survey is an annual study commissioned by the National Readership Studies Council, covering a sample of 250,000 respondents across urban and rural areas in India. It provides information on demographics, readership of publications, television ownership and channel viewing, radio ownership and listenership, Internet access and use, and product ownership and use. Television Audience Measurement (TAM) tracks TV viewership and advertising expenditure. TAM uses metres to track over 20,000 individuals across 26 Class 1 cities and towns in India. It provides minute to minute account of TV viewership patterns, analysis across 50 programme genres according to different times of day and target groups. Available at www.tamindia.com

- qualitative interview-based primary field research using focus group discussions and in-depth interviews.¹³

1.5.1 Determining the Target Group

A campaign to address sex selection has to conceptualise the problem in terms of demand and supply in order to determine the target group. On the **demand side** are the service recipients – those who seek the medical technology and services to determine the sex of the foetus and later to abort it. Service recipients consist of the woman, husband, and conjugal and natal families. On the **supply side** are the doctors and radiologists, who are also part of the larger medical community. A third possible mass media target is the larger society and environment consisting of policy makers, civil society, media, non-governmental organisations and others.

Mass media messaging, by definition, cannot be narrowly selective in its reach, and cannot focus its sights on a target group defined solely by ‘professional’ criteria (such as the medical community). Thus, while doctors who supply sex selection technology and services do need to be stopped, it is not feasible to target them exclusively through mass media. Instead, the medical community can be reached through alternative forms of advocacy and monitoring by professional associations such as the Indian Medical Association and the Federation of Obstetrics and Gynaecological Societies of India. There is also a need for advocacy with the government to strengthen implementation of the Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Technique Act, so that fewer doctors profit from sex selection. It may be possible, however, to include message segments on medical ethics, prevalence of medical malpractice, abuse of reproductive and other medical technology, as part of the overall messaging targeted at the general population.

As a result of being unable to target audiences based on profession, a mass media intervention is best used to target the general population, which can be further disaggregated into two target groups:

- A primary target for a potential mass media campaign could be the service recipient group.
- A secondary target for a potential mass media campaign could be the environment (policy makers, civil society, media and NGOs).

The Primary Target Group: The Service Recipient

The primary objective of a campaign targeting the service recipient group would be to change their attitudes and behaviour. However, the objective of a mass media campaign targeting the service recipient group to improve the overall sex ratio can only be expected in the long-term, over a 10-20 year period. More short-term impact (2-5 years) on the target audiences can be expected in terms of an increased sense of discomfort with participating in, promoting, or encouraging sex selection, and an overall reduction in demand-side motivations.

¹³ The field-based primary research component of this study was designed and conducted by Quantum Social Research.

The Secondary Target Group: The Environment

The primary objective of reaching the secondary target group would be to generate greater awareness and a sense of national urgency about the declining sex ratio, so that there is action on multiple fronts by a range of stakeholders. Greater national awareness is possible in the short-term (2-5 years). However, it could be several years before this translates into concrete action and intervention. Action by the government and policy makers on this issue could include eliminating legal loopholes and more stringent implementation of the law to reduce the supply of sex selection technologies and services. Action by NGOs could include communication and direct intervention at the grassroots level to raise awareness and change attitudes and behaviour. Action by media outlets could include production of creative messaging and devoting greater news-space and airtime to this issue.

The key objective of the qualitative interview-based field research was to gain a deeper understanding of the main target audience – the service recipients.

1.5.2 Primary Research: Objectives and Design

The study of the service recipient group attempted to determine the following elements for a possible mass media campaign:

- **Relationship with mass media**, including:
 - What kind of relationship do audiences have with the main mass media platforms?
 - Why do respondents prefer a particular genre (e.g. daily soaps, serials, talk shows and reality shows)?¹⁴
- **Knowledge and attitudes** towards:
 - reproductive rights;
 - abortion;
 - sex selection;
 - women's health;
 - social change (including the impact of modernity, areas of conflict, anxieties, changing aspirations); and
 - male attitudes to women.

The objective of studying the service recipient's relationship with mass media was to determine what mass media platform and genre would best reach the target group. The objective of analysing the knowledge and attitudes of potential sex selection service recipients was to establish whether the message direction be:

- legal – giving information about the law.
- moral – promoting the notion of right and wrong.

¹⁴ Primary research was used to corroborate data gleaned from secondary research sources such as NRS and TAM.

- information based – giving health based information or information about sex selection and safe abortion.
- or, to unpackage cultural attitudes and behaviour around sex selection.

QUALITATIVE PRIMARY RESEARCH

At a Glance

- Primary research was conducted in one district in each of the four target states.
- Respondents:
 - Male/female
 - married/unmarried
 - ages 15-35
 - older “influencers” (e.g. mother-in-laws)
- Socio-Economic Classification:¹⁷
 - Urban: A2, B1, B2, C
 - Rural: R1, R2
- Class:
 - Upper middle
 - Middle
 - Lower-middle
 - The sample did not cover the very rich or the very poor
- Research covered a rural and urban sample as follows:
 - Punjab: rural
 - Haryana: urban
 - Delhi: urban
 - Rajasthan: both urban and rural
- Primary research methodologies and sample size:
 - 26 focus group discussions
 - 40 in-depth interviews

The primary research findings on the respondents’ relationship with mass media are outlined in Chapter 4, whereas the findings relating to knowledge and attitudes are presented and analysed in Chapter 5.

1.5.2.1 Sample selection and size

Target states

The feasibility study was conducted in four states: Delhi, Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan. Although sex selection is widespread across India, it is currently most acute in the adjoining north Indian states of Delhi, Haryana and Punjab.¹⁵ An influential group of demographers using NFHS-II data have hypothesised that the potential for the phenomenon to increase is greatest in the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, where a deep rooted son preference is simply awaiting information and technology for sex determination and sex selection practices.¹⁶ The feasibility study, therefore, the selected three target states where the problem is currently most acute (Delhi, Haryana and Punjab), as well as Rajasthan, where conditions exist for an escalation of the problem in the very near future.

Rural/Urban

Sex selection is an urban-led phenomenon, with urban areas generally recording greater disparities in sex ratios than rural areas.¹⁸ However, the study decided to cover both a rural and urban sample for the following reasons:

- urban middle classes set consumer, lifestyle and behaviour standards for rural elites;

¹⁵ Punjab has a child (0-6 years) sex ratio of 793, Haryana has 820 and Delhi has 865 girls per 1000 boys (Census 2001).

¹⁶ Retherford, R. and Roy, T.K. 2003, ‘Factors Affecting Sex Selective Abortion in India’, *National Family Health Survey Bulletin*, Number 17, January.

¹⁷ Socio-Economic Classification (SEC) categorises urban households into five groups, namely A, B, C, D and E, on the basis of education and occupation. It is used by most marketing professionals as an indicator of the propensity of urban consumers to purchase different items. A high SEC rating (such as A) suggests that the household has a high propensity to purchase high value items.

¹⁸ In 1991, the rural child sex ratio (0-6 years) was 948 and urban sex ratio was 935. In 2001, the rural sex ratio declined 14 points to 934, while the urban sex ratio declined 32 points to just 903 females (2001 Census).

- there is evidence to suggest that practices of sex selection are expanding rapidly to rural areas; and
- with the exception of Delhi, the remaining three states are overwhelmingly rural.¹⁹

Thus, any potential mass media campaign strategy would have to cover both rural and urban populations.

Male/Female

Although women of reproductive age have been the primary objects of attention in the interventions surrounding sex selection, the decisions regarding sex selection are rarely taken by women in isolation. They are taken either by the extended joint family, by husbands or by the couple together. Any potential mass media campaign would have to take on board male views as well. It was therefore critical for this study to cover both male and female respondents.

Sample Size

The following table outlines the sample size and allocation across the study districts.

District	Focus Group Discussions		Interviews			Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Influencers	
Urban						
Delhi	2	3	6	3	3	17
Jhunjhunu	2	3	3	5	0	13
Ambala	2	3	5	3	0	14
Rural						
Fatehgarh Sahib	2	3	2	3	1	10
Jhunjhunu	2	3	3	2	1	11
Total						66

¹⁹ Haryana is 71% rural, Punjab is 66% rural and Rajasthan is 76.7% rural (2001 Census).

2

Practices of Sex Selection in India: An Overview

Child Sex Ratio (0-6 years)		
	1991	2001
India	945	927
North India		
Punjab	875	793
Haryana	879	820
Delhi	915	865
Rajasthan	916	909
South India		
Tamil Nadu	948	939
Andhra Pradesh	975	964
Karnataka	960	949
Kerala	958	963

Source: Census 2001

2.1 Introduction

The 2001 Census of India reveals a somewhat divided India. Sex selection appears to be more prevalent in north India, although the child sex ratio does show a fall in some southern states between 1991 and 2001. Kerala is the one southern state where child sex ratios have improved since the last Census. Although even in Kerala analysts point to increasing evidence of sex determination and sex selection.¹ Researchers argue that the south is in fact catching up with the north in terms of its anti-female bias in natality, as evidenced in the growth of sex determination clinics in small towns and semi-urban areas in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.²

2.2 Reasons for the Spread of Sex selection

There are many factors that influence sex selection in India. This section outlines three broad factors:

- son preference;
- decline in fertility; and
- availability of technology.

2.2.1 Son preference

Son preference in India is an enduring phenomenon, based on a host of reasons, both old and new. Some of the most commonly accepted reasons for son preference are outlined below.

Indian society is, for the most part, patriarchal, where women move out of their natal home upon marriage and become members of their husbands' families. This

¹ Patel, V. 2002, 'Adverse Juvenile sex ratio in Kerala', *Economic and Political Weekly*, p.2124-2125.

² George, S. and Dahiya, R. 1998, 'Female Foeticide in Rural Haryana', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol XXXIII No. 32, Aug 8-14, pp.2191-2198.

decreases their value to their natal family, since they will eventually leave their family home. Sons are seen to have greater economic utility as family labour and wage earners. Traditionally, women (daughters) are seen primarily as home-based. Those who do work have comparatively low paid work. In Punjab and Haryana, the situation is exacerbated by the marginalisation of female labour as a result of mechanised agriculture. Thus, while sons promise upward social and economic mobility, daughters are often seen as a burden and in some cases causing family debt and penury.

Dowry (payment in cash and kind by the bride's family to the groom's family) – though illegal – is thriving. It has spread to all communities: rich, poor, upper caste and lower caste. The spread of a consumer culture and the availability of branded products have made dowry very lucrative. In several places, notably in Punjab, the shift to cash crops and greater liquid wealth has also fuelled the practice of dowry. Thus, a daughter's marriage is a prohibitively expensive proposition for parents. From this perception of the daughter as a financial burden was born the popular sex selection catchphrase: "Better 500 rupees now (on the sex selective abortion) than 50,000 rupees (on the dowry) later."³ Furthermore, only sons can perform cremation rites for most Hindus, thus ensuring freedom from the cycle of rebirth and enhancing the value of having a son.

The system of descent, continuation of family name, and patterns of inheritance are all also patrilineal, with few exceptions (notably, some communities in Kerala and in the northeast), reinforcing a subordinate position for women. Some researchers suggest that the propertied classes do not want daughters because their sons-in-law may demand a share of the property.⁴

As far as women (mothers) are concerned, bearing sons enhances their value within the family, ensures better treatment, and vastly improves their power and bargaining position. Giving birth to a daughter on the other hand, is often an invitation to abuse and ridicule and threats of divorce and desertion.

According to some researchers, son preference, though strong, is declining marginally in most states.⁵ They conclude this by analysing women's ideal sex ratio (the ratio of ideal number of sons to ideal number of daughters) which, for India as a whole fell from 1.43 to 1.35 in the years between NFHS I and NFHS II. However, these ideal sex ratios are still much higher than the biological norm of 1.05, suggesting that there continues to be potential for increasing sex selection.

³ Gupte, M. 2003, 'A walk down memory lane: an insider's reflection on the campaign against sex selective abortions', Unpublished Newsletter, MASUM, Pune, India.

⁴ Patel, V. 2003, 'Political Economy of Missing Girls', *Missing Girls in India: Science, Gender Relations, and the Political Economy of Emotions*, Workshop in Delhi, India, Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi.

⁵ Retherford, R. and Roy, T.K. 2003, *Factors Affecting Sex Selective Abortion in India and 17 Major States*, National Family Health Survey Subject Reports, Number 21, January, p. 16.

2.2.2 The two child norm and the decline in fertility

As India undergoes its fertility transition, the conditions are ripe for an increase in sex selective behaviour. India has had over 50 years of publicity on the two-child norm. Throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, the government pursued population control policies. Although by 2000 there was a shift, with the National Population Policy speaking in the relatively non-coercive and target-free language of a 'small family norm' (as opposed to the two child norm), several states designed their own population policies that deter parents from having a third child. Due in part to government policies and economic and social pressures, there is today both a voluntary and coerced acceptance of a two-child norm and consequent decline in fertility.⁶ It is an established fact that in patriarchal cultures, son preference intensifies in the transition period when fertility is declining. Thus, a decline in overall fertility has also served to increase son preference.

2.2.3 The availability of technology

Sex selection first became possible in the 1970s with the advent of amniocentesis technology. Punjab led the way, advertising the first commercial amniocentesis facility in 1979.⁷ Also used extensively in the early days of sex selection is a technique known as chorionic villus sampling. This was soon replaced from the 1980s onwards with the much less invasive and much less expensive ultrasonography.

The spread of information about the technology and the easy access to inexpensive ultrasounds, sex selection, once restricted to the economically prosperous, was by the end of the 1980s a mass phenomenon. Newspaper articles highlighted the availability of mobile sex selection facilities in the small towns of Haryana.⁸ They not only offered sex determination tests but also offered immediate abortions. Today the technology is widely available in rural and urban areas.

2.3 Who Decides?

Decision making has been one of the most complex and perhaps least studied aspects of abortion behaviour in India. The traditional silence around abortion in general has contributed to this. However, in the last decade and a half, ever since researchers began seriously engaging with the phenomenon of sex selection, there have been a number of studies and surveys that attempt to identify just who

⁶ Das Gupta, M. and Visaria, L. 1996, 'Son preference and excess female mortality in India's demographic transition' in *Sex Preference for Children and Gender Discrimination in Asia*, Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs (KIHASA), Seoul, Korea.

⁷ Newspapers in Amritsar openly advertised the New Bhandari Ante-natal Sex Determination Clinics, which served to draw public attention to the spread of this phenomenon.

⁸ Retherford, R. and Roy, T.K. 2003, *Factors Affecting Sex Selective Abortion in India and 17 Major States*, National Family Health Survey Subject Reports, Number 21, January, p. 16.

decides whether a sex determination test is taken and who decides to abort a female foetus.⁹

These questions are critical for a mass media study trying to zero in on a target audience. It is also necessary for a potential mass media campaign to consider the multiple layers of decision making that finally culminate in the practice of sex selection; for it is in between these multiple layers of decision making where potential moments of hesitation can be located and targeted in order to facilitate behaviour change. The picture, predictably, is anything but simple.

By and large, decisions around pregnancy and abortion are taken not by the woman alone, but by the family, or by the woman along with her husband. The husband plays a pivotal role in all pregnancy related decisions and, in case of a conflict of opinion, will generally prevail. This is a widely accepted practice with near unanimous social approval. Indeed, it is considered the 'right' of the conjugal family to take or, at the very least, participate in the decision about whether a pregnancy is wanted or unwanted.

There are two stages of decision making involved in sex selection. First is the decision to take a sex determination test. If it is a female foetus, the second decision involves the actual abortion. The decision to take a test appears to be largely taken by the husband and wife, although in some instances mothers-in-law do suggest the test. One micro-level study concluded that women themselves wanted to find out the sex of the child but have to inform their husbands because of the expense involved in the test.¹⁰ In some cases, doctors and ANMs are the first to suggest an ultrasound. Given the enormous power that doctors wield, a doctor's advice is often as good as a decision.

In terms of a decision to abort, the majority of women report that they, together with their husbands, were the primary decision makers in deciding to terminate the pregnancy. In one Delhi-based study,¹¹ contrary to popular stereotype, the mother-in-law took the crucial decision only in 1% of the cases. If a couple wants

⁹ This report has drawn upon the following articles for an understanding of decision making patterns:
 Ganatra, B., Hirve, S. and Rao, V.N. 2001, 'Sex Selective Abortion: Evidence from a Community-based study in Western India', *Asia-Pacific Population Journal*, Vol.16 No. 2.
 Ganatra, B. 2003, 'Coercion, Control or Choice' *Seminar* Vol. 532
 George, S. and Dahiya, R. 1998, 'Female Foeticide in Rural Haryana', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol XXXIII No. 32, Aug 8-14, pp.2191-2198.
 Hamid, I. 2005, *Rising Sons, Setting Daughters* (unpublished report). Action India, New Delhi.
 Larsen, M and Hatti, N. 2004, "Family Structures and Declining Child Sex Ratios in India." Part of a series within the ongoing project *Lives at Risk: Discrimination of Female Children in modern India*. Swedish Research Council.
 Rabindranathan, S. 2003, *Women's decision to undergo abortion: A Study based on Delhi clinics*, Indian Journal of Gender Studies 10:3, Sage Publications, New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London.
 Shiva, M. and Bose, A. 2003, *Darkness at Noon: Female Foeticide in India*, Voluntary Health Association of India, funded by Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India. New Delhi.
 Unisa, S., Prakasam, C.P., Sinha, R. K. and Bhagat, R. B. 2003, *Evidence of Sex Selective Abortion from Two Cultural Settings of India: A Study of Haryana and Tamil Nadu*, International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai.
 Visaria, L. 2003, *Sex Selective Abortion in the States of Gujarat and Haryana: Some empirical evidence*, HealthWatch Trust, (typescript) New Delhi.
¹⁰ Visaria, L. 2003, *Sex Selective Abortion in the States of Gujarat and Haryana: Some empirical evidence*, HealthWatch Trust, (typescript) New Delhi.
¹¹ Rabindranathan, S. 2003, *Women's decision to undergo abortion: A Study based on Delhi clinics*, Indian Journal of Gender Studies 10:3, Sage Publications, New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London.

an abortion in the first trimester without a sex determination test (for reasons such as spacing or limiting family size), then it is often performed without the knowledge of others. Other family members, particularly the mother-in-law, were significantly more likely to know or to be involved in the decision if it was a case of a sex selective abortion. Many women who already had one or two daughters reported their own desires to abort a female foetus, particularly among upper caste social groups.¹² They said they wanted an abortion, but would still have to get permission from elders to exercise their wish, thus clearly underlining the fact that no matter what the reason for the abortion, it is almost never the woman's decision alone.

However, many women accept and internalise the desires of their conjugal families as their own, and may even feel that they are acting out their own desires. These women are candid in expressing their levels of son preference and reported feeling little remorse about aborting a female foetus. With the present level of research, it is difficult to gauge whether women express their own feelings or merely reflect and echo the dominant views held by the conjugal family.

Even though women are generally expected to accept family wishes as their own, there are some conditions under which women's own desires can come into greater play. For example, older women who have proven their fertility (preferably by producing sons) can exercise greater choice. Similarly, working women with greater economic independence and greater mobility do have more of a say in the decision, and on rare occasions women with independent means and alternative support systems can by-pass the conjugal family decision making process all together.¹³

Decision making around pregnancy and abortion differs in joint and nuclear families. In joint families, mothers-in-law are more likely to know or be involved in the woman's intention to undergo a sex determination test and sex selection. The same is true of other family members such as fathers-in-law and sisters-in-law. In joint families, the older generation has greater influence over the younger generation, including financial control. And since allocation of (joint family) resources constitutes one of the main factors upon which son preference and daughter discrimination is legitimised, the joint family ethos itself legitimises a role for the extended family in pregnancy-related and sex selection decisions.

In nuclear families, children become financially independent sooner and the older generation has less influence in important decisions. Some women in nuclear families reported that they did not have to consult other family members before undergoing a sex determination test. Often decisions about the visit to the sex determination clinic were kept secret between husband and wife. They would go to town under some other pretext, get the test done, if need be get the abortion, and then return as if nothing happened.

¹² Visaria, L. 2003, *Sex Selective Abortion in the States of Gujarat and Haryana: Some empirical evidence*, Health Watch Trust, (typescript) New Delhi.

¹³ Ganatra, B. 2003, 'Coercion, Control or Choice', *Seminar* Vol. 532, p.21.

One Maharashtra-based study conducted in-depth interviews with 12 women who had undergone sex selective abortions to try and understand the complex pathways to decision making.¹⁴ Two prominent patterns emerged:

(1) Although there was no stated family demand to undergo a sex selective abortion, the woman herself “decided” on the abortion, clearly in response to unstated family pressure and threats of the husband’s remarriage. These women knew they had to produce a certain number of sons to survive in the conjugal home and did not want to undergo repeated pregnancies and childbirth in order to meet their obligations.

“My mother-in-law used to say: ‘I won’t say anything but tomorrow if my son starts feeling that he should have a son and he thinks about remarrying, then don’t blame me at that time. You manage that.’ After such things, I have fear in my mind so I thought I will try and go for checking (the sex).’ *A statement by a 21 year old woman with two daughters.*¹⁵

(2) Family elders directly and openly stated their demand for a male birth and asked the woman to undergo a sex determination test. The woman herself was often opposed to undergoing the test, but in the face of the husband’s indifference or his active agreement with the family elders, she felt helpless to resist.

“This time my mother-in-law wanted a boy. So she decided we should check it (the sex of the foetus). My husband did not say anything. What can I say? I do whatever elderly people in the family say.” *A statement by a 21-year-old housewife, who had two sex selective abortions.*¹⁶

Clearly, decision making around sex selective abortion is complex, and with joint families increasingly giving way to nuclear families, it is possible that decision making patterns are undergoing a change. As more women enter the job market, it is possible that they will exercise greater choice. Much of this remains to be determined. But, one thing is clear; a mass media messaging strategy seeking to change behaviour around sex selection will have to target an audience wider than just women of reproductive age.

2.4 The Law

There are two Acts which pertain to practices of sex selection:

- the Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Technique Act and
- the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act.

The Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Technique (PCPNDT) Act Although government imposed a ban on the use of sex determination tests in all government facilities in 1978, private providers flourished unregulated for the next

¹⁴ Ganatra, B., Hirve, S. and Rao, V. N., 2001, ‘Sex Selective Abortion: Evidence from a Community-based study in Western India’, *Asia-Pacific Population Journal*, Vol.16 No. 2. p.115.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

two decades. In the early 1980s, a coalition of activists known as the Forum Against Sex Determination and Sex Pre-selection Techniques stepped into the fray and began linking sex selection to the larger issue of gender-based violence. The media joined the campaign and in 1994 the PNDT (Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques) Act was finally passed by the government, banning the use of all diagnostic techniques for the purpose of determining the sex of the foetus. The act became effective throughout India in 1996. Amendments in 2003 brought pre-conception genetic manipulation into the purview of the Act and made it the PCPNDT Act.

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act

The other law affecting sex selection is the MTP Act, enacted in 1971. The act specifies reasons for which an abortion can be legally performed, who can perform it, and the type of facility in which it can be done. As revised in 1975, the Act says that an abortion is legal for a woman if the pregnancy endangers her life, causes grave injury to her mental or physical health, might result in a child with physical and mental abnormalities, is the result of rape, or results from contraceptive failure. Contraceptive failure is legal grounds for abortion only for married women, but it does in effect legalise abortion on demand. It can be legally performed up to 12 weeks gestation, but with concurrence of two medical doctors, an abortion performed up to 20 weeks gestation is also legal. Most sex selective abortions today take place in the early part of the second trimester, for that is when the sex of the foetus is generally detected. These abortions therefore get protection under the MTP Act as being the legitimate exercise of a woman's right to terminate a pregnancy (since no woman actually admits that she is aborting because the foetus is female).¹⁷

There is a potential clash between the two laws outlined above. One seeks to illegalise sex selection and sex selective abortion, while the other provides a legal cover for precisely the same act. This clash goes to the heart of the moral and intellectual issues in the debates surrounding sex selection – debates which have a direct bearing on mass media messaging.

On the one hand, a woman's (legally protected) right to choose and to have an abortion is part of her reproductive rights. On the other hand, is the right of females to be born, and of society to protect and preserve a gender balance.

The conflict between these two positions is reflected in much of the mass media messaging on this issue.

¹⁷ Although abortion was legalised in India long before other countries, it was never preceded by a civil society campaign or articulated within a 'reproductive rights' discourse. In the absence of a civil society push factor, there has been failure to follow up the law with adequate recognised safe abortion facilities

Using Mass Media to Reduce Sex Selection: An Evaluation of Messages

3

3.1 Introduction

Awareness raising through various forms of communication has been an intrinsic part of non-government civil society campaigns against sex selection for almost two decades. Mass media campaigns on this issue, however, have been created largely in the last 10 to 12 years, primarily by the government, following the enactment of the PNMT Act in 1994. Shortly thereafter, the government made extensive use of newspapers and print advertisements, and hoardings and wall paintings, at the district and the sub-district levels explicitly to publicise the law.¹ These campaigns have succeeded in that there is today widespread awareness of the illegality of sex determination. In more recent years, both government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have attempted to use a variety of mass media (including television, radio and print) to go beyond just talking about the law to try to address the attitudes that motivate sex selective behaviour.

These mass media outputs present a rich source of information and experience. It is critical to take stock of these mass media and communication materials in order to propose a strategy that effectively builds upon them. Also, given how complex the phenomenon of sex selection is, and how carefully messaging against sex selection must be constructed considering the fine line between avoiding stigmatising abortion and being 'anti-sex selection', this study has attempted to critically evaluate some recent anti-sex selection messaging. The effort is to move mass media messaging towards behaviour change objectives targeted at sex selection without compromising women's reproductive rights. The effort is also to simply assess whether mass media messaging on this issue does have the potential to affect behaviour change and reduce practices of sex selection.

Mass media messages on the issue of sex selection use a variety of formats and platforms, including short and long feature films, short public service advertisements on radio and television, TV drama serials; IEC (Information, Education, Communication) material such as pamphlets, posters and flip charts; news stories and feature articles in newspapers and magazines, print

¹ *Sex Selection in India: Ending the Practice of Pre-birth Elimination of Females: Changing the mindset*. A National Advocacy Strategy. Final Draft. 3 June. 2005. p.17.

advertisements and photo essays. Many of these outputs have been produced by the government, primarily by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare as well as by individual state government departments. Mass media outputs have also been created by private producers, NGOs and mainstream media organisations and journalists. This study has reviewed a mixed sample of outputs using different formats on different mass media platforms, produced by government and NGOs.

3.2 Government Mass Media Outputs

In 2001, the Government of India funded a short feature film (27 minutes) called *Atmajaa*. Directed by filmmaker Nila Madhab Panda, *Atmajaa* was broadcast on Doordarshan and screened at several government and non-government fora on sex selection. *Atmajaa* tackled the issue of sex selection through the stories of two pregnant women and the choices forced on them by their husbands and families. The film also sought to foreground the PNDT Act and difficulties in its implementation, by having a committed and honest gynaecologist play the main protagonist, who heads the authority mandated under the Act to monitor and implement the ban on sex determination.

Between 1999 and 2002, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare supported several full-length feature films dealing with various aspects of gender inequality, though not with sex selection directly. These include:

- *Hari Bhari*, directed by Shyam Benegal, which dealt with reproductive rights.
- *Kairi*, directed by Amol Palekar, which dealt with the girl child.
- *Daman*, directed by Kalpana Lajmi, which took on the issue of domestic violence.

In addition, over the past several years, the government has produced a series of public service advertisements for All India Radio and Doordarshan. Storylines from some of the most recent television public service advertisements include:

- using the plaintive voice of the absent girl, who could have been born if she had not been aborted, asking her parents why she was killed in the womb, because, given a chance, she too could have made them happy.
- the voice of a girl speaking to her pregnant would-be mother from the womb: “I want to meet you mummy! Promise me you will not get the [sex determination] test done.”
- a man described as “the king of crime but who still has a heart.” The man is shown scolding his weakling, married son who is about to take his wife to abort a female foetus. The man says to his son: “When you cannot bear your daughter getting even a tiny scratch, how can you possibly kill a female foetus?” Message: A macho man is anti-sex selective abortion.
- uses a successful female television celebrity with happy parents to give the message that girls can be successful and are the pride and joy of their parents.

Most of the public service advertisements described above conclude with the message (in voice over) that sex determination is not only a crime, it is also a sin.

3.3 Private Productions: TV Drama Serials

Two notable television drama serials tackled the issue of sex selection, *Atmajaa* and *Astitva*.

Atmajaa

Atmajaa or “Born from the Soul” (2004) was a 13 part tele-serial produced in 2004. Inspired by the short feature of the same, directed again by Nila Madhab Panda and funded by Plan International, it was telecast on various Doordarshan channels at different times.

The serial contextualised the problem in an urban, upper middle class north Indian family. The main protagonist was Mamta, a young married woman, who fights against her conjugal family to save her unborn female child. In order to resist conjugal family pressures to have a sex selective abortion, she leaves home and tries to make a new, independent life for herself. The serial was targeted primarily at women in the reproductive age group to make them aware of their reproductive rights and of the right of the girl child to survive. The secondary target groups were families, communities, the medical establishment and judiciary, to make them critically aware of sex selection and of the provisions of the PCPNDT Act.

In 2004, the Delhi-based Centre for Advocacy Research (CFAR) conducted a five-city audience impact study on *Atmajaa*. The study found that young women were the most decisive supporters of the serial, and that young women, married or unmarried, were unanimous in their approval of greater gender empowerment. In addition, there was a small but critical mass of unmarried young women who were aware, candid and open to new attitudes. Married women, however, felt that women’s rights need to be located within the family. Therefore, conflict resolution must take place within the domain of the family. Among this audience segment, Mamta’s decision to leave the conjugal home provoked anxiety and discomfort. The study found that, for the most part, married women tended to defer to the opinions of the older generation. Older women, old enough to be mothers-in-law, had a compelling but uneasy relationship with the serial. Many of them felt stereotyped in the serial, and felt uneasy about being portrayed as regressive and authoritarian. Male viewers generally felt marginalised and felt that their challenges had not been adequately represented in the storyline.

The impact study concluded with the following key recommendations:

- As an experiment in communicating a social message through a drama serial format, *Atmajaa* was worthwhile and should be supported.
- Older women and men would have to be made an active part of the discourse and given a greater personal stake in the issue in order for the message to reach them.

- The format of a long-running soap rather than a 13 episode serial would be more effective to communicate this complex issue.
- There was enormous scope for serials like this to be interactive and that producers of such drama serials should seek viewer feedback on the treatment of issues and resolution of conflicts.

Atmajaa was revived in 2006 with new episodes funded by the international NGO IFES. The new episodes of the serial began airing on Doordarshan in early 2006.

Astitva

Astitva: Ek Prem Kahani (2002-2004) was a long running serial centred on a strong, female character, Dr. Simran, a gynaecologist heading her own nursing home, who falls in love with and marries a man 10 years younger than her. It is the story of her lives, loves, challenges and the social issues she confronts. *Astitva* was directed by well-known commercial television director Ajay Sinha (best known for an earlier drama series '*Hasratein*'). Over a three and a half-year period, 668 episodes of *Astitva* aired on Zee TV at 9:00 pm, four to five times a week. Four episodes in 2004 dealt with the issue of sex selection.

Dr. Simran encounters a young accident victim, Sudha Rastogi, who has come to the nursing home. The accident took place because Sudha was running away from her husband and mother-in-law, who were trying to force her to have a sex selective abortion. Thus begins Dr. Simran's engagement with the issue. The four episodes of *Astitva* dealt with legal issues – Dr. Simran files a case against the guilty husband and his mother. They also raised the issue of reproductive rights of women and ended with messages about loving the girl child. As Dr. Simran says at one point that women can only think about fighting for their other rights when they get the right to life. In the final episode dealing with sex selection, Dr. Simran does a public service advertisement for television in which she reads a poem – *janm lene do mujhe* ("let me be born").

Astitva was generally well regarded for its progressive stand on several issues, and indeed for including a range of social issues in its storylines, such as breast cancer, rape, eye donation and sex selection. However, while *Astitva* received tremendous critical acclaim, including praise from women's organisations, it never came close to the popularity of the "Saas-Bahu" (drama) serials. *Astitva*'s popularity remained restricted to an urbane, upper class audience. According to *Astitva*'s own scriptwriters, the construction of Dr. Simran's character as an independent professional was too removed from women's actual lives to enlist real engagement. Her choices, for example, marrying a man 10 years younger, were perhaps too radical for the average female viewer.

Ghar ki Lakshmi Betiyaan and Betiyaan apni yaa... Paraaya Dhan

Ghar ki Lakshmi Betiyaan (Zee TV) and *Betiyaan apni yaa... Paraaya Dhan* (Star One) are two new serials in India. Currently available information about their storylines suggests that they do not deal directly with the issue of sex selection. Instead, they

go one step further and engage with the position of daughters in the average Indian family.

Ghar ki Lakshmi Betiyaan launched in September 2006. According to an official Zee TV release, the serial will address the persisting gender discrimination in Indian society by “highlighting certain myths in our society.” *Betiyaan apni yaa... Paraaya Dhan*, which is set to launch in October 2006, is the story of six daughters and one son born into a landlord’s family. The father constantly rebukes the daughters who were born only because of the family’s quest for a son. The eldest daughter Krishna is the main protagonist in the serial.

It will be essential for any proposed mass media campaign to observe the message direction that both these serials choose to take, as well the audience response to those messages.

3.4 Private Productions: Feature Films

The best-known Indian feature film to deal specifically with the issue of the declining sex ratio is *Mathrubhoomi: A Nation Without Women* (2003-2004). Directed by Manish Jha, *Mathrubhoomi* is a violent representation of a future world without women. The film, which opens with a scene of female infanticide, is set in rural Bihar, in a village where no wedding has taken place for 15 years, because there are no women to marry. In this desperate, dehumanised village lives a father with five sons. By a quirk of fate they encounter the last surviving woman, Kalki.

The film follows Kalki’s life as she is married to all five brothers, raped by each one, then by the father and turned into a sex slave in the family stable. Reviewers said *Mathrubhoomi* tackled a novel subject and had powerful performances. But at the box office the film was a failure. Some critics noted it was ahead of its time, that audiences were simply not ready to engage seriously with the possibility of a womanless world.

3.5 NGO Communication Material

Non-governmental organisations and agencies of the United Nations have aimed to raise awareness and change behaviours regarding sex selection through the production of information, education and communication (IEC) materials. Below are examples of some of these materials.

- *Simatta Kanya Ka Astitva* (“The Shrinking Existence of a Young Girl”), a drama on female foeticide was produced by the Population Foundation of India (PFI), with funding from Plan International, in 2005. The programme was part of a communication package that included an anchor led studio-based discussion on sex selection. The storyline of the drama focused on elderly parents who keep waiting for their son to come to their aid in a time of need. Instead, the one who does finally come to help them is their daughter. The anchor of the communication package summed up the message in the following rhyme: “a

son is a son until he gets himself a wife. But a daughter is a daughter for the rest of your life.” In early 2006, PFI was planning to dub the package into five regional languages with a view to approaching Doordarshan’s regional channels for telecast. PFI has also produced a poster series on sex selection and the girl child.

- The Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI) has produced a poster series, two sets of flip charts (on abortion and sex selection) and a research study (“Darkness at Noon”) among other material.
- In 2005 the National Foundation of India supported Ruhani Kaur, a photo-journalist, to shoot a photo essay on the impact of sex selection and the declining sex ratio on the lives of women and men in rural Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan. The photo exhibition, “India’s Invisible Women” has been shown across India.
- The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has produced audio-visual and printed material on various aspects of sex selection, included information-based material mapping the sex ratio across India.

In addition to the material described above, a host of NGOs, development organisations and researchers have produced pamphlets, handbooks, posters, research studies and other IEC material. There have also been a large number of feature articles and news stories on the issue of sex selection in both mainstream and alternative media.

3.6 Evaluation of Communication Messages

Messaging and communication material on sex selection fall into two broad categories in terms of target audiences:

- (1) messages aimed at changing behaviour among that section of the population that practices sex selection, such as Government of India television spots; and
- (2) advocacy messages and material whose intended to target civil society and policy makers, such as material produced by UNFPA.

Although the present feasibility study has reviewed both types of messages, the focus of the study is on behaviour change messaging.

There is no available documentation that suggests any audience pre-testing of the communication messages described above, nor, barring CFAR’s assessment of *Atmajaa*, has there been any impact assessment using knowledge, attitudes and practice parameters. There is, therefore, little basis on which to evaluate the impact of these messages on behaviour change. One can, at best, critically evaluate them on the basis of opinion given by communication experts and by experts engaged in interventions in the field of sex selection. The evaluation given below is perforce general and aimed only at highlighting broad trends in the area of anti-sex selection messaging.

Vigorous advocacy campaigns have succeeded in highlighting the issue of the alarming adverse sex ratio. Information-based messaging about the PCPNDT Act has led to an increased awareness about the illegality of sex determination. However, messages around the illegality of sex-selection (in both content and imagery) are largely centred on the act of abortion, not on the use of technology for sex determination. Thus, in the absence of an equally vigorous campaign about the MTP Act, PCPNDT messaging runs the risk of making abortion seem illegal, and can potentially result in the denial of safe abortion to women. Further, instead of criminalising the medical community, the messages can have the inadvertent effect of inducing misinformation and fear in the woman seeking legal abortion services.

Anti-sex selection messages tend to be moralistic. The notion of sin ("*paap*") is promoted aggressively. One radio message tells the audience that they should at least have fear of how they will be judged in the eyes of God before they commit the sin of sex selection ("*bhagwan se daro*"). These messages adopt a judgmental tone, which generally serves to make viewers defensive and block communication, rather than pose the issue as a dilemma to the audience in an interactive or open-ended manner, which might serve to draw the audience in. Instead of tackling sex selection motivations head-on and engaging with them, the messages, for the most part, tend to present the issue in terms of absolute right and absolute wrong. This leaves little room for the audience to negotiate its way out of sex selective behaviour without admitting to having sinned.

Some messages invest the foetus with human life and viability, making its elimination seem morally abhorrent and akin to murder. These messages are mostly violent in content and imagery. The scripts of some of these television and radio public service advertisements speak of "murder of girls" and "killing of females." The image construction often employs splashes of blood suggesting a violent death. Sometimes these messages amplify the physical details of a medical abortion in order to repel potential sex selective abortion seekers.

A disproportionately large number of anti-selection messages use medical images, such as an enlarged visual of a foetus, of an ultrasound machine or of an ultrasound negative. This can be alienating to general audiences. It also shifts the focus away from the sociological root of the problem, to the medical act of aborting the female foetus, which is, a consequence. It also serves to once again, locate the problem in the pregnant woman.

The print media has tended to favour stories, as have some television storylines, about mothers who saved their unborn female foetuses against difficult odds (primarily by battling with the husbands and conjugal families). This places the moral onus for preventing sex-selection solely on women (as mothers). In fact, as one particular television public service advertisement says in its concluding line, "not only is it [sex selection] a crime but, for a woman to even contemplate such an act is utterly sinful." The manner in which the message is delivered seems to imply that it is far more sinful for women to contemplate sex selection than it is

for men. Indeed, for the most part, messaging around sex-selection tends to address women – ignoring the fact that sex selection decisions are not made by women alone.

Several messages, which attempt to promote positive images and portrayals of girls and women, continue to be embedded in the very same traditional, patriarchal family contexts and roles that are at the core of son preference. The focus tends to be more on protecting girls/daughters than on empowering them.

3.7 Conclusion: Does the issue of sex selection lend itself to mass media messaging?

Current mass media messaging on sex selection has chartered a great deal of unknown terrain and proved that mass media platforms – print, radio and television – can be used for messaging on what is a sensitive, delicate issue, centred as it is around the act of pregnancy and abortion. Given the scale of the problem of sex selection, and the scale of India as a country, mass media is an important communication option. It is evident that without extensive use of print, radio and television content, it would be difficult in a country of India's size to adequately publicise the law banning sex determination tests.² At the same time it is important not to overstate the case for mass media to the exclusion of other forms of communication, given that large parts of rural India remain outside the mass media net.

However, within the framework of mass media, the content of sex selection messaging thus far has tended to be moral ("it is wrong, it is a sin") and legal (attempting to use the threat of legal action as a deterrent). In the absence of pre-testing or impact assessment of these outputs, it remains to be determined whether moral and legal messaging has any impact on behaviour change.

With a few notable exceptions, mass media has not directly tackled the attitudes and motivations that make sex selection a rational behavioural choice for so many. This remains a challenge for a mass media output. Nor has messaging challenged sex selection through the concept of reproductive rights or by using women's health as a trigger, choosing instead to largely use the morality pitch. The two fiction drama serials that dealt with sex selection, *Astitva* and *Atmajaa*, also set up a moral dichotomy between right and wrong in their storylines, rather than seeking to explore the shades of grey. These serials do, however, suggest just how well the entire arena of sex selection (embedded in the domain of family, patriarchy and gender relations) lends itself to a fiction drama format.

² Although it must be noted that the government has also made good use of its large network of health workers, anganwadi workers and village level institutions, such as Primary Health Centres, to promote these messages, this is particularly crucial in areas outside the purview of major mass media platforms.

Thus, mass media communication, using a range of platforms (print, television and radio), has already proved to be effective for information-based messaging. There has to be continued and extensive use of mass media to address the information gaps that still remain about the law, as well as fill gaps in other areas of information that impact decisions around sex selection, including health, reproductive rights and abortion rights in general. No other communication platform can match the scale of mass media outlets. The question of which mass media format is preferred by target audiences is explored in greater depth in Chapter 4.

4

Towards a Mass Media Campaign: Analysing the relationship between target audiences and mass media

4.1 Introduction

The reach of mass media in India is growing exponentially. But access remains uneven, with the chief discriminator being the place of residence – major cities versus towns and rural versus urban areas. In order to assess the feasibility of using mass media on the issue of sex selection, this study examined secondary data¹ on media access and habits in the four target states. Following this assessment, the primary research component of the study assessed the relationship between the identified target audiences and the dominant mass media platforms and programming genres.

4.2 Media Habits in the Target States

Television dominates in all the target states and therefore suggests itself as the mass media campaign driver. Television is followed by print and radio. The following sections detail the media habits in the four target states.

4.2.1 Television

TV Ownership

Of the four target states, television ownership² is highest in Delhi, with 90.3% of households owning a television. Punjab follows with 77.5% television households and Haryana with 70% television households. Rajasthan has the lowest television connectivity, with less than half of its households (45.7%) owning a television.

Cable and Satellite

Cable and satellite connectivity in the four target states follows a similar pattern to TV ownership. The highest cable and satellite connectivity is in Delhi, with 74% (out of 90.3% TV households) having access to cable and satellite channels. Haryana

¹ National Readership Survey (NRS) 2005 was used to determine TV and radio ownership and access to cable and satellite channels, while Television Audience Measurement (TAM) was used to determine most watched shows and TV genres, according to TV ratings.

² NRS 2005: TV ownership, radio ownership and cable and satellite households are based on household data. Frequency of watching TV, listening to radio, frequency of reading, top 10 most watched channels, top 10 most read newspapers, magazines, and top genre of magazines, languages read and spoken, are based on individual data.

follows with 40% (out of 70% TV households) and Punjab with 33.8% (of the 77.5% TV households) having access to cable and satellite. In Rajasthan, only 16.9% of TV households (45.7%) have access to cable and satellite channels.

Rural/Urban divides in TV ownership and cable and satellite connectivity

Apart from Delhi, which does not have a rural population segment, there are significant rural/urban variations in the remaining three states. The differences are sharpest in Rajasthan.

TV Ownership / Cable and Satellite Connectivity		
State	Urban %	Rural %
Punjab	89.9 / 66	71.2 / 17.5
Haryana	86.9 / 65.1	62 / 27.8
Rajasthan	78.6 / 39.9	34.8 / 9.3

NRS 2005 household data

Given that each of these states is largely rural the rural television consumption patterns are important. For the most part, as expected, both television ownership and cable and satellite connectivity drop in rural areas (in rural Rajasthan, it drops to as low as 9.3% of TV households have access to cable and satellite channels). For rural households with television access, the viewing pattern becomes Doordarshan dominated.

Data from the National Readership Survey (NRS) 2005 suggests a domination of Doordarshan and Star Plus. Doordarshan (DD1) is first among the “normally watched” channels in rural Punjab, rural Haryana and rural and urban Rajasthan. In urban Rajasthan, popularity of Star Plus appears to be growing, with 29.8% of viewers listing it as their most normally watched channel, just behind the 43.2% who mentioned Doordarshan. Star Plus is number one in the list of ‘normally watched’ channels in urban Punjab, urban Haryana and Delhi.

This data does not conclusively mean that there is a complete takeover of cable channels (notably Star Plus) even in cable and satellite dominated markets such as Delhi. For example, even though Doordarshan does not show up in the NRS list of top five ‘normally watched’ channels in Delhi, Television Audience Measurement (TAM) data tells a different story. According to TAM 2006 data for two weeks,³ the top 10 programmes in both Delhi and Rajasthan were on Doordarshan.

Preferred Programme Format

Across the target states and bridging rural and urban and gender divides, there is one single genre of programming that dominates TV viewing habits – the fiction drama serial.

³ TAM data is given for the weeks January 1-7 and January 8-14, 2006.

Among the top 100 programs viewed by females 15 years and older, this is how the fiction serial stood in the four states:⁴

- Punjab/Haryana: 71 of the top 100 shows were fiction serials.
- Delhi: 76 of the top 100 shows were fiction serials.
- Rajasthan: 53 of the top 100 shows were fiction serials.

Among the top 100 programs viewed by men 15 years and older, the fiction serial was not as high as among females but remains significant:

- Punjab/Haryana: 56 of the top 100 shows were fiction serials.
- Delhi: 55 of the top 100 shows were fiction serials.
- Rajasthan: 41 of the top 100 shows were fiction serials.

Preferred Language

Both NRS and TAM data concur that Hindi language programming is preferred in all four states. In both Punjab and Rajasthan, the regional languages surface only occasionally in particular genres of programming.⁵ For example in Punjab, the following genres of Punjabi language programmes appear in the top 100: news, feature film, and drama serial. In Rajasthan's top 100 programmes, three programmes on Doordarshan's regional Kendra (DD Rajasthan) use some amount of Rajasthani – *Gorband*, *Cheermi*, and *Sanskriti*. Of these, *Gorband* is a regional music programme and the other two are arts and culture based programmes.

4.2.2 Print

Frequency of reading at least once a week is relatively high across the four target states and close to the all India average of 45.6%.⁶ Delhi, with its average literacy rate of 82%, leads with 69.8% of its population reading once a week. Haryana follows with 53.1% of its population reading once a week. Rajasthan, despite a low average literacy rate of 61% (Census 2001) has 44.7% of its population reading once a week. Punjab, despite a relatively higher average literacy rate of 70%, has the lowest readership among the target states with 43.1% of the population reading at least once a week.

News, current affairs and women's genres are the most popular formats to read. Hindi is the preferred language among both newspapers and magazines. Among newspapers, English is the second most popular language in Delhi, Haryana and Rajasthan. In Punjab, Punjabi is the number two language among newspapers.

⁴ Data is based on TAM data taking an average over a four week period from 28 May to 24 June, 2006. Note TAM data for Punjab and Haryana is combined with Himachal Pradesh and Chandigarh.

⁵ Based on TAM data for the week of May 14-20, 2006.

⁶ This section is based on NRS 2005 (individual data).

4.2.3 Radio

Delhi and Haryana have higher frequency of listening to radio⁷ – described by NRS as “heard at least once a week” – than Punjab and Rajasthan (Delhi 36.8% and Haryana 25.3%). This is due largely to the increasing popularity of FM radio. Delhi lists Radio Mirchi, Radio City and Red FM as its top three radio channels. Haryana is somewhat similar with Radio Mirchi, Radio City and AIR (National) occupying its top three slots. Punjab and Rajasthan have a relatively low frequency of listening to the radio, with only 7.3% of Punjab’s population and 15% of Rajasthanis listening to radio.

4.3 Reaching Rajasthan

Data suggests that large parts of Rajasthan are outside the purview of any mass media platform – television, radio or print. Rajasthan is also the largest of the four target states with a population of 56,507,188 (Census 2001).⁸ NRS data reveals that 54.3% of Rajasthan’s households do not own a television set and of the 45.7% that do, only 16.9% have access to cable and satellite channels. Frequency of radio listening is also low. Print consumption, though high relative to literacy, is clearly not enough to compensate for the low reach of other mass media platforms. Also, given that female audiences are particularly important in the context of sex selection, Rajasthan’s low female literacy of 44% suggests that print may not be the best media platform.

Although beyond the purview of the present feasibility study, it is critical to highlight the problem of finding an alternative, effective (mass) message delivery system to reach Rajasthan’s hinterland. Community radio could be a possible strategy, which could involve NGOs in developing content for local broadcast. While Rajasthan may not be saturated with mass media, it does have a large number of committed non-government organisations through which social messaging and communication strategies could be developed.

4.4 Relationship between Target Audiences and Mass Media

Television is a vital, intimate part of people’s lives, across states, regions and socio-economic groups – slightly more so in cable and satellite dominated markets (Delhi, Haryana, and Punjab) than in Rajasthan, which was the only Doordarshan-dominated study region. And, more so for women than men. It is perhaps false to think of television as just another mass media platform, for it occupies a space quite unlike print or radio. It influences everything – decisions, fashions, perceptions, attitudes, conversations, consumer choices and life aspirations. The sections that follow are the media habits of the respondents of the study’s primary research.

⁷ This section is based on NRS 2005 (individual data).

⁸ Census 2001 populations: Delhi – 13,850,507, Haryana – 21,144,564, Punjab – 24,358,999.

4.4.1 Women and television

This study's primary research revealed that female viewers have a deep and emotional relationship with television – far closer than men do. They also exhibit an extraordinary level of identification with television characters, particularly from daily soaps. For women, television does not represent a casual or occasional source of escape or entertainment. It is an addicted or, some would say, committed relationship.

Television provides women with role models. It gives them access to fashion trends – from the cut of a lead character's blouse or the way she has draped her saree, to the kind of bindis she chooses to wear. Women look to television to guide them on life choices relating to conflict and conflict resolution. Television is also the sole source of information on a host of social issues, such as HIV, polio and sex selective abortion. Several female viewers in Rajasthan recalled Doordarshan's *papa mujhe mat maaro* ("daddy, don't kill me") anti-sex selection public service advertisement.

For young unmarried women, whose mobility is otherwise restricted, television is often their only window to the world. Young women in Haryana, pressured by protective brothers into staying indoors even during their summer vacations, had a daily viewing quota of up to eight hours. Thus, given that leisure time for women is generally spent inside the house, television is the primary source of entertainment.

Women's viewing patterns

The television remote control is far more in the hands of women than men. This appears to be one domestic arena in which men willingly relinquish power and control. For example, the young women in Haryana mentioned above are allowed virtually unfettered access to television by their fathers. Even in single television households – which are the norm in rural areas – women have access to programmes of their choice at most times. Mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law generally watch the same programs. Men make viewing decisions only occasionally; for example, when there are major sports events on air.

Barring the experiences of some upper class respondents from two-television households in Delhi, television viewing is a family affair. So, despite women's intimate relationship with the screen, it is not a 'private' activity, in which they can indulge in isolation. This appears to be entirely a function of space and practical considerations. Given the opportunity, young women do watch television by themselves in the afternoon, but this 'private' viewing pattern is not the norm.

Women watch television primarily in two distinct time slots – in the afternoon, generally with other women in the home, including mothers-in-law, and in the evenings with the entire family, or late night programming, with their husbands. Men, for the most part, watch what the women want to watch.

What do women watch?

Fictional drama, namely the daily soap opera, is by far the most popular television genre among women. These tend to be what are popularly known in India as the

“Saas-Bahu” serials or the “K serials.”⁹ Within this genre, however, there are preferences depending on cable and satellite availability and the age of the viewers.

Younger women (15-17 years) watch a far greater variety of programming. In addition to the Saas-Bahu serials, they watch game shows (e.g. *Smart Shrimati* on DD1 is popular across the target states), health programming, music videos, fashion shows, detective serials, crime reporting, sensational news programmes, and even the odd cricket match.

Reality shows, like *Indian Idol* on Sony TV or Zee TV's *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Challenge 2005*, appeared to be of interest largely in Delhi.¹⁰ The only well-known competitive reality show to surface in the top 100 shows was *Super Hit Muqabla* on DD1 (Delhi and Rajasthan) and *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* on Star One (Delhi and Punjab/Haryana). *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* is viewed less because it is a competition-based reality show and more because of its comedy value.

As women get older (18-24 years), their viewing choices get narrower. They tend to become less eclectic and more woman-centric in their choice of programming. The family soaps continue to be the most popular. They might watch the odd reality show or the sensational crime story, but not as committed or regular viewers.

By the time women reach the ages of 25-35, they become focused on the Saas-Bahu serials. To this limited repertoire, devotional programming like the Aastha Channel and health-based programming is added, with Baba Ramdev's yoga programmes being particularly popular in Haryana.

4.4.2 Men and television

Men have a markedly different relationship with television than women – less addicted and less intimate. Both younger and older men have other outlets and fewer restrictions on mobility. Television is not their only source of information, entertainment, or their only window to the changes going on in the world, although it remains an extremely important lens through which they view modernity and social transformation. Younger men watch television generally in the afternoon and at night. Older men tend to watch primarily at night, along with their wives and the rest of the family.

Given that television sets are physically located in the domestic space, which is less a male domain, television watching and access to the TV remote control is less male controlled. In a context of single television households, men do not by and large dictate programming choices. However, left on their own, young men indicate preferences for Fashion TV (which consists primarily of scantily clad models walking up and down on a host of international ramps), detective serials (*Jasoos Vijay* was often mentioned in Rajasthan), news programming (DD News, Aaj Tak), music

⁹ K serials refer to the popular TV daily soap operas produced by Ekta Kapoor for Balaji Telefilms. Their titles begin with the letter 'K' – *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki*, *Kasauti Zindagi Ki*, *Kahin To Hoga*, *Kusum*, *Kasamh Se*, etc.

¹⁰ This was confirmed by TAM data for Delhi, Rajasthan, Punjab/Haryana for the week of 14 May 2006.

videos, National Geographic, Discovery, and comedy shows such as *the Great Indian Laughter Challenge*. Older men appear to have less interest in Fashion TV or reality shows such as *Indian Idol*, and more interest in sports programming. As with women, the reality shows (*Indian Idol*, *Fame Gurukul*, *Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa*) were mentioned far more often in Delhi.

Almost all male respondents in this study, across the states and age-groups, watched Saas-Bahu serials with considerable enjoyment. Some admitted to this, others did not, although those who claimed to be reluctant watchers demonstrated high levels of information about characters and storylines. Young men in particular, and quite unexpectedly, turned out to be staunch votaries for the Saas-Bahu serials. They were open and unabashed about watching them, liking them and declaring that these serials set important morality standards for Indian women.

4.4.3 The Saas-Bahu serials

Who are the dominant role models?

The list of serials in the Saas-Bahu genre is long. Heading the list are the long-standing daily Star Plus classics with each of the lead female characters holding sway over the hearts and minds of millions. These characters appeal to viewers across the board with a particularly devoted following among older women:

- Tulsi from *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* is loved because she upholds the truth at all costs.
- Parvati from *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* is a devoted to her husband and trying to keep the family together at great cost to herself.
- Prerna from *Kasauti Zindagi Ki* is strong, working, and therefore slightly more contemporary, but for her family always comes first.

Younger women today have other favourites, including the following:

- Nimmo from *Kya Hoga Nimmo Ka?* (Star One) is a young woman who enters into a contract marriage to save her family. She is also a bit of a comic and a rebel.
- Saloni from *Saath Phere* (Zee TV) is a dark-skinned woman who attracts a handsome, wealthy man and then proceeds to handle the family with grace and gentility.
- Bani from *Kasamh Se* (Zee TV) is one of three sisters who sacrifices herself for her sisters vis-à-vis their relationship with a wealthy tycoon, upon whom they become financially dependent.
- Kashish from *Kahin To Hoga* (Star Plus) not only epitomises the virtue of sacrifice, but manages to look great. Kashish is known for the clothes she wears and the style standards she sets for young women – from the cut of her kurta to the neck designs of her blouses. But Kashish generates both envy and hostility because of her independence and her glamorous looks.
- Sneha from *Thodi Khushi Thode Gham* (Sony) is a young daughter-in-law who challenges the decisions of family elders.

There are a host of others serials in this genre across channels. Some are lighter, with more comic elements thrown in. Others are more serious and family-focused. The prominent serials in this genre include *Woh Rehne Wali Mehlon Ki*, *Kumkum*, *Kaavyanjali*, *Sindoor Tere Naam Ka*, *Pyaar Ke Do Naam: Ek Radha, Ek Shyam*, *Hari Kaanch Ki Chudiyaa*, *Sapne Saajan Ke*, *Woh Hue Na Hamare* and *Main Banoongi Miss India*.

Although none of the ‘younger’ family soaps comes close to the popularity of the Star Plus shows, the family soap genre in India is undergoing interesting variations and innovations. New storylines are being attempted, with many producers trying to cater to younger tastes and come up with new role models and less conventional central characters.¹¹ Primary research shows that they are at least partially succeeding in attracting younger viewers.

Why do men watch these serials?

Given that a large number of male respondents admitted to watching the Saas-Bahu serials, their relationship with these serials was probed in both the focus group discussions as well as in individual interviews. Male respondents were directly asked why they watched these serials. They were not prompted as to whether they thought the serials were good or bad.

While men for the most part watch and enjoy these serials, it is noticeable that they fail to identify with most of the male characters, quite unlike the level of female identification with the female characters. Instead, many lead male characters appear to set impossible standards of heroism, nobility and wealth. Several male respondents said that they felt threatened and resentful that their wives expected them to behave like Mr. Bajaj (one of the leading male characters in *Kasauti Zindagi Ki*).

There was a strong although a minority male view, expressed in both Rajasthan and Delhi, that these serials were regressive and were taking women back many centuries by teaching them to obsess about family disputes and remain embroiled in petty domestic quarrels. However, a majority of the male respondents felt that the serials were good because the serials:

- uphold family values;
- show ‘ideal’ women;
- teach women how they should behave;
- uphold male control over family life;
- highlight the sacrifices made by women;
- teach family unity; and
- enforce good cultural values in women.

Male respondents also shared several possible story ideas in the Saas-Bahu serial format that they believed would reduce sex selection, including serials that show:

¹¹ *Viraasat*, a daily drama on Star Plus, is currently raising the bar for bold love-making scenes on television.

- women taking care of their family until the bitter end;
- daughters taking care of parents even after her marriage;
- sacrifices made by women, thus enhancing women's value; and
- how a competent, qualified daughter makes her parents feel proud.

Why do women watch Saas-Bahu serials?

With a majority of the female respondents, there was little need to specifically probe into their relationship with the Saas-Bahu serials. It is such an organic relationship (between the respondents' lives, their regular consumption of television and their engagement with these serials) that it made itself apparent naturally. In both focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, the very first series of questions posed by the facilitators asking respondents to describe their day or describe what they like, invariably elicited a direct reference to these serials.

A majority of the female respondents liked the Saas-Bahu serials for a number of reasons. For example, they have a strong sense of identification with characters: "they are like 'us' or like members of our family." They also appreciate the sense of intimacy these shows provide: "we know their deepest fears and anxieties." The serials are a part of their daily lives and demonstrate how they can make change possible in their own lives. The show how they can handle conflict and offer an alternative reality that opens a world of new possibilities.

The Saas-Bahu serials and the concept of modernity

The Saas-Bahu family serials appear to construct a perfect dichotomy between the 'good-traditional' and the 'bad-modern.' The heroines are all 'good-traditional' to be loved and emulated. The female characters that the primary research respondents labelled 'modern' were disliked. The very word 'modern' has a pejorative meaning in these serials. There appeared to be little room for a 'good-modern' character. Characters who are labelled 'modern' are constructed in a very particular way with several constitutive elements: women who do not conform to expected behaviour (some abandon their own children), have their own ideas, dress glamorously and try to use their glamour to entice men, and scheme and lie, break homes, manipulate men and destroy families. These modern characters are etched as excessively individualistic and selfish.

Among the characters mentioned most often as 'modern,' 'hateful' and 'home breakers' were Komolika from *Kasuti Zindagi Ki* and Mohini from *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*. It remains an open question whether this construction and overlap between 'modern equals bad' versus 'traditional equals good' comes from the producer's/scriptwriter's notions of what is modern or whether the audiences themselves take their existing beliefs about what is modern and then project these defining ideas on to particular characters. A proposed mass media output in the area of fiction drama needs to explore this construction more deeply.

4.4.4 Television and social messaging

Television is perhaps the most significant source of information on social issues. Several respondents in Rajasthan recalled *the papa mujhe mat maro* ("daddy, don't kill me") anti-selection advertisement on Doordarshan in which an unborn female foetus pleads for her life. There was high recall of AIDS messaging in all centres, barring Rajasthan, where there was greater recall of the girl child campaign. However, in Rajasthan, *Jasoos Vijay*¹² was popular across groups and admired for the fact that the lead character takes on the issue of HIV/AIDS.

Respondents also recalled pulse polio advertisements. However, social messaging recall was extremely low among young women in Haryana who said disdainfully that such advertisements were generally found only on Doordarshan, which they did not watch.

4.4.5 Relationship with other mass media: radio and print

Most men read newspapers on a regular basis, but few women in the study were avid consumers of print media. Younger women read magazines for beauty and cooking tips, celebrity gossip and horoscopes. Magazines mentioned in Haryana were *Grah Shobha* and *Meri Saheli*. *Punjab Kesari* was prominent among the newspapers mentioned. Curiously, women in Rajasthan appeared to be the most enthusiastic consumers of newspapers and had an interest in non-gender specific news and information. Even young women (15-17 years) mentioned reading newspapers like *Dainik Bhaskar*, *Rajasthan Patrika* and *Shekhawati Bhaskar*.

Though many households owned a radio, it did not occupy an important space in their lives, apart from occasional bouts of listening to music. In Haryana and Delhi, some respondents mentioned FM radio. In rural Punjab, FM Patiala and FM Chandigarh were mentioned as channels where the respondents often heard Punjabi songs. Respondents in Rajasthan did not mention radio at all.

Importantly, radio and print did not appear to have significant recall of social messaging.

4.5 Conclusion

Television is the clear leader among mass media platforms and would certainly be the preferred mass media campaign driver in Delhi, Punjab and Haryana. Although women have a far more intimate relationship with television than men, television does continue to occupy the number one mass media slot even for men. The favoured genre is the family soap known popularly as the Saas-Bahu serial, and women have a particularly close relationship with this genre. But, television viewing is not a private time viewing for women – there is a constant family gaze giving

¹² *Jasoos Vijay* is a detective drama serial produced by the BBC World Service Trust as part of its mass media HIV/AIDS awareness raising project in India

social sanction to women's programming. It is conceivable that men would not be quite so tacitly supportive if the content were more subversive. So, television is a female dominion but with a male guard.

Men for their part have a conflicted relationship with the Saas-Bahu genre. Little is objectionable about the serials: they support family, uphold male control, keep conflicts and conflict resolution within the controlled domestic space, and yet these serials appear to generate anxiety in men. Many male respondents found themselves unable to identify with the leading male characters, which are larger than life, drive big cars, and derive their primary power, strength and identity from enormous wealth. Given some of the insights into male anxieties that emerged out of the primary research (discussed in detail in Chapter 5) about being the family provider in an unsafe world and by being unable to fulfil the increasing consumer aspirations of the family, it is possible that the ethos, storylines and (male) characterisation in the classic Saas-Bahu sagas could be further feeding these male anxieties.

Rajasthan, as mentioned earlier, is different from the other three states on mass media access. Large parts of the state are outside any mass media net. However, even in those pockets where mass media does reach, there are significant differences between Rajasthan and the other three states in the study. For one, Rajasthan is not television saturated and continues to be Doordarshan dominated. The family serials, though dominant, are less popular than elsewhere.

Audiences in Rajasthan prefer a greater variety of programming. Men protest stronger and louder at being forced to watch the Saas-Bahu serials. Finally, respondents from Rajasthan, including young women, showed a greater engagement with print than elsewhere. Thus, both primary and secondary data suggest a somewhat different potential mass media strategy for Rajasthan than for Delhi, Haryana and Punjab. Given the size of the state and magnitude of the problem, it is recommended that Rajasthan employ all three main mass media platforms for messaging on sex selection. While television continues to suggest itself as the campaign driver in Rajasthan, the choice of television platform would be Doordarshan as opposed to cable and satellite channels.

Knowledge and Attitudes to Abortion and Sex Selection

5

5.1 Introduction

Any mass media campaign aimed at addressing sex selection needs to understand the prevailing knowledge and attitudes of the target group in the areas of reproductive rights and abortion as well as about women's health. In designing a mass media intervention, it is helpful to distinguish between campaign messages that seek to raise awareness about a particular issue, through the dissemination of factual information, and those that seek to challenge established attitudes and behaviours. These two main directions for mass media messaging seeking to change the behaviour of the potential user of sex selection services are:

- Message Group A: Fill the *knowledge* gaps that play a role in sex selection and unsafe abortion decisions.
- Message Group B: Unravel and challenge social and cultural *attitudes* that fuel sex selection.

The distinction is important when selecting programme platform and format (see Chapter 7 on Recommendations).

This chapter outlines primary research findings relating to the knowledge and attitudes of men and women in Delhi, Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan. However, where relevant, any noteworthy differences have been highlighted. The assessment given below represents only the majority opinion among respondents.

5.2 Reproductive Rights

Knowledge

Reproductive rights consist of a range of choices, including decisions about methods of contraception, timing of pregnancy, and whether to have an abortion. The concept of women's right to make their own reproductive decisions was not probed directly in a question such as: "what is your opinion on reproductive rights?" In fact, significantly, the concept was absent from extended discussions about abortion practices and sex selection. Neither men nor women mentioned sex selection or abortion in the context of women's right to make decisions about their own bodies. This is the case even when it is recognised that abortion is often forced on women by their husbands and families.

Attitudes

There is some evidence of a more implicit and limited concept of reproductive rights. Respondents generally accept that the act of sex selective abortion affects a woman more than it affects a man or her family. There is even an appreciation of the negative effect that a sex selective abortion has on a woman's health – both mental and physical. For example, a young man (18-24 years) in Jhunjhunu (Rajasthan) said: "She becomes mentally ill. She feels her family killed her child. She becomes mentally disturbed." In response to the question: "So is it against her wish?" the response was: "Yes. Ninety per cent is against her wish. Ten per cent you cannot say."

Young women (18-24 years) in Jhunjhunu were similarly clear about the negative impact sex selective abortion has on women. In response to the question: "how will it affect women?" a young woman replied: "Through the process of abortion, the rays which pass on to her body can cause many disorders. She will have to take care during her next pregnancy. For some time her life is at risk." Upon further probing ("tell me with an example why it will affect women more?") she said: "Physically, some part of her own body will be removed from her which is also a life and she may have some weakness. Mentally, she will feel that she has killed her own child because she could not protect it."

While the respondents do not directly say that women should have greater rights over their bodies than men or conjugal families, they convey that abortion affects women more. The person most affected by any situation should logically have greater power to take decisions relating to that situation. However, respondents did not articulate a connection between a) the fact that women are most affected by abortion decisions and b) that women should have greater control over these decisions. There is a simultaneous expectation and acceptance that families will continue to control reproductive decisions; that this is a 'natural' state of affairs. Mass media messaging can help make that logical leap between the effect of sex selection on women and women's right to resist family pressures for it. This is an area that suggests itself for probing through mass media messaging.

5.3 Abortion

Knowledge

Information levels about the law regarding abortion, namely the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, are low. In fact, while it is generally assumed to be legal, there is limited knowledge about the circumstances under which abortion is legal. There is some awareness among both men and women of the health implications of having multiple abortions, but most people do not realise the extent of harm that late-term multiple abortions can have on women's bodies. One female respondent from rural Jhunjhunu said:

"I feel there is no problem. It doesn't make any difference. If a body part is spoilt you have to remove it. Abortion is the same way. If we don't want it, we get it removed. If a woman is going for the first time she will be a little

scared. But the one who has got it done already will go easily for the second time.”

Furthermore, respondents did not have adequate information on the differences between a first trimester abortion and a second trimester abortion, and a safe versus unsafe abortion.

Attitudes

Among the participants of the primary research, abortion (for any reason) is articulated as taking of life. This in-built sense of morality is present in attitudes towards sex selection; however, significantly, it does not appear to play a key role in decision making related to abortion or to sex selection. The practical necessity of getting an abortion tends to override any sense of moral deterrence around abortions, including sex selective abortions. Abortion for reasons such as if the girl is unmarried, there is foetal abnormality or a girl has been raped, is acceptable. A young woman (15-17 years) in rural Fatehgarh Sahib (Punjab) said: “If an unmarried girl becomes a mother, then it is necessary for her to have an abortion, to maintain family respect.” Abortion is also acceptable if a family does not want a girl and wants to wait for a son. A female respondent in Ambala (Haryana) was asked why women have abortions. Her reply:

“We feel tension in response to the word abortion. The reason for abortion will be maybe she is unmarried and is pregnant before marriage. Maybe she knows she is going to have a girl. She wants a son and she already has daughters. She wants a son to continue the family generation. If there are too many female children then you can do it.”

5.4 Sex Selection

Knowledge

There is widespread awareness about the technology that determines the sex of the foetus and how to access it. For example, women know they cannot go to government hospitals for a sex determination test and must go to private facilities. People are also aware that sex selection is illegal. But there is confusion about just what is illegal – is it the abortion or the ultrasound? There is a lack of clarity on the provisions, culpability and punishment under the PCPNDT Act. Finally, there is very limited awareness about biological facts regarding conception; for example, how the biological sex of the child is determined.

Attitudes

Sex selection as a phenomenon is acknowledged and there is general acceptance of it as a social practice. There is even approval of sex selection if the couple has two or more daughters. One group of young women from rural Jhunjhunu had the following varying responses to sex selection: “If you abort because it is a girl then it is a crime, but if you abort for financial reasons it is OK.... I feel it is wrong to abort.... If a woman has AIDS then she should abort.” Young female respondents in this study were generally the most critical of sex selective behaviour.

Many people consider sex determination tests to be 'useful', and do not believe there should be a ban on these tests. After all, as one older female respondent from rural Jhunjhunu said, "One woman in our village needed it. She was not earning much. And she already has five girls and she needs a boy so that her generation can go ahead." Even as women across the board say that daughters are loving and giving, they are candid in their desire for 'at least one son'. Most of the respondents in this study said that pressures for sex selection generally come from the larger family. A feeling (or, justification) among some respondents is that sex selection would somehow enhance the status of women.

However, even women who articulated a strong son preference said that daughters should also be born, but not as many. As an older female respondent from rural Fatehgarh Sahib said: "Girls should be born. But only one daughter must be born. If all are boys, then the boys will remain bachelors. They also have to marry a girl. But more girls should not be born. They should get aborted."

Respondents in this study did not generally endorse sex selection for the first child. But if the first is a girl then they are more understanding of sex selective behaviour. The 'small family norm' appears to have been accepted among a wide cross section of respondents, and is the preferred option for most couples. Messages about the small family norm have been received from TV and from health providers.

There does not appear to be much awareness of the long-term consequences of sex selection. Visions of a womanless society in the future – a world in which parents will have trouble in finding brides for grown up sons – does not appear to affect attitudes to sex selection. Respondents, both male and female, are preoccupied with their immediate concerns, fears, and perceptions of reality and consequences of their decisions in the short-term.

Despite the widespread acceptance of sex selection, the abortion of a female foetus does have a sense of shame associated with it, and is seen as a 'backward' thing to do. Particularly for more educated, upper class respondents, it is seen as behaviour that could stigmatise them and tarnish their educated, urbane, progressive image. When directly asked about sex selection, most respondents denied that they would do it and said it is a terrible thing to do; that it is akin to killing a child. Respondents also hold both the doctors and the clients equally responsible for sex selection. Many people said that both should be punished.

5.5 Women's Health

Knowledge questions about women's health in relation to abortion are covered above. Beyond this, the respondents' discussions about health issues focused on attitudes. Health was articulated in a limited way – largely in terms of how a woman looks, not in terms of disease or infection. Female respondents considered good health important because bad health affects their ability to do housework. One female respondent from Ambala was asked: "What is the role of health in a woman's life?" Her response:

“Health is important as otherwise we are not able to take care of our house. Take my own example – I am not able to sweep the floor and I have to be dependent on servants and if she does not come for four days, the house remains dirty. And if you are healthy then you do not have to be dependent on others.”

Similarly, several male respondents assumed that if a woman looked attractive and managed to do the household work, she was healthy. When asked about good health, respondents frequently mentioned attributes such as glowing skin, healthy hair and a good figure. Several respondents said that health is important because it is important to be attractive.

5.6 Conclusion

These primary research findings suggest several directions for a mass messaging strategy. Addressing Message Group A: filling the knowledge gaps, would aim to raise awareness about facts related to abortion and sex selection. Message themes can be centred on raising awareness of the following:

- existing laws: the MTP Act and PCPNDT Act;
- the impact of repeated late-term abortions on a woman’s health; and
- how the sex of the foetus is biologically determined.

A campaign addressing Message Group B, unravelling and challenging social and cultural attitudes that fuel sex selection, is much more ambitious. Messaging would have to be more nuanced and would likely involve a development of a character with whom young women would identify. One way to tackle the issue of reproductive rights and abortion is to build on the already accepted concept of looking good and associate this with broader health and rights issues. The aim would be that women’s notion of taking care of their appearance would translate into women having a greater sense of control over their bodies and a sense of discomfort at family control over their reproductive decisions.

Chapter 6 delves further into both understanding the social and cultural attitudes influencing sex selection decisions and the messages a mass media campaign can use to challenge them. Chapter 7 outlines specific recommendations on which media platforms and formats are most suitable for each of these message groups.

6

Impact of Social Change: Unravelling and Challenging Attitudes that Fuel Sex Selection

6.1 Introduction

Sex selection occurs at the interface of deep-rooted cultural attitudes, socio-economic pressures and the spread and misuse of modern medical technology. The public discourse surrounding sex selection, including previous mass media outputs has focused largely on the act of abortions without substantively addressing the context that creates a demand for sex selection.

The primary research was informed by the basic understanding that practices of sex selection are motivated by a socially accepted devaluation of females. Attitudes that ascribe gender role divisions in society and behaviours that subordinate women are faithfully reproduced by family life generation after generation. The study was designed to unravel the reasons why women are devalued and identify fault lines where this can be challenged. These fault lines can help create a space for women and families to resist pressures for sex selection. This is where mass media messaging has a role to play; to support those ways of thinking and behaving that enhance the value placed on women and that encourage and empower women to have greater control over their own decisions, including their reproductive decisions.

Forces of social transformation and modernity should logically mount a challenge to sex selective behaviour. However, sex selection appears to be increasing among the high-income group and those most exposed to new ways of thinking and better education. Why? What is it about the changing world that is making sex selection a behavioural choice for so many? The approach of the primary research was to recognise that Indian society is in transition and a society where change for the better is theoretically possible.

In order to develop a mass media messaging approach that would help the target group re-think attitudes and behaviour, the primary research looked for answers to the following questions:

- What are the dominant attitudes to women and how are they changing?
- In a rapidly changing society, what are the major zones of social transformation and conflict?

- How are people's aspirations conflicting with the existing framework of social relations and social expectations?
- Who is most willing to question and challenge accepted norms of behaviour? Who is most ready to rebel? Men or women? Young people, with everything to gain, or older people with little to lose?

This chapter reveals the attitudes of younger and older men and women relating to these questions. Before outlining the responses to these questions listed above, it is important to establish the profile of a sex selective abortion seeker.

6.2 Profile of a Sex Selective Abortion Seeker

The profile of the high-risk sex selection seeker is constructed from a combination of secondary sociological and demographic research studies.

Women with the greatest likelihood of undergoing a sex determination test and aborting a female foetus tend to be those who conform to traditional gender role expectations. They are married, either with children or expected to bear children, may not work outside the home, and lack autonomy, mobility, an independent source of income, and decision making powers even within the home. This is not to say that all women who meet these criteria choose sex selection, but simply to glean from this profile the constituent elements that make for the greatest probability of a woman engaging in (or, being forced to engage in) sex selective behaviour.

Socio-economic pressures are sometimes leading to an embracing of progressive ideas and at other times to nostalgia and a kind of tenacious clinging to traditional values and practices. Women are entering and succeeding in the job market like never before. New jobs are emerging, along with new ways of thinking and living. Alternative lifestyles are challenging the traditional joint family. Populations are moving across rural, urban and national borders and this migration is bringing a change in the old way of life. Consumerism is increasing, as is violent crime. It is impossible to ignore the media explosion, with television entering homes and private spaces audaciously selling new images and aspirations. These combined forces of modernity are compelling people to change attitudes, roles and behaviours – whether they like it or not.

The profile of a sex selective abortion seeker outlines a number of characteristics that are being influenced by social, economic and cultural change; namely women's increasing access to jobs outside of the home and the consequent impact this has

PROFILE OF A HIGH RISK SEX SELECTION SEEKER

- Aged 20-30 years
- Least likely to be from poorest class or lowest caste
- Literate
- Housewife i.e. not working outside the home
- Has one-two children (probably daughters)
- Lives in a joint family
- Regular media exposure through television (less radio and print)
- Restricted mobility
- Little autonomy
- No independent source of personal income
- Restricted decision making power within the home

on their mobility and autonomy. If this profile changes, will the desire and/or the pressure to engage in practices of sex selection also change?

6.3 Men's Attitudes to Women in the Context of Social Change

Research approach

Male attitudes to women were not explored directly or through a fixed set of questions. Attitudes were probed as male respondents themselves alluded directly or indirectly to women's changing position in society, women's clothes, attitudes to girls' education and female sexuality in response to a series of other questions about social transformation, aspirations and the conflicts that men face in a changing society.

Where male respondents made direct references to women, the facilitators followed these up with probing questions. For example, in response to a question about how society has changed, young men mentioned women's increasingly revealing clothing as one visible, negative sign of change. This was then followed up with a question such as: "why are these new clothing fashions for women seen as a negative development?" However, if critical issues did not emerge naturally in the course of an interview or focus group discussion, then men were directly probed about their perception of social change and their attitudes to women.

Primary research findings are given below, disaggregated by age – young men (15-24 years) and older men (25-35 years). They are not disaggregated by socio-economic categories because, while there were significant attitudinal differences among men/women and younger/older respondents in these focus areas, socio-economic categories were not found to be a significant discriminator. The perceptions, aspirations and anxieties of those living in rural areas were surprisingly similar to those found in urban areas, and middle class and lower middle class respondents gave responses similar to upper middle class respondents in urban areas. However, the issue of financial pressures was mentioned more across lower socio-economic categories in both rural and urban areas. The views given here represent the majority views expressed during the study.

New educational and career options create opportunities and anxieties

Young men (15-24 years) were asked: "how has your life changed?" and "what changes have affected your life and your aspirations?" Most young men feel they have a greater chance of being successful because of more varied job opportunities. They mentioned the expansion of jobs in the private sector and the opening up of new professions. Linked to this was the greater availability of educational facilities and opportunities.

Young men in all of the study locations recognise that girls are gaining increasing access to education and are doing well in schools and colleges. Many of them say this is positive development. Among many young men however, there is hidden

conflict and resentment. They said that girls are becoming smarter and more arrogant, and acknowledged their inability to do anything about this ("we cannot stop them because there are better career options for them").

Many unmarried young male respondents expressed a desire to have educated wives who would contribute to the family income, but they also mentioned that their wives should also take care of the family and household. For example, young men in Fatehgarh Sahib (Punjab) were asked: "suppose your parents leave the choice of a marriage partner to you, what sort of girl would you want?" The responses included:

- "The one who will take care of my parents, house and be well educated."
- "Since I am educated, I would prefer to have my wife also educated, so that she will have the understanding capacity. If necessary, she can also work."
- "For me even if the girl is 10th pass, it will do, but she has to take care of the house and serve my parents. If the girl is too educated, there could be tension in the house."

Some older men (25-35 years) openly articulated feeling threatened by women in the job market. During a long discussion on changes in society, a group of men in Ambala (Haryana) had the following opinions:

- If girls were not given jobs, then unemployment would go down.
- I think girls should be given jobs only if they need it.
- Girls work for less salary.
- When girls are working there is often dispute in the house.

They were further prompted by the question: "why do disputes happen?" The response was,

- "My friend's wife works in government and she is very dominating...."

They were then asked: "So should women not work?" The response was,

- "Of course they can work.... There is no problem in it.... They should teach or tutor- it is a respectful job. In private jobs so many girls get into affairs."

Many of the respondents who have daughters are more supportive of young women's education and careers, saying that they would give equal opportunities to girls and boys. A male respondent from Fatehgarh Sahib with an 18-year-old daughter was asked what he would do if his daughter wanted to study more and did not want to get married. His response: "If I am confident about my daughter, I will allow her to study." He was further probed and asked how he would explain this to his parents who might put pressure for their grand-daughter's marriage. His response:

"I will explain to my parents that if I make her study more her knowledge will increase and she will be intelligent. If her in-laws are not well educated than she can support the family. If her husband is not capable of earning enough then she can help her husband financially. She can become a teacher or a computer trainer and they can live a beautiful life."

Similarly, male respondents from Jhunjhunu (Rajasthan) appeared to be more open to the idea of women entering any profession. They spoke of women entering the army, becoming doctors, and even seeking careers as air-force pilots. When probed about how women's roles have changed, one group of men said,

"Girls don't like to get married early. They want to work, establish themselves. Girls now want to take up anything – business, service or a vocation. Government is also promoting girls education. Nothing is a problem for girls now."

Overall, most men qualified their statements about women working by saying that while boys can explore any career, girls cannot, citing teaching and other similar professions as being most appropriate for women. The new professional opportunities available to women in call-centres are seen as both good and bad. A few fathers said a job in a call-centre is good because the girls are dropped home by transportation provided by the office, but a majority said that it was not good for girls to work in call-centres because of the late hours. It is noteworthy that discussions around call-centres were not in any way prompted; they emerged spontaneously because the growth of the call-centre phenomenon is clearly on the respondents' minds.

Several men said that while there are good aspects to modern life in the material sense, they resent the fact that this is making women dominating. A male respondent from Delhi was asked to visualise a serial in which he portrayed the problems associated with the twenty-first century woman. The following are excerpts from the discussion:

"If women get freedom they will start calling vulgarity fashion, and men cannot do anything about it.... There are men and women working closely in the office. Even if a little emotional connection happens, it leads to sex.... See, the same woman who is supposed to be in the house, now she is in the office. You can imagine what must be happening. Any man/woman relationship finally leads to that (sex)."

The respondent was probed further and asked to explain why he connected the progress of women with sex. His response was:

"She will have freedom and she will have loads of money so she won't be dependent on anybody. She won't care about anything.... Like today if a man does not like his woman, he can go to another. The same thing will happen with this lady. This will cause serious imbalance. Yes, women are progressing. But certain fields are meant for women like teaching, household work, or some NGO work. But never put her in a field that is an earning field. In that the balance is disturbed. If a wife is earning 20,000 rupees she will also spend 3000-5000 rupees on entertainment and make-up. She will roam around... sex is bound to come...."

There appears to be a reluctance to allow women to abdicate their primary responsibility to the home and the family. Being educated, working and earning is

not, for the most part, seen in terms of young women attaining autonomy or independence; it is seen in more instrumental terms – as an add-on to family income or because a “earning” wife is more valued in the marriage market.

Opinions on dowry were taken from the point of view of young men who are soon to benefit from it as receivers of dowry as well as from fathers who are plagued by it as providers of it. Overall, dowry is generally seen as an acceptable social practice among the study respondents, with few respondents actually questioning the practice of dowry.

When asked directly what they would get as dowry, young men in a group discussion in Delhi did not respond by condemning or questioning the practice. Instead they shared their dowry wish-list; for example, “fridge, TV, car, scooter, motor cycle and a furniture set.”

Dowry is a major concern for fathers. While older men said that girls were more loving and giving than sons, in the same breath they spoke of the enormous pressure of a girl’s marriage and the expense that it will entail. It was sometimes mentioned explicitly: “One of the major headaches is dowry. It is a very costly affair. In today’s times if a father is not prepared well he will literally be stripped. On top of that if he has two daughters, then he will die.” Other times it was implicit in their use of phrases such as:

- “...worry about marriage expense.”
- “...pressure of getting the girl married.”
- “...how can we afford a girls marriage?”

What should be a happy occasion is invariably described in most unhappy terms – worry, pressure, concern, fear, burden and responsibility.

Another concern of older men with reference to changing socio-economic conditions is the increasing materialism and the spread of a consumer culture. They said that consumer needs are outstripping income. Life is unaffordable. Many older men expressed frustration at the increasing consumer demands made by their families, which they find themselves unable to meet. But at the same time there is a perception that there are more ways out of financial problems than before. As a respondent from Ambala said, “Now our kids don’t get stuck because of finance. We get loans easily – whether educational, personal or bank loans. Things have become easy thanks to change in economic policies.”

There is a visible trend towards increasing consumerism, heightened material aspirations, and easy access to lifestyle products with the spread of a loan economy. All this appears to have exacerbated the pressure on families to both demand and supply larger dowries. Older male respondents in this study with families to support, are somewhat disenchanted with a modern, consumerist life. The dazzling, infinite possibilities of modernity exemplified by mobile phones and internet which seemed so exciting for the younger male respondents, translate into enormous financial worry as men get older.

Women's changing roles and appearance impact men's views of women

When young men (15-24 years) were asked “what has changed in your city, your life, your world?” among the first unprompted responses was “having girlfriends”. The concept of girlfriends is a new, important and attractive social change for many young men. It means having access to the opposite sex outside the conventional framework of family and marriage. When they listed their aspirations, concepts such as success, making money and buying cars and electronic devices such as mobile telephones were also accompanied by the aspiration to interact with girls.

Further exploration of how young men relate to women reveals a conflict and a double standard. On the one hand they said they like having modern looking girlfriends, but at the same time they were judgmental about them. For example, the following interaction from a focus group discussion with young men in Fatehgarh Sahib typifies the young male attitude:

Q: What has changed here in the last five years?

A: Five years ago it would not have been this modern.

Q: What do you mean by modern? How are things modern now?

A: People's clothing sense has improved.

Q: What about girls?

A: Five years ago girls did not come out, now they are very free and modern. They move around freely in fashionable clothes. Now girls also wear western attire like boys. Nowadays girls are more knowledgeable. They know where to go and what to do. They are gutsier.

Q: What could be the reason for this?

A: TV. Cable TV is the main culprit. Then the movies.

Q: What kind of movies?

A: All these sexy movies, which have Bipasha Basu and other girls like her. Also, all these music videos and modelling – all this has a very bad effect on girls.

Young men started off speaking of change in terms of “improvement” and ended up with a judgmental statement on what has a “bad effect” on girls. Further in the same focus group discussion, they were asked what kind of modernity would be acceptable to them. The response was: “Girls, even if they are forward, should not dress up like film stars.... If a girl were going to wear these sorts of clothes, they would induce bad feelings in boys.” One group of young boys in Ambala said, “*Chote chote kapde aa gaye hain* (clothes now are tiny). *Chuhe kapde kha gaye hain* (the mice have eaten up the clothes)” and laughed heartily.

This contradiction in attitudes towards women and social change was found in other study locations as well. The following interaction with a male respondent (25-35 years) from Ambala was typical. He was asked which social changes he felt positive about. “First the ladies used to be only at home and they were not allowed out. Today ladies are allowed to roam outside and have got the freedom. Like I

even send my wife or daughter sometimes to get things from the shop.”

He was then asked, “So what are you not happy with?” His response:

“The changes that have taken place in clothing I don’t like, like skirts both in films and in real life. I like women with sarees and not those with skirts. Minimally clad women cause an increase in crime. The rapes of today – it increases all this. Crime is generally increasing a lot – murder, dacoity. The police don’t stop the crimes... About my daughter, it is good that they have started leaving the house and going out and working but looking at the crime I feel sometimes we have given them too much freedom. This is a little confusing.... A girl always has to be taken care of. We have to see whom she is talking to, where she is going because one mistake can ruin the family reputation.

Many young men want their wives to appear presentable. They said that looking good would make her feel more confident in interacting with others and it would also make them feel proud of her. But some young men were dismissive, saying that a good-looking wife would simply invite stares and embarrass the spouse. Several young men said that while it was fine to look good, “looking too good would invite rape.” In one group discussion young men were very disparaging about women saying that women try and look good just to get things in life the easy way.

Male respondents across the board, both younger and older, made unprovoked references to the revealing clothes worn by fashionable women and to how ‘sexy’ movies and music videos were having a bad effect on girls. They specifically criticised a slew of sexy contemporary heroines – Mallika Sherawat and Bipasha Basu among others. These women wear revealing clothes, represent sexual liberation, vulgarity, immodesty, and symbolise the reality that some girls in big cities are getting bolder, looking better, looking more glamorous, drawing attention to themselves, losing chastity and losing “traditional culture.”

Furthermore, young men are extremely protective of their sisters. When the reason for this was probed, a group of young men in Delhi had this to say.

“If my sister goes out from home there is much tension until she returns. Parents suspect the girl more than the boy because if a girl does the same thing then it becomes a big issue. There is a difference in their minds about boy and girl. It is to do with pride, status and dignity of the family. The girl’s respect is the respect of the entire family. She is the goodness of the house. She is also the goddess of the house. When she is at home she is considered the best. If she goes out it is a problem. Anything wrong committed by her reflects on the house.”

Clearly there are double standards for boys and girls, and fathers and brothers are under tremendous pressure to preserve the family honour by controlling their daughters/sisters. The traditional notion of family honour being vested in the sexual chastity of girls and women continues to be extremely strong. Thus, aspects of social change, which contain the threat of female sexual liberation, appear to directly challenge the traditional patriarchal control over women’s sexuality.

6.4 Women's Aspirations and Anxieties in the Context of Social Change

Research approach

In order to discern how women's responses to life situations change as they get older, respondents were grouped into three distinct age categories: 15-17 years, 18-24 years and 25-35 years. Where age was seen to be a significant discriminator, the views of female respondents given below have been disaggregated age-wise. However, for the most part views given below are grouped into two broad age categories: younger women (15-24 years) and older women (25-35 years).

Women's aspirations for equality vary depending on age

In analysing the aspirations held by women it was relevant to disaggregate young women's respondents into two groups: 15-17 year old women and 18-24 year old women.

Young women aged 15-17 years want access to higher education. Many of them want to pursue professional courses. Their levels of excitement about education and the prospect of working and earning were gauged by the fact that several women in focus group discussions began to speak simultaneously and enthusiastically. They spoke with confidence of being able to earn just as well as any man. Young women in Delhi mentioned the following as desirable professions: architect, computer engineer, interior designer, fashion designer, lawyer and doctor. Young women in Ambala listed the following as their main educational and professional ambitions: receiving a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) or Commerce, a job in a multinational or call centre and learning computers. They went on to say:

"If we do a job we can be independent and do whatever we like. After marriage it depends upon our in-laws. If they don't want us to do a job, we shall have to leave it, but in our mothers home we can do whatever we like. We will look for in-laws who allow us to do a job."

It is important to young women to be able to earn their own money. Having an independent income is a high priority objective. Wanting to own cars was mentioned as a desire by young women in Ambala. Young women want to excel in their careers and have complete faith in their ability to succeed. One young female respondent from Delhi, asked to describe in a few phrases today's woman said, "flying high, moving ahead, ahead of boys." However, education and career is not seen as more important than family and household. As young women in Delhi said, "You must know household skills along with education. A girl must have knowledge of both. If she only has education, after she grows up, everyone will be ready to criticise her."

Women aged 18 to 24 years appear to have scaled down their aspirations and ambitions. Being able to earn money is still a significant desire, but instead of wanting to excel in careers in management or do a MBA degree, many of them spoke of wanting careers in teaching or tutoring. They all said they wanted to make their parents proud by working and supporting the family.

Older women (24-35 years) continue to want a degree of economic independence, both to add to family income and to meet their own small consumer desires. However, avenues for earning that seem feasible to them are opening a small home-based shop or beauty parlour or teaching. Some women said that they want to earn some independent income by stitching and doing embroidery. Not being seen as a “burden” is important. As one female respondent from Fatehgarh Sahib said, “I used to earn by stitching. And I have bought a lot of big things for myself. I bought a fridge, TV, jewellery. My mother is still proud of me. She says I am like her son. I was never a burden to her.” Older women also articulated their desire to “supplement family income by working from home”. This they said would keep “everyone in the family happy.” In fact “keeping everyone happy” was mentioned often by older women as one of their main goals in life. A female respondent from Ambala was asked when she felt proud of being a woman. Her response was, “Everyone says that when I am at home, there are no problems. I take care of every thing. Even if I am going out somewhere, if a guest comes then I cancel going out and look after the guest.”

Women are anxious about restrictions placed on their role in the family and in society

After gauging women’s perceptions of social change and their own changing aspirations, they were specifically probed about what worried them about their lives and how they felt their lives could be improved. Younger women clearly want to continue education and pursue careers, but many of them are unsure and worried about just how much support they would continue to get from their parents. They are also somewhat confused about career options and said they feel the need for guidance. They also said they want to continue unfettered with their educational and career goals and not have the constant fear of an impending marriage hovering around the corner.

Many young women are very worried that concerns about safety, parents’ restrictions on their mobility, and inability to keep late hours would directly affect their career choices and options. Young women expressed resentment at the way their movements were constantly monitored by neighbours and indeed by society at large. They feel that the barrage of critical and moralistic comments about young women by society has a direct, negative impact on their lives. Many of them said that young female role models on television were inspiring and could help initiate social change for the better.

While young women welcomed increasing interaction between boys and girls, they articulated that they fear sexual violence. They spoke of increasing crimes against women. Compounding their own fear is the fear experienced by their fathers. A group of young women in Delhi were asked what problems they hid from their fathers. The response was:

“If someone eve teases us we cannot tell Dad. He will shout and stop our roaming. They want to maintain their reputation. Dad sits with us and explains ‘my child don’t ever do anything wrong.’ Otherwise you will have to sit inside the home like a prisoner for your entire life.”

Ironically, many young women also said that it was increasingly safer for women to be outside the home and that is why many more women could be seen in public spaces.

Like men, women often mentioned the kind of revealing clothes that other women wear as a visible, negative change. Young women in Delhi said they get angry when they see others wearing short, revealing clothes. Some women in the group referred to these clothes as dirty or vulgar. Others added that Mallika Sherawat wears these “open clothes”. The respondents then concluded: “...so, boys see these clothes and do bad things.”

Many young women want far greater mobility than they are given. They said they want to learn about the world and be better informed. They also desire to be better groomed and better dressed. An aspiration articulated more in Ambala than elsewhere was the ambition to move out of their present location and move to a big city – generally Chandigarh or Delhi. Some women, again in Ambala, said that their deepest desire was to go abroad and settle down.

Dowry is also a source of anxiety, although many young women said that if they are given a good education they could take care of their own dowry themselves. Some women said that removal of the dowry system altogether would certainly improve their lives.

Older women (25-35 years) expressed concern about their daughters’ education. They are worried about whether or not they are able to convince their family to educate their daughters. Some women said they want to ensure both – a good career for their daughter and a good marriage. Older women expressed regret that their own education had been cut short, and want to make sure the same thing did not happen to their daughters; daughters should be able to support themselves financially, they said. They also hope and pray that the dowry demands from their daughters’ prospective grooms would not be exorbitant.

For themselves, older women are unhappy about the limited decision making powers they have in the family. Some women also said they want to be the ones

Young women were asked to give quick responses to what made them happy and what made them sad. The responses below typify the majority response:

- When I am given freedom and mobility it makes me happy.
- When my brother and I are treated equally it makes me happy. I get angry when he is allowed something and I am not.
- When I am allowed to groom myself, visit the beauty parlour and dress according to current fashion I feel pleased.
- When I see young role models on television I get inspired.
- When I am asked to do household chores at the expense of my studies I get angry and resentful.

to decide how many children to have and when to have them. They feel they might get greater powers in the home if they could supplement the family income. Demanding and restrictive in-laws are often cited as barriers to change. Many older women also point to “gossipy neighbours” and to negative social attitudes towards working women as obstacles for women who want to step out of the home and achieve something. They feel that inspiring role models (both local and national) would help facilitate changes in these social attitudes. A supportive husband and mother-in-law could also make many things possible.

Older women resent not having financial freedom and having to make do with small sums of money doled out by their husbands even for small items such as lipsticks and shampoos; they begrudge not having the freedom to look after their own parents or visit their parents at will; they resent having limited decision making powers especially related to their children’s lives.

What they enjoy is being seen as a facilitator who supports her children in keeping up with the times. Many mothers said specifically that they like being a confidante to their daughters. They also enjoy buying consumer products for themselves and for their children. Older women expressed a need to be appreciated; to be recognised for their skills as efficient homemakers. They want to see themselves as the balancing force – maintaining tradition but also helping their children and their family access the fruits of a modern life made comfortable with a host of consumer products.

Ultimately, women of all ages seek affirmation and approval. The desire to please gets stronger as they grow older. Older women want to please everybody; their husbands, family and society at large. They constantly seek a sense of self-worth and are plagued by the basic question of identity. Who am I? What is my value as a mother, wife, homemaker, financial contributor, as a burden? These are some of the female concerns with which mass messaging needs to engage.

6.5 Conclusion

The primary research has sketched out dominant social trends, perceptions, anxieties and contemporary concerns among both men and women that must necessarily form the socio-economic and cultural context in which anti-sex selection messages are to be embedded. Primary research has also indicated several critical fault lines in the transition between modern and traditional roles, values and behaviours that have a direct bearing on the devaluation of females and on practices around sex selection.

The conventionally accepted reasons for sex selection continue to be salient. These include son preference for reasons of economic security, continuation of family line and perception of daughters as an economic burden primarily due to the practice of dowry. Economic development and the consequent increase in consumer and lifestyle demands have exacerbated the financial pressures of dowry on families.

Dowry also weighs heavily on the minds of unmarried young women. What does appear to be a recent phenomenon is the significant number of young women who said that if they were educated, they would be capable of earning their own dowry. Reasons for increasing sex selection such as decline in fertility, adoption of a two-child norm and the easy availability of sex selective technology also continue to be critical variables in decisions around sex selection.

Other insights from the primary research relate to how processes of social change are impacting the respondents' lives and shaping their attitudes to women. Is social change generating positive attitudes to women, and thus leading to women being more valued? The primary research reveals a mixed picture. Girls are getting educated and finding jobs. They are thus stepping out of traditional spheres. This is coinciding with an increase – real or perceived – of crimes against women. All respondents – male and female – revealed an enormous, palpable fear of crime. It is ironic that even as social change is seen to be making women “bolder” (a term used often by male respondents), it is also perceived to be making them sexually vulnerable.

The combined impact of these factors appears to be to make a large number of men increasingly worried about two things – women's sexual vulnerability on the one hand, and women's sexual aggression on the other. The two are often linked, leading to the argument forwarded by several respondents: “girls who dress seductively, invite rape.” The pressure to protect female chastity and control female sexuality thus appears to be a dominant concern for male respondents. Fathers, who believe in educating their daughters, simultaneously fear “giving them too much freedom.” Husbands, who actually value having a working wife, simultaneously fear its consequences in terms of greater female domination and loss of control. Some of them harboured fears that wives working outside the home would be susceptible to having affairs. Women must be seen as equal partners in finding solutions to the many problems and anxieties brought about by modern life. However, in the current phase of social and cultural transition, women are being seen as a part of the problem of modernity, not its solution. They can only be partners if they are allowed to be empowered equals.

The immediate impact of these fears on the lives of young women is a restriction on their mobility. This was a reality mentioned by respondents in all study states. Male respondents spoke of it as something desirable; young women spoke of it as a barrier. Even as girls are being educated more than ever before, they are still being told to curtail their career ambitions, and often cannot realise their full potential. Even though women can theoretically work and earn and should therefore logically not be seen as a financial burden, the fact is that their options are restricted. While young women (15-20 years) speak of being able to do any job and have career ambitions equal to any man, as they get older, they gradually scale down their ambitions and confine themselves to jobs such as teaching, running beauty parlours and tutoring. Realistically then, they cannot be equal in their pursuit of any profession.

Thus, even as social change is leading to greater education for girls and greater female participation in the work force, their primary domain remains the home and family. The axiom that education will make women self-sufficient, that they will not be a financial burden on the family and they will therefore be more valued – is therefore, only partially true. The reality is that many young women in this study are simply not allowed the mobility and freedom that would give them real material and career success – they could never in a sense ‘earn their own dowry.’ They could be educated but still a burden.

Contemporary social transition also appears to be shaping attitudes to women into two categories of modern equals bad and traditional equals good. Some behavioural attributes of modern or contemporary women (such as working, earning, being mobile, making many of their own decisions) appear to be leading to a fear of what is seen as the deleterious effects of “modern culture,” namely sexual promiscuity, vulgarity, loss of traditional culture and loss of family honour. This split was particularly pronounced among the younger male respondents in this study.

An important part of the mesmerising effect of modern life on young men is having girlfriends. Young men, particularly in Delhi and Ambala, appear to be fascinated with the changed physical appearance of young women, some of which they see on late night television and in magazines. Women dress better, wear make-up and make themselves sexually attractive. In one group discussion, young men managed to steer virtually every question to the issue of women, girls and girlfriends, speaking about them very animatedly and often in demeaning and derogatory terms. They are clearly both attracted to and threatened by visions of female freedom.

A ‘modern’ girl who is good as a girlfriend is not good enough or ‘decent’ enough to be a wife. Many of the young male respondents are conflicted. On the one hand many of them said they want working wives, to help cope with anxieties and material needs of a modern life, but on the other hand they want to marry women who would not threaten or challenge them; who would stay at home and look after their parents. They are unable to visualise the possibility of women who could be both traditional and modern, of women who could be equal partners in life and yet not be threatening or dominating. Young men in urban Jhunjhunu, however, revealed a greater acceptance of changing gender roles and expressed a level of comfort with “good-looking” working wives (see next section on why Rajasthan is different).

Young women, on the other hand, have a greater ability to see themselves as a bit of both traditional and modern; to visualise the possibility of gradual empowerment where modern values do not necessarily herald the violent or instant collapse of all that is good in tradition. They have high career aspirations and want greater mobility and decision making in their family after marriage (which is perhaps why many of them want to live in nuclear families). They are feisty and often resent the freedom their brothers have. Nearly all the young female respondents enjoy

grooming themselves with make-up and regular visits to beauty parlours, and take pleasure in their physical appearance, and they do not see themselves as being sexually provocative or promiscuous because of this. They merely said that looking good was linked to their self-image and self-confidence and that they had the right to look after themselves. Earning money and being self-sufficient is one of their main goals in life.

On the one hand, primary research reveals a host of positive attitudes to women – there are some positive attitudes among all sections of respondents. The increasing education of girls is clearly and undeniably a positive step forward towards their empowerment. However, the processes of social transition towards greater gender empowerment appear to be slow. There continues to be traditional social barriers in letting women go the whole distance; in giving them mobility and letting them work and earn freely. These barriers are compounded by negative “modern” images of aggressive women, created largely by media, which is leading to a patriarchal backlash, leading to regressive, derogatory and disrespectful attitudes to women.

The challenge for mass media messaging will lie in being able to construct images that blur the lines between ‘tradition’ and ‘modern’ such that certain positive behavioural attributes of the modern woman who is working, earning, being mobile, making her own decisions, including her own reproductive decisions, do not necessarily create the fear of vulgarity, loss of tradition and sexual promiscuity.

6.6 Why Jhunjhunu (Rajasthan) is Different?

Responses in Jhunjhunu were somewhat at variance from those in other study centres. Men are less opposed to educating girls and encouraging them to seek careers. They also do not have such negative responses to the perceived sexual revolution and threat posed to young girls by the temptations of modernity. In fact, there appears to be less conflict between traditional/modern constructions of females in Jhunjhunu. One group of young male respondents (15-24 years) in Jhunjhunu was asked what kind of woman they wanted to marry. The response was, “I want an educated wife. Junior or senior to me does not matter. But I am alone, so I want her to take care of my parents also....” When asked: “how should she look?” the response was: “beautiful, good clothes and she should be aware of our culture.... If she goes to a party people will say she looks good. Like us she should look smart.”

Young women in Jhunjhunu generally appear to be more empowered compared to young women in the other states studied. They are more progressive in their views and dreams and sense of gender equality than young women elsewhere. Jhunjhunu was also less addicted to the Saas-Bahu serials – whether this was causal or coincidental, it is difficult to say.

Jhunjhunu appears to have had a less traumatic socio-economic rupture than Delhi, Haryana and Punjab. The other states have collided with a modern service economy and with its physical manifestation more dramatically, with greater rural-urban

movement and consequently a greater sense of dislocation. In Haryana and Punjab particularly, there is a palpable sense of restlessness and absence of located-ness.

The modern mass media revolution, with its sexual imagery may have had less impact in Jhunjhunu compared to the other states, where it does appear to have lead to a backlash in terms of generating regressive views towards women (cable TV was often cited as the main culprit in the other states). There is also still a strong extended family network in Jhunjhunu and men do not see themselves as 'lone crusaders in the big city', protecting family honour, or being left entirely to their own devices in dealing with the challenges of the modern world. This may be translating into less overall social anxiety and perhaps, therefore, greater ability to engage in a less hostile manner with modern possibilities – at least for now, in the short term, in what is probably the first phase of modernity in small town and in rural Rajasthan.

It is recommended that any mass media campaign in Rajasthan be preceded by in-depth qualitative field research in all the major socio-cultural zones in order to better understand the prevailing attitudes relating to gender equality.

7

Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

Given the scale of the problem of sex selection and the size of India as a country, mass media is an important communication option to address the attitudes and behaviours that determine gender inequality. A feasible mass media campaign has to take into account four elements on which this chapter provides recommendations:

- Target audience;
- Messages and messengers;
- Media Platform;
- Media Format and language.

7.2 The Primary Target Audience: The Service Recipient

Secondary research suggests three main potential target groups that have an effect on practices of sex selection:

- The service recipient group – those who seek the medical technology and services to determine the sex of foetus. This group consists of women, husbands and conjugal and natal families;
- The suppliers of sex selection services and technology – medical practitioners such as radiologists;
- The larger environment consisting of policy makers, civil society, media and NGOs.

Mass media messaging by definition has to reach a 'mass' audience. It cannot specifically target a group such as the medical community, which is defined solely by professional criteria. Therefore, the supply side issues around sex selection services will have to be addressed through other means, including legal action, advocacy and monitoring.

This study recommends that a mass media campaign seeking to change sex selective behaviour should have as its primary target the service recipient group, the woman, husband and the natal and conjugal family.

According to an analysis of the primary research, it is recommended that young unmarried women be the core target for mass media messaging. Young, unmarried women (15-20 years) were the group that displayed:

- greatest conflict in life choices;
- most open to questioning received wisdom;
- desire to challenge gender role definitions;
- greatest discomfort with sex selection;
- greatest stake in mounting a challenge; and
- would be most amenable to behaviour change.

However, young women are part of a social web. Behaviour change will be contingent upon the support of others – both men and women. Furthermore, the study recognises that TV viewing is a family affair. Not only is this inevitable but probably desirable, given that decisions around sex selection are also influenced by the family.

There is evidence that support will be available from older women – women whose life-scripts are already written but who express regret at not being able to achieve many things in life and regret at some of the choices life forced upon them. Older women still remember their own dreams when they were younger. Many seek resolution of those dreams in the lives of their children (daughters). Older women also express resentment at the degree of control exerted by husbands in many spheres of life. Even though they lack major decision making powers, they derive affirmation from being a friend, a confidante to their children and especially to their daughters. These older women were positive about empowering their daughters.

Primary research indicates that, although mothers-in-law do influence decisions around sex selection, in the context of the changing socio-economic environment and rise of the nuclear family ethos, the support of husbands is more crucial to changing these decisions. Support for behaviour change to enable new choices will have to be elicited from men – as fathers and husbands. If messaging can take on board their concerns and fears, their support may be available. Therefore, it is recommended that a mass media campaign also address itself to, and bears in mind the sensitivities of the wider family including older women and men.

7.3 The Secondary Target Audience: The Environment

The objective of a mass media campaign targeting the environment, policy makers, NGOs, and the wider civil society is to create greater awareness and a sense of national urgency about the declining sex ratio. Messaging would need to highlight the social, economic and development implications of such a dramatic fall in sex ratios leading to a serious gender imbalance in society.

The larger aim of such a mass media effort, that is, improving sex ratios, cannot be expected in the short-term. A feasible short-term expectation is to enhance public awareness, which is possible in two to five years. The effect of such a

campaign can be expected in terms of multiple advocacy action on many fronts by a range of stakeholders. Action by the government and policy makers on this issue could include eliminating legal loopholes and more stringent implementation of the law to reduce the supply of sex selection technologies and services. Action by NGOs could include communication and direct intervention at the grassroots level to raise awareness and change attitudes and behaviour. Action by media outlets could include devoting greater news-space and airtime to this issue.

The focus of the feasibility study was not, however, on the larger environment. Rather, the focus was on the service recipient as a primary target group. The recommendations that follow apply to mass media interventions seeking to target the service recipient group.

7.4 Messages

As introduced in Chapter 5, there are two main directions for mass media messaging seeking to change the behaviour of the potential sex selection seeker:

- Message Group A: Fill the *knowledge* gaps that play a role in sex selection and unsafe abortion decisions.
- Message Group B: Unravel and challenge social and cultural *attitudes* that fuel sex selection.

Message Group A mass media outputs need not necessarily be distinct from Message Group B. In some instances information and knowledge segments can and should be inserted into content that challenges the social and cultural context of sex selection.

The direction for mass media messaging can be based on a combination of the secondary and primary research found about:

- knowledge and attitudes to sex selection, abortion, reproductive rights and health, (as outlined in Chapter Five) and
- the impact of social transformation on cultural attitudes, life choices, conflicts, anxieties and attitudes to women which may be fuelling son preference and sex selection (as outlined in Chapter Six).

7.4.1 Message Group A: Filling the knowledge gaps

A campaign seeking to raise awareness about facts related to sex selection should be centred on the following areas:

- Awareness of existing laws: the MTP Act and PCPNDT Act;
- Awareness about the impact of repeated late-term abortions on a woman's health; and
- Awareness about who determines the sex of foetus.

Awareness of existing laws: the MTP Act and PCPNDT Act

Research indicates that there is considerable confusion about provisions under these laws. With reference to the MTP Act, there is limited awareness that safe abortion under legally prescribed circumstances is a right. Regarding the PCPNDT Act, although there is a general awareness that sex selection is illegal, there is lack of clarity about just what is illegal, how that illegality can be established, and what is the culpability of doctors, families and the woman undergoing a sex determination test or a sex selective abortion. There is a need for information related messaging in these areas.

Even though there has already been a great deal of focus on the publicising the PCPNDT Act, there is a need to undertake this publicity in tandem with publicity around the MTP Act, to avoid the inadvertent impression that abortion is illegal, and to secure the rights of those women who are seeking abortions for legitimate reasons.

Awareness about the impact of repeated late-term abortions on a woman's health

Repeated late-term abortions can have a negative impact on a woman's health. Primary research indicates that there is some level of awareness of this fact. If this concern were specifically probed as a question ("do repeated abortions have a negative impact on women's health?"), a vast majority would say 'yes' and give physical weakness as an example of the impact. However, primary research also indicates that the awareness is somewhat vague in nature, and not based on concrete information; it does not appear to exist in the respondents' minds in the form of definitive, undeniable knowledge about the impact of repeated abortions on a woman's body.

There is a need for messages to transform this vague awareness into concrete knowledge. There is also further need to transform knowledge into active concern about the negative health impact, as a deterrent to repeated sex selective abortions. Messaging must be carefully constructed so that it does not take the inadvertent shape of anti-abortion messaging. Since most sex selective abortions take place in the early second trimester, it would be prudent to focus on the notion of safe and un-safe abortion in constructing these messages – to promote the information that most sex selective abortions take place after three months, and that at this stage it is both medically less safe and takes a greater toll on a woman's body to undergo an abortion.

Messaging can be targeted in the first instance at women to bolster their ability to resist pressures for repeated sex selective abortions. However, since it is a known fact that women do not take these decisions alone, such messaging must also be aimed at the larger target audience, including men and families.

Awareness about who determines the sex of foetus

A vast majority of the respondents in this study did not seem to be aware of basic biological facts about conception, specifically the fact that the male

chromosome determines the sex of the foetus. When asked who determines the sex of the foetus, several respondents said that it was, “in God’s hands”. There is a need to make this basic fact more known and a part of the active public discourse so that women do not continue to bear the blame’ for conceiving female foetuses.

7.4.2 Message Group B: Unravelling and challenging social and cultural attitudes

- Traditional reasons for the prevalence of sex selection continue to be salient today. Thus, the first recommendation for a mass media output is that it needs to unravel and challenge the traditional social and cultural basis for continued son preference as well as with the fears and anxieties generated by more contemporary processes of social transformation.
- In order to develop a mass media messaging approach that would help the target group re-think behaviour, the primary research explored current concerns generated by processes of social change and at how social change is affecting attitudes to women. Mass media messaging needs to engage with this phenomenon. Social change appears to be leading to a host of contradictory attitudes to women. On the one hand traditional barriers to women’s empowerment are tempering the positive gains of increasing education and job opportunities for women. At the same time, the explosion of modern mass media and its use of the female body in particular ways is constructing and splitting women into “bad modern and good traditional images. In many instances this is leading to regressive, disrespectful and derogatory attitudes to women. Mass media messaging needs to blur these lines between ‘tradition’ and ‘modern’ such that positive behavioural attributes of empowered modern women who work, earn and take their own decisions, including their own reproductive decisions, do not necessarily lead to a fear of greater vulgarity, sexual promiscuity, loss of chastity, loss of tradition and loss of family honour.
- Mass media content also needs to take on board the concerns of a traditional patriarchal social structure, exemplified by the fears held by fathers and husbands of increasing violence against women, loss of tradition, female sexual freedom, and consequent loss of male control. It is clearly not enough to simply tell parents to “love the girl child” or “educate daughters, they can earn and will not be financial burden”. The messaging needs to take on board the fears generated in the mind of a parent as he or she sees his daughter going out to work and is worried about the larger consequences for the daughter and for family honour.
- Young women must be encouraged to take their own reproductive decisions. It is recommended that messages attempt to strengthen the resistance felt by young girls at being pushed into traditional roles; to encourage and affirm their quest for greater gender equality; and explore their discomfort with sex selection. In the perceived fault lines between modern and traditional values,

behaviours and gender roles, messaging must construct positive alternative conflict resolution scenarios.

- Messages should also explore attitudes to the physical self – to the body and health. In an image driven, media saturated age, 'looking good' is an important value for young women, both married and unmarried, rural, urban, small-town and across regions. Young women 'felt good' when they were allowed by families to indulge in grooming of self, and angry or resentful when they were stopped. Of all the respondents in this study, young women were also the most uncomfortable with sex selection. They articulated an equal desire for daughters, and said that they would resist pressures to abort female foetuses. The challenge for mass media messaging is to re-direct the 'look good, feel good' factor towards more health driven and reproductive rights messaging that strengthens these progressive desires among young women. Primary research suggests several directions for a mass messaging strategy. Messages can address the relationship between body care and respect for body, tap the latent desire for autonomy over the body and explore resentment about family control on reproductive decisions.
- Messaging has to be careful in its representation of modernity. It must promote the best of the modern possibility for women, without losing a base of traditional values. Any acceptable messaging direction will have to steer clear of the so-called 'sexual revolution' which is threatening to a range of stakeholders in reproductive decision making.
- Mass media messages should avoid moralising the issue. A moral sense of "right" and "wrong" and "sin" (*paap*) does not play an important role in decisions around abortion or sex selection. Practical and immediate concerns override any moral hesitation.

7.5 Media Platform

It is recommended that the mass media campaign driver for behaviour change messaging be television. This is based on an assessment of the overall popularity of television from NRS data, media habits, primary and secondary data, and on the particular popularity of television among the suggested core target audience of young women.

A mass media campaign should be supported by radio (FM) and print in Delhi, Haryana and Punjab. It should be further supported by radio (AIR) and print in Rajasthan. Although data from Rajasthan does not suggest any particular presence of a radio or print audience, Rajasthan is not a mass media saturated state and therefore any and all mass media outlets need to be employed.

7.6 Programme Format and Language

The choice of programme formats will depend on the type of message and objective of a campaign.

Message Group A: *filling the knowledge gaps that play a role in sex selection and unsafe abortion decisions*, several formats suggest themselves on all three mass media platforms, namely:

- TV public service advertisements
- Radio public service advertisements
- Outdoor hoardings
- Print messages
- Information, education and communication (IEC) material, particularly for Rajasthan

Message Group B: *unravelling and challenging social and cultural attitudes that fuel sex selection*, this study recommends the following formats:

- Campaign driver: fiction drama series
- Supported by television and radio public service advertisements
- Supported by music (spin-offs from a TV series)
- Supported by print advertisements

The issue of sex selection has certain critical attributes that make it particularly amenable to a fiction drama series. Sex selection is embedded in the space of intimate family relations, involving inter-generational conflict (between in-laws and the couple). It operates within the arena of power and control and directly engages with volatile issues of sexuality, reproduction and gender conflict (between the husband and the wife). These are precisely the elements that form the core of mainstream fiction dramas.

The primary research, in tandem with secondary data from NRS and TAM, has indicated that within the fiction drama format, daily soaps are the preferred programme genre among the primary target group (service recipients), with an committed viewership among the core target audience (young women). However, a fiction drama series on such a sensitive issue must allow time and space for rigorous message pre-testing of every message segment. Also, a daily fiction drama focused largely on the issue of gender equality in the context of sex selection stands the danger of exhausting itself too soon. This study therefore recommends the production of a fiction drama serial that can be either a weekly or a series aired two or three times a week.

A mass media campaign needs to bear in mind the fact that the issue of sex selection is complex and warrants a sustained approach. Perhaps more critical than the issue of daily or weekly episodes is the issue of overall longevity of presence. This study suggests that a fiction drama series on this issue will require a sustained media presence rather than an intense but short-lived impact. Thus, a long-duration programming commitment of at least two years is recommended rather than a short-term (for example, a 13 episode) serial.

Programme language

The recommended campaign driver, namely a television fiction drama series, should be in Hindi. Music spin-offs from the drama serial, or stand-alone music videos can be in the regional languages or use regional folk music style and melody.

Although there is evidence that upper class, English-speaking families increasingly choose sex selection; the audience segment for English language mass media continues to be relatively small.

7.7 Messengers

As mentioned in Chapter 4, television is recommended as the preferred mass media platform and the campaign driver for all messaging on the issue of sex selection. Within television programme formats, the fiction drama genre serial is suggested as the primary format for messaging that explores social and cultural issues. A fiction drama series would obviously generate its own 'role models' and messengers.

Messaging that is focused on information awareness could use a range of platforms and genres, including print advertisements or short public service advertisements on both television and radio. The primary research has suggested public figures from different walks of life, which could be effective in a mass media campaign to promote gender equality and reduce sex selection.

Public figures, both past and present, such as Sania Mirza, Kalpana Chawla, Kiran Bedi, Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi, were frequently mentioned as "female role models" by both male and female respondents. They are deeply admired and have iconic status. Kalpana Chawla and Sania Mirza were liked not only by young women but by respondents who were parents and particularly by fathers because they were projected as 'daughters' and each of their families was an extremely visible part of their public lives. Thus their achievements were not seen to be threatening or compromising on the traditional family structure or on family values.

This suggests that female public figures who have demonstrated an ability to be achievers in the mainstream world but who do so without visibly compromising on traditional values would be preferred as messengers. For example, even though as a professional tennis player, Sania Mirza wears short skirts, several male respondents said that despite her 'modern' attire, there was "shyness in her eyes", suggesting that she was acceptable because she was not seen as bold, aggressive or immodest.

Although for the average young woman, these public figures are distant and too iconic to engage with 'real' everyday concerns of social change, aspiration and domestic conflict, they are appropriate for information and knowledge based messaging. They are also appropriate for setting aspirational norms. Using high achievers to give information or to promote pro-women messages is likely to be effective.

Celebrities from the Indian film fraternity with female children were also suggested as likely to be convincing to audiences as messengers. They include Amitabh Bachchan, Shah Rukh Khan, Hema Malini and Kajol. However, a celebrity like Sushmita Sen, a single mother who has chosen to adopt a daughter, is not recommended as an ideal choice of a messenger. Despite having chosen a female child, Sushmita Sen's version of (single) motherhood fundamentally threatens and undermines the traditional institutions of marriage and the patriarchal family. Young heroes, such as John Abraham or Emran Hashmi can be best used for anti-dowry messaging to appeal to young unmarried men.

7.8 Other Recommendations

Audience research

A study of previous mass media campaigns revealed a lack of research that both informs the development of campaigns as well as evaluates their effectiveness and impact. It is recommended strongly that any new mass media initiative include the following:

- A systematic and rigorous behaviour change impact assessment of existing mass media campaigns and outputs on sex selection, both government and non-government.
- Pre-testing of all proposed mass media outputs.
- Quantitative and qualitative impact research.

For campaigns targeting Rajasthan, research in all the socio-cultural zones prior to launching a mass media campaign on sex selection is required.

Construction of messages

An analysis of existing mass media outputs undertaken during this study, has found that the careless construction of messages in the area of sex selection can inadvertently harm or compromise reproductive rights and abortion rights. Messages that attempt to dissuade people from sex selection by focusing on the act of the abortion itself rather than on the socio-cultural context that enables it, can promote an overall anti-abortion bias. Even as this study recommends the creation of a vigorous mass media campaign on sex selection, it simultaneously highlights the urgent need to address the increasing anti-abortion discourse surrounding this issue at all levels. In the absence of such a discursive engagement, any proposed mass media campaign or multiple mass media campaigns against sex selection could have the inadvertent effect of compromising gender equality instead of enhancing it.

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