

Planning Families, Planning Gender



The Adverse Child Sex Ratio in Selected Districts of
Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh,
Haryana, and Punjab

Authored by
Mary E. John, Ravinder Kaur, Rajni Palriwala
Saraswati Raju, Alpana Sagar

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Note: *All names in the text have been changed to protect the identity of the respondents*

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FOREWORD

A mammoth endeavour of research, data collection, analysis and reflection on the underlying dynamics of persisting adverse child sex ratios in North India, is now complete. This report is testimony to the extent to which discrimination against the girl child and women exists, despite burgeoning socio-economic development. Girls and women continue to bear the brunt of patriarchal norms that deny them equal rights, with boys and men, in their survival, development and protection, both within their families and in society. The detailed and disaggregated quantitative data, even though with small numbers, across and within regions, caste, class and age groups, presented in the study throws light on the complex nature and determinants of the problem of declining child sex ratios in North India. The qualitative analyses, within the context of changing socio-economic realities, touches upon the most intimate locations and individual and familial attitudes and strategies – on gender, marriage, education, health, work, household decision-making, sexuality and contested arenas of property rights and female agency. This study of adverse sex ratios in 5 north indian States – Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana – by integrating the quantitative and qualitative approaches, has broken new ground in understanding discrimination based on sex in the context of North India.

ActionAid, in partnership with the International Development Research Centre, Canada, is proud to have participated in the study and present the findings in this report.

We are proud because approximately 60 fieldworkers and several field coordinators (a short list is presented in the Preface), across States and sites, from ActionAid partner organisations at the grassroots, participated in household data collection and compilation, over two phases. Such an exercise was necessary to comprehend the nuanced nature of discrimination against the girl child and women and the manner in which household decision-making, within the larger socio-economic context, alters their life chances. We gratefully acknowledge their contribution. We are indebted to the valuable support, guidance and solidarity of the Advisory Team, comprising eminent scholars and intellectuals, without whose help this study could not have been put together and concluded successfully. The process reflects the commitment of several grassroots workers, researchers and the academia to further the goal of ending discrimination against girl children and women. This study is a very important milestone in ActionAid India's struggle to end 'Poverty and Patriarchy'.

The present research will contribute immensely to our ongoing work in the area of Women's Rights. It gives us a comprehensive and accurate picture of the extent and nature of discrimination and oppression of girl children and women. At the same time it directs and guides our work and interventions in the field that aim to eliminate all forms of discrimination, create awareness amongst young girls and women of their rights and embolden their voice in decisions that effect the survival and protection of their daughters and themselves.

We rededicate ourselves to fulfilling the dreams of several activists, researchers, intellectuals and ordinary women in society and heartily commend this report to all activists, students, sympathisers and allies, including those in the legislature, the judiciary and the executive. We appeal to them not only to read carefully the facts, figures and analysis that follows but also to strengthen progressive discourse and awareness that will promote equity and justice for the survival of the girls and women in India, who have been relegated to the margins of society for centuries before Independence and for several decades since then. In addition to the creative academic discourse that is expected, we hope that the learning from the study is used as a basis for field intervention and to promote the rights of girls and women.

Our profound gratitude to all the researchers whose names are recorded in the Preface.

Babu Mathew

Country Director – India

ActionAid

PREFACE

This study of the adverse child sex ratio in India was carried out by a team of five researchers. It was conceived in response to a request by ActionAid India, and subsequently supported by the South Asia Office of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. The focus of the study is on the socio-cultural contexts and patterns that structure the sex distribution of children in families in five selected districts of northern India. The present report, which encapsulates the broad findings of the study, has been organised as follows:

Chapter 1 delineates the background and methodological context.

Section 1.1 describes the recent emergence of the problem of the declining child sex ratio in India. In a situation where much of what is known has been drawn from large statistical sources of secondary data, this study concentrates on the methodological insights offered by a multi-sited micro study involving primary data collection, both quantitative and qualitative. Its purpose is to provide a complementary account of the set of factors that are currently accelerating processes of aversion to daughters, at times in counter-intuitive ways.

Section 1.2 outlines the methodology adopted in carrying out the study and explains the process of selecting particular villages and urban wards and the types of data generated by the study.

Section 1.3 draws on secondary data at the state and district levels in order to indicate broader background trends. State- and district-level information also helps in contextualising the different issues thrown up by child sex ratio patterns in the specific sites of this study.

Chapter 2 introduces the five sites within the districts in some detail. This chapter concentrates on an analysis of the quantitative data gathered during the study. Various dimensions of the sex ratio are examined in relation to the different sites, their socio-economic specificities, both rural and urban, class and caste differences, education and marriage patterns, and changes in fertility and family composition/sex distribution.

Chapter 3 addresses the strategies and technologies used by families for composing or ‘producing’ the kinds of families they wish for. It explores the family patterns in the different sites, and also looks at the old and new technologies being used for achieving the desired family. Finally, it examines the issue of agency in reproductive decision-making processes and family-building strategies.

Chapter 4 draws from both the quantitative and qualitative data to address the changing structural context leading to adverse child sex ratios. It examines the institutions—kinship, family, marriage, property inheritance, and so on—that are constructing gender roles and determining responsibilities. The chapter attempts to show why the issue of gender discrimination, which has a long ‘traditional’ history in the region, has reached a new level, demanding shifts in explanation. Transformations in the political economy, increasing access to work opportunities, health care, and education, and shifting marriage patterns are among

the essential dimensions of change, often carrying unintended consequences. Finally, the chapter looks at some of the effects of adverse sex ratios.

Chapter 5 draws together the major findings of the study. It also suggests areas for intervention and offers a critique of certain policy initiatives.

This study would not have been possible without the help of many people who have been involved at different levels. A number of institutions have played an enabling role in carrying the project forward. In the field, thanks to ActionAid India and its partner organisations in Morena and Dholpur, Department of Sociology, M.D. University in Rohtak, and Voluntary Health Association of Punjab in Chandigarh. We would like to acknowledge the coordinators of the field researchers at the local level—Asha Singh, Alok Rath, Sanjeev Kumar, Neerja Ahlawat, and Manmohan Sharma. We are particularly grateful to all the field researchers for their invaluable work. A district-wise list has been provided separately.

In Delhi, the Women's Studies Programme, Centre for the Study of Regional Development, Centre for Social Medicine and Community Health at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Department of Sociology, Delhi University, Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, and the Centre for Women's Development Studies provided institutional support. Chris Kurien, Mokshika Gaur, Sonali Chatterjee, Ravi Nandan, and Neerja Ahlawat were valuable research assistants, and along with Jyoti Sapru helped in drafting district-level reports. Jyoti Sapru took on many duties as a research assistant in the latter part of the project, including coordinating between the researchers and ActionAid India. Special thanks to Satyendra Kumar and Oommer Kurien for assistance in quantitative data analysis. We would also like to thank Malini Sood for editing the report within a tight schedule and with multiple demands on her time.

The idea of such a project was first articulated by the then director of ActionAid India, Harsh Mander, with Arundhati Roy Chowdhury, then Programme Manager, ActionAid India taking on administrative responsibility in the initial period. We are grateful to them and also to Babu Mathew, Country Director, Jagat Ballav Patnaik, Programme Director, Anchita Ghatak, Thematic Leader, Women's Rights, and Sincy Joseph, Capacity-Building Officer, all from ActionAid India, who have seen the project through. Particular thanks go to Navsharan Singh, Senior Program Officer, Gender Programs, International Development Research Centre, Canada, and to the Director, Stephen McGurk, at the South Asia Office of the IDRC for all their support.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Framing the Problem

The point of departure of this study is the rapid decline in child sex ratios in contemporary India as evidenced by the 1991 and 2001 Censuses. The most recent decennial census in 2001, for which basic demographic data are also available, indicates that there are over 35 million fewer females than males in the country. The sex ratio in India is conventionally measured by a demographic ratio comparing the number of females in a given population for every 1,000 males. (The world over, acceptable child sex ratios can be in the region of 950 girls to 1,000 boys, as slightly more boys than girls are born, though this ratio tends to 'improve' in favour of girls after birth as boys show somewhat higher mortality rates. However, due to greater life expectancy among women, overall sex ratios have proportionately more women than men. India has experienced a different pattern, with a history of negative overall sex ratios.) During the last decade, overall figures in India for the first time actually indicated a small improvement in the sex ratio, from 927 to 933, for the entire population, due to increasing life spans among older women. However, the 2001 Census also highlighted the dramatic decline in child sex ratios computed separately for the 0–6 age group, and in almost all the states in India. While Census 2001 indicates a rise from 924 to 934 for the population above 6 years of age, the child sex ratio (0–6 age group) has come down from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001, registering an overall decline of 18 points in a decade, and dropping below the overall level for the first time.

The issue of an unfavourable sex ratio in India is by no means a new one, and had even engaged the attention of colonial officials a century ago. In the post-independence years, the problem was rediscovered in the late 1960s and 1970s by demographers, who were able to establish a secular declining trend from the turn of the twentieth century. What is now of particular concern is the decline in child sex ratios, which cannot be explained away by changing migratory patterns or by other ways of accounting for variations in overall figures. Not only have the biggest declines been in this age group, but the rate of decline has also increased in the last two decades, reaching an all-time low in 2001.

1.1.1 Spread of Adverse Child Sex Ratios

The census data also seem to imply that the imbalance is not only getting worse but is also taking newer forms, and penetrating fresh regions, communities, and classes where it was not a big problem before. As is clear from the 2001 Census, the only states where further declines have not occurred are the southern state of Kerala and the north-eastern states of Sikkim, Tripura, and Mizoram, though it should be noted that all of them have relatively lower child sex ratios compared to adult sex ratios.

The 2001 Census demonstrates that the phenomenon has reached new proportions in states that had no prior history of practices such as female infanticide or where pronounced patriarchal ideologies and forms of discrimination against girls were not strongly in evidence. A good example is the case of Himachal Pradesh, where the child sex ratio dropped from 951 in 1991 to 897 in 2001. A similar trend holds true for several other states: Gujarat (50-point decline), Orissa (17-point decline), and Bihar (15-point decline). Furthermore, the phenomenon no longer appears to be limited to certain communities as claimed before, with many Scheduled Caste communities also showing progressively worse child sex ratios. In districts where urban centres had worse sex ratios, rural areas are beginning to 'catch up'.

1.1.2 Development and Sex Ratios

What has been particularly disorienting for researchers and all those who have been arguing about the increasing feminisation of poverty and the lower survival chances of poor girls and women is that the states showing the largest declines in the child sex ratio between 1991 and 2001 are also among the more economically prosperous ones. These are the very states that have recorded fairly high literacy rates in recent years and also declining fertility trends with a growing prevalence of small families. Counter-intuitive as it might appear, Punjab and Haryana are not just the states where literacy levels have improved substantially, but also the states where the gaps between male and female literacy levels have narrowed. Yet these states show some of the worst declines in child sex ratios, followed closely by other prosperous states such as Gujarat and Maharashtra. Rich and modern cities like Delhi, Chandigarh, and Ahmedabad show some of the worst child sex ratios.

The census data thus place before us a series of 'conundrums' that throw into question some of the strongest assumptions about development, the comparative life chances of boys and girls, and the existing definitions of women's 'empowerment'.

1.1.3 Some Pertinent Questions

The preceding discussion has led us to formulate several questions.

1. What does the increasing imbalance in the sex ratio, and specifically in child sex ratios, signify for thinking about contemporary meanings and practices of gender and family strategies?
2. How critical are variations in the sex ratio situation for different classes, castes, communities, types of households, different patterns of marriage, and so on?
3. What are the specific social, economic, political, and cultural processes evolving and shaping gender relations on the ground, 'within' families?
4. How are different people acting in response to these processes and constraints, and with what justifications?
5. What are the different relationships that are emerging among the poor and the non-poor in terms of their access to changing economic opportunities, health care, education, and the desire for fewer children, on the one hand, and equitable sex ratios, on the other hand?

A major impetus for this study was also that the issue of the sex ratio and its decline has primarily been constituted as a demographic and statistical fact. Undoubtedly, the field of demography has made path-breaking contributions in revealing the phenomenon of missing women and girls, and has created widespread awareness about the situation. However, aggregate data sets, whether from the Census of India, the National Sample Survey (NSS), or the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), can only produce macro-level analyses of a certain kind, based on information gathered through large surveys. There is no methodological room for in-depth explorations of micro-level experiences and actions, as these are being structured by and are in turn structuring wider processes, nor is there sufficient recognition of some of the limitations that characterise data gathered under survey conditions. There is often a severe mismatch between careful and insightful analysis of macro data (which are being disaggregated in increasingly sophisticated ways) and experiences on the ground. Correlations often appear as causal explanations or as a result of a final cause ('mindsets'), a conclusion that does not help either in disaggregating region- or site-specific factors or in designing policy interventions. To be effective, the latter need to be based on an understanding of the complex of processes and imaginings that, while producing the same results (declining sex ratios), may vary in their contexts or their linkages.

1.1.4 The Study Framework

At the time of the study, we recognised that a reasonable amount of quantitative data and analyses on the problem of low sex ratios already existed. However, not many qualitative studies have been conducted to understand its determinants. The complex nature of the problem, involving the most intimate locations and spheres of human behaviour—gender, marriage, the family, sexuality, and contested arenas of property rights and female agency, intertwined with experiences and processes in the 'public' sphere—calls for qualitative research.

We believe that sex ratio patterns in India are complex and diverse, and hence the analyses have to be sensitive to this diversity in its spatial, social, cultural, and economic aspects. There was thus an urgent need to go beyond the existing data and analyses in order to capture the situation for different social classes, castes, and communities situated in different local-level contexts. It is in this light that the present study offers an alternative framework, and in more ways than one. The quantitative data, even though constrained by the relative smallness of the numbers, are able to closely examine local trends and the complexity of factors at work. The micro-level qualitative study sought to understand the behaviour, meaning, and structure of the society and social agents that lie behind the growing imbalance in the sex ratio. It is based on an approach that emphasises the everyday 'practices' and relations through which structures are dynamically reproduced, calling on dispositions, ideas, institutions, and values. There are economic, political, religious, and other kinds of social practices that influence the construction of the value of men and women, girls and boys. A nuanced analysis requires that we understand these practices, and their role in reproducing and changing the structures that affect the demographic balance.

To understand social change, we, therefore, need to study and understand how practices change, and how they reorient or transform structures. It also becomes necessary to

understand social processes as inclusively as possible, both in terms of groups and the arenas of social life covered. For example, if son-preference and sex selective abortions are a modern contemporary phenomenon rather than mere vestiges of age-old customs, then focus on the boy child as well as on the girl child is required in relation to work, religious meanings, marriage arrangements, care responsibilities, inter-caste dynamics, bureaucratic regulations, and political choices. Or, if gender disparities are sharpening as fertility rates are declining, it will become crucial to understand what new forms of masculinity are being created and normalised, and through what kinds of practices.

1.2 Research Methodology

1.2.1 *Sample and Site Selection*

The states selected for this study were Haryana, Punjab, and Himachal Pradesh in the north, Rajasthan in the west, and Madhya Pradesh located in central India. The first three states have been in the news for their skewed distribution of girls vis-à-vis boys despite their otherwise better record in terms of development. Among these three states, Haryana and Punjab have a history of negative sex ratios stretching back over the twentieth century. Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, less economically developed, have equally been known for a history of female infanticide, especially among upper-caste groups. All the five states have shown further declines in child sex ratios in the 2001 Census.

The study was undertaken in two stages. Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan were taken up for investigation at the first instance in 2003, and Haryana and Punjab were added later in 2005.

Within these states, particular districts stand out for having especially low sex ratios. The sites for the study were chosen from within such districts. The 1991 Census provided disaggregated information for Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan since these were the only data available in 2003, whereas the disaggregated data from the 2001 Census were available by the time the study of Haryana and Punjab was initiated in 2005. The districts chosen were Morena (Madhya Pradesh), Dholpur (Rajasthan), Kangra (Himachal Pradesh), Rohtak (Haryana), and Fatehgarh Sahib (Punjab).

The selection of sites posed a challenge as they had to be 'representative' in some sense of the vast number of villages and urban centres in the district. In order to proceed, all those villages having at least 100 children in the 0–6 age group were selected in each of the designated districts. These villages were then arranged in ascending order as per their child sex ratio. The villages were then divided and grouped into three strata, A, B, and C, each strata having equal shares of population so as to take care of differential sizes of villages or wards.

Three variables—0–6 sex ratios, Scheduled Caste population, and female literacy—that have some bearing on child sex ratios were selected. The averages for A, B, and C strata were worked out separately, which represented villages with 'low', 'medium', and 'high' child sex ratios respectively, and which provided the basis for identifying villages and urban wards for the field survey. Only those villages and urban wards

were selected that came closest to the strata A, B, and C averages. At this juncture, it is important to note that the classification of villages and wards into ‘low’, ‘medium’, and ‘high’ child sex ratio categories is not absolute but relative as they are, in each case, from the districts with the lowest child sex ratios in their respective states.

If several villages within the strata had the same average values for one variable, the second and the third variables were progressively taken into account. The same method was followed for the selection of urban wards. Care was taken to select urban wards from the towns that in addition to having the lowest sex ratios were also in close proximity to selected villages to the extent possible so that (a) the given socio-cultural and physical context did not change much across the urban and rural sites; and (b) fieldwork remained manageable.

The first-phase states–Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan–had three urban and three rural sites each to represent the ‘low’, ‘medium’, and ‘high’ child sex ratios as classified in the study. For Haryana and Punjab, however, the medium category was left out as it was felt that the medium category represented ‘average’ conditions (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1: Selection of Samples in Five States

	Rural Sites			Urban Sites		
	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High
Madhya Pradesh	Village 1	Village 2	Village 3	Ward 1	Ward 2	Ward 3
Himachal Pradesh	Village 1	Village 2	Village 3	Ward 1	Ward 2	Ward 3
Rajasthan	Village 1	Village 2	Village 3	Ward 1	Ward 2	Ward 3
Haryana	Village 1	–	Village 2	Ward 1	–	Ward 2
Punjab	Village 1	–	Village 2	Ward 1	–	Ward 2

Once the sites were finalised, 250 households were randomly selected from each site. Care was taken that the village/ward caste composition, including the Scheduled Castes, was proportionately represented. Overall, 4,500 households were surveyed in the first three states and 2,000 in the last two. In the second stage of the survey (focusing on reproductive history, child health, and marital history; see below), 50 per cent of the households were surveyed in the first three districts, but in the last two it was decided to include all the households covered in the first stage of the survey.

A pair of researchers—one woman and one man—lived for the entire research period in each site; they were responsible for collecting data.

1.2.2 Conducting the Research

The study combined both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in order to develop a comprehensive research framework. During the course of the research, fieldworkers spent six to eight months in their respective field locations. The first

phase of fieldwork involved the collection of data for all the 250 households through a two-stage detailed questionnaire and a village/urban ward profile for each site. The household questionnaire sought information under two sections: (a) basic demographic information and household assets; and (b) fertility profile, child health care, and marital history. Detailed questions on marriage, dowry, etc. were included in order to examine the validity of current explanations linking social patterns and adverse sex ratios.

The second phase of the fieldwork involved gathering qualitative data through intensive interaction with a small number of selected households, while researchers continued to reside with the community. Households were selected on the basis of various criteria: skewed sex distribution of children in favour of boys or girls, suspected incidences of repeated abortions, willingness of family members to talk, and rapport of interviewers with interviewees in general. Based on data drawn from the household questionnaire, and in close consultation with the core and research teams, 12 families were finally selected, taking care that diversity—families with all girl/all boys, from lower and higher castes, and from poor and prosperous sections—was well represented as far as possible. The sample selection ensured that heterogeneity within the community was covered and that fieldworkers had the opportunity to make sure that important parts of the sample were not left out.

A range of issues, including family-building decisions such as size and sex distribution, the interface of families with work and education, and the values families place on girls and boys, were covered. The researchers maintained field diaries: (a) daily diaries; (b) household diaries; and (c) ‘star diaries’ (special information and subjective inputs of researchers) in the local language, which were later transcribed into English.

1.2.2.1 Language

Locally based researchers were selected to take advantage of familiarity with language and a nuanced understanding of the local situation. Knowing the language made it easier for the researcher to enter the world of the subjects and to focus on the meaning they gave to their actions.

1.2.2.2 Importance of Establishing Trust

The researchers’ mode of interaction was non-intrusive and was directed towards building trust with the community. Once this trust was gained, the researchers were able to collect information beyond the public representation that people wished to make of themselves, to become sensitive to the meanings with which people live, and also to have an opportunity to check the information gathered either through multiple conversations or through counter-observations. The researchers’ long stay in the field allowed for a close observation of the local society and facilitated the collection of empirical and qualitative data on various aspects of life.

1.2.2.3 Nature of Data

The data collected were systematic, oriented towards the problem being studied, yet not narrowly focused on it. The case study approach implied studying the intricacies and dynamics of varied and multiple aspects of social life of a small number of ‘cases’.

based on intensive interactions, in contrast to the extensive data collection of a survey, which necessarily has to focus on questions with little counter-checking as to the integrity of the responses. Indeed, the premise of an ethnographic study is that information needs to be collected on a wide variety of areas and arenas of behaviour in order to discover connections. For instance, while studying the sex ratio imbalance, connections need to be made between constructions of gender and their interrelationships with family structure, work, property, religious-cultural values, etc. To unpack the powerful ideology of son-preference, information on several parameters was required, which could only come from close observation and which would not be evident from the survey method.

Workshops during which the field researchers were trained by the advisory team in methods of survey and ethnographic data collection were held at regular intervals, as were sharing workshops. In addition to the survey questionnaire, a detailed checklist of topics and issues to be covered by field researchers was prepared by the authors of the study, who also made periodic visits to the field sites.

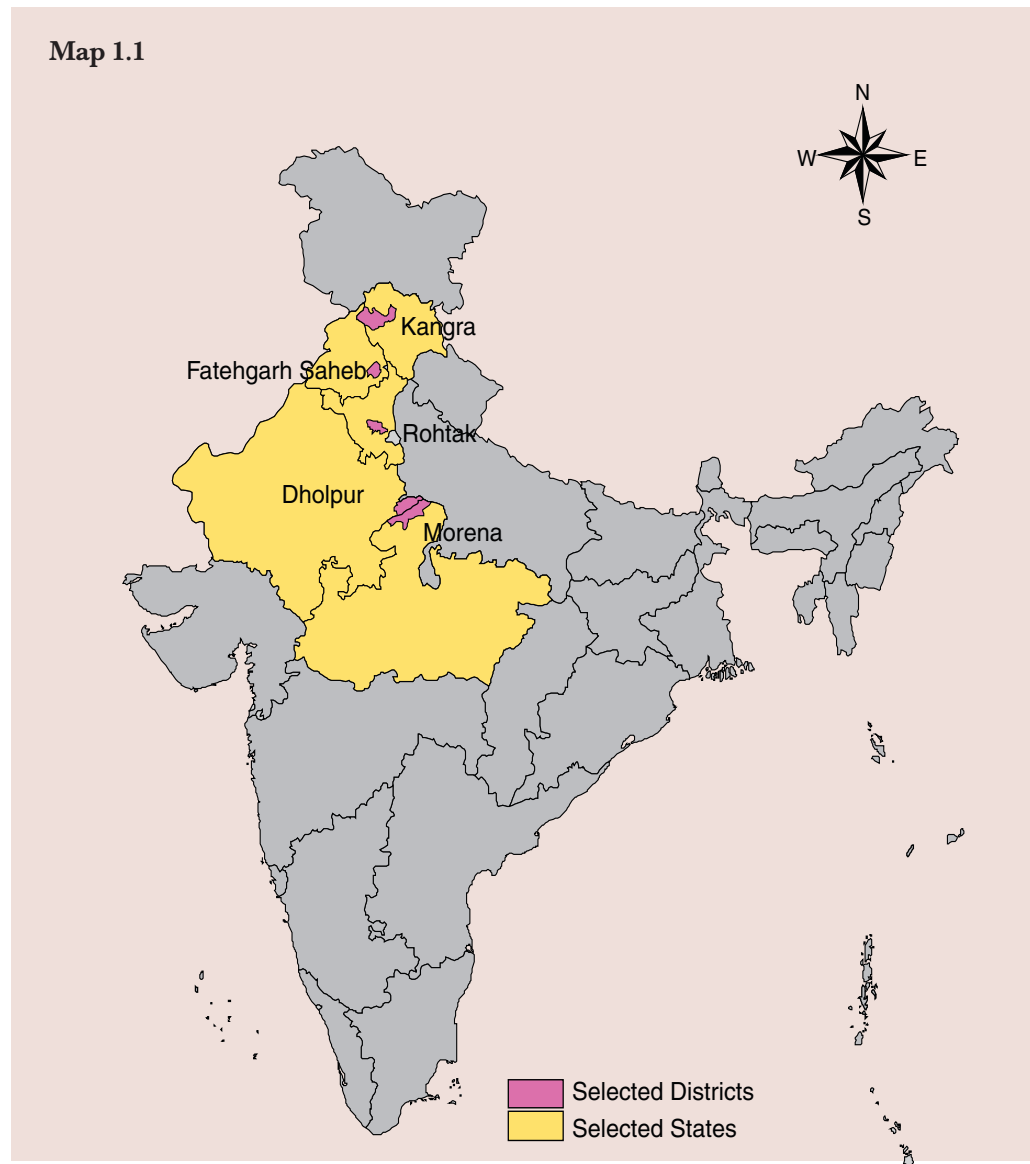
1.2.2.4 Ethical Considerations

The study was not extractive by nature, and the study team was accountable to the respondents. While doing the fieldwork, care was taken not to make the community in general and the women in particular more vulnerable or traumatised as the result of the study. We recognise them to be victims also, and not perpetrators, of gender discrimination.

1.3 The States and Districts of the Study

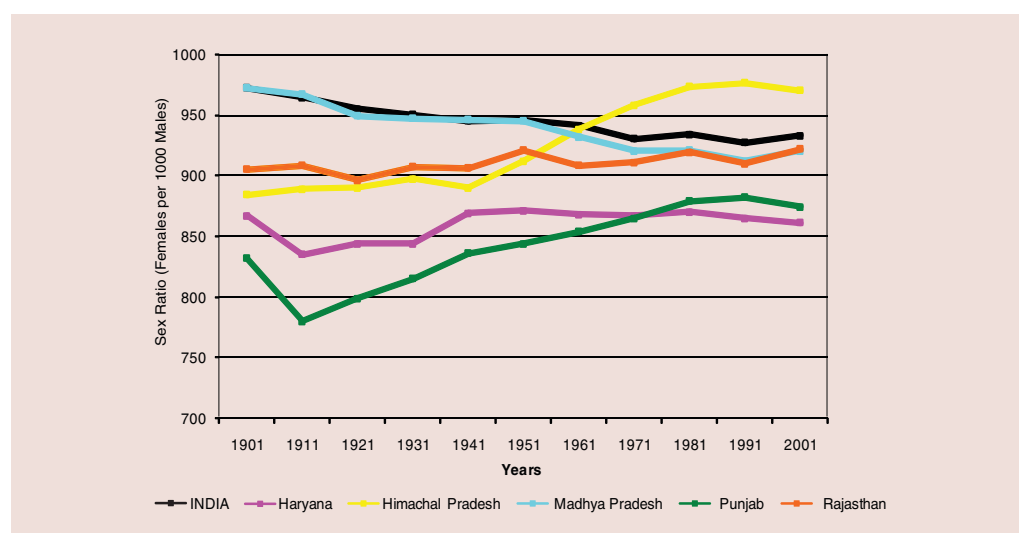
As mentioned earlier, with the exception of the 1971 Census, India has witnessed a secular decline in sex ratios, documented from 1901 onwards. However, statistical data disaggregated by gender show distinct regional patterns in India. In general, states located in the northern and north-western regions of the Indian plain are known for their greater discriminatory treatment of women, while states in the south have had somewhat different gender patterns and practices (though by no means egalitarian). Among the states in the north and the north-west as well, there are significant variations. In order to study recently falling child sex ratios, different states characterised by low sex ratios were selected for investigation. These were the states of Haryana, Punjab, and Himachal Pradesh in the north, Rajasthan in the west, and Madhya Pradesh located in central India. The following sections provide an overview of the sex ratio situation in the selected states and districts, as well as a brief examination of the socio-economic indicators that are useful for contextualising sex ratio patterns in the different states and district.

Map 1.1 Locating the States and Districts Of The Study.



Graph 1.1 provides a temporal profile of sex ratios for India and for the five states. General sex ratios are influenced by migration patterns, which tend to be male selective as is the case with Punjab (largely international migration) and Himachal Pradesh (internal migration). At the all-India level, the impact of migration on sex ratios can be somewhat discounted.

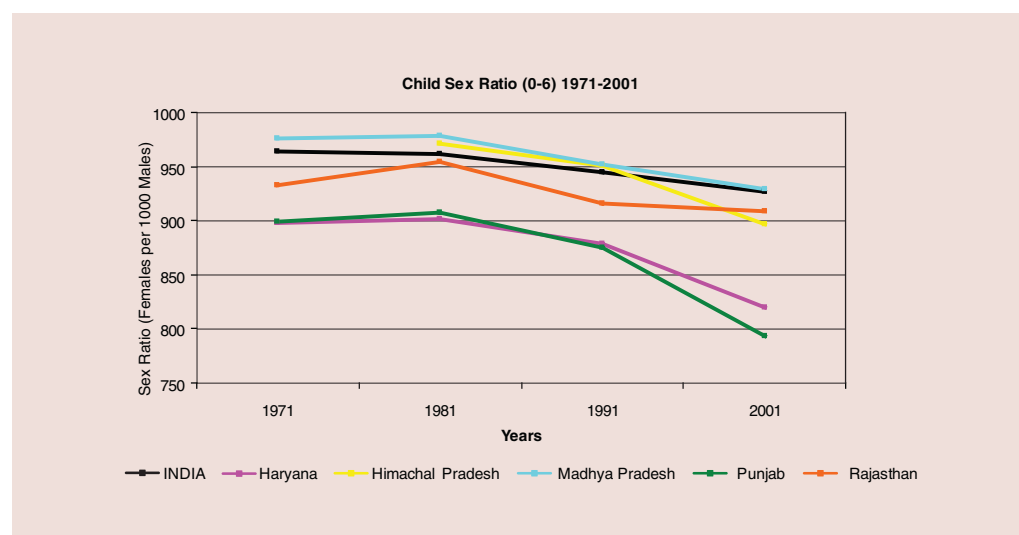
Graph 1.1: Sex Ratio of Population, 1901–2001



Source: Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, General Population Tables, Various volumes.

Although the overall sex ratio improved slightly since 1991, the drastic decline in child sex ratios brought into focus ‘missing’ girls and daughters by more directly pointing to the preferential treatment of boys compared to girls. There has been a secular decline in the child sex ratio—a drop of 18 points (from 945 to 927) for India as a whole (see Graph 1.2). All the states and districts in the study show a drop in child sex ratios, although the decline is less severe in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh than in the other three states. Punjab and Haryana consistently have shown much lower sex ratios than the other states for the past four decades. Ironically, as mentioned earlier, Haryana and Punjab top the list of developed states, while Himachal is steadily showing a ‘progressive’ profile in terms of literacy attainment and other economic indicators, such as poverty reduction and increase in per capita income.

Graph 1.2: Child Sex Ratio (0–6), 1971–2001



Source: Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, Socio-cultural Tables, Various volumes.

Having proposed a broad grouping of states, it is important to note that similarities among and differences between states coexist at various levels. Table 1.2 gives us the overall and child sex ratios for India and for the five states. Table 1.3 reveals the extent of decline in the overall and child sex ratios for India and for the five states. Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, and Punjab show very steep declines of 55, 60, and 77 points respectively in the 0–6 age group.

Given the already poor histories of Punjab and Haryana, this new deterioration or decline raises fundamental questions about the nature of development in these two states. They represent the perfect conundrum—high female literacy, along with high median age at marriage, which are significant indicators of development.

Himachal Pradesh does not have a uniform history of discrimination against girls and women extending in time and space, but Kangra, the district selected for investigation in this study, has recorded a steep decline in the child sex ratio.

Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan show smaller declines in the child sex ratio. Indeed, Rajasthan shows a decent improvement in its overall sex ratio. Both states are relatively backward and have histories of continuing practices of female child neglect and rarer cases of female infanticide.

What is also noteworthy is that in Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh, both rural and urban child sex ratios have declined by very large margins, showing a convergence of the rural and the urban. In Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, the decline has been far greater in urban areas, following earlier patterns. The reasons for some of the patterns outlined by the 2001 Census data and the study data will be further explored in the report.

Table 1.2: Sex Ratios in 1991 and 2001 by State

Sex Ratio (females per 1,000 males)

State	Madhya Pradesh	Rajasthan	Himachal Pradesh	Haryana	Punjab	India	Madhya Pradesh	Rajasthan	Himachal Pradesh	Haryana	Punjab	India
	Census 2001						Census 1991					
RURAL												
Overall Sex Ratio	927	930	989	866	890	946	943	919	990	864	888	939
0-6 Sex Ratio	939	914	900	823	799	934	956	919	955	877	878	948
0-14 Sex Ratio	922	902	928	847	834	922	942	905	961	869	881	931
URBAN												
Overall Sex Ratio	898	890	795	847	849	900	893	879	831	868	868	894
0-6 Sex Ratio	907	887	844	808	796	906	937	909	904	884	866	935
0-14 Sex Ratio	904	887	851	823	815	909	933	907	898	878	883	932
TOTAL												
Overall Sex Ratio	919	921	968	861	876	933	931	910	976	865	882	927
0-6 Sex Ratio	932	909	896	819	798	927	952	916	951	879	875	945
0-14 Sex Ratio	918	899	921	841	828	919	940	905	956	871	882	931

Note:

- Sex ratio for MP for 1991 is for the undivided state, while for 2001 it is for the divided MP without Chhattisgarh.
- India figures for 1991 are for India (minus J&K), and for 2001 the entire country as the census was not conducted in 1991 in J&K.
- As computed from the Census of India 2001 and the 1991 Socio-Cultural Tables on Single Year Returns by Sex.

Table 1.3 Sex Ratios Differences Between 1991 and 2001 by State

State	Madhya Pradesh	Rajasthan	Himachal Pradesh	Haryana	Punjab	India
Point Difference between 2001 and 1991						
RURAL						
Overall Sex Ratio	-16	11	-1	2	2	7
0-6 Sex Ratio	-17	-5	-55	-54	-79	-14
0-14 Sex Ratio	-20	-3	-33	-22	-47	-9
URBAN						
Overall Sex Ratio	5	11	-36	-21	-19	6
0-6 Sex Ratio	-30	-22	-60	-76	-70	-29
0-14 Sex Ratio	-29	-20	-47	-55	-68	-23
TOTAL						
Overall Sex Ratio	-12	11	-8	-4	-6	6
0-6 Sex Ratio	-20	-7	-55	-60	-77	-18
0-14 Sex Ratio	-22	-6	-35	-30	-54	-12

Note:

- Sex ratio for MP for 1991 is for the undivided state, while for 2001 it is for the divided MP without Chhattisgarh.
- Figures for 1991 are for India (minus J&K), and for 2001 entire country. As computed from the Census of India 2001 and the 1991 Socio-Cultural Tables on Single Year Returns by Sex.

The discussion so far has been concentrating on state-level data. However, as already mentioned, particularly low, if not the lowest, sex ratio districts from each state were chosen for locating the micro study. Tables 1.4 and 1.5 give details of sex ratios and changes in sex ratios in each of the districts between 1991 and 2001. Compared to their respective states, not only do these districts have lower child sex ratios than the state average, but they also have witnessed larger declines during the same period. Fatehgarh Sahib and Kangra suffered the worst declines of 108 and 103 points respectively in their child sex ratios, followed by Rohtak at 77 points. Morena comes next with a 41-point decline, while Dholpur shows the smallest decline at 15 points. Separating rural-urban changes, Morena shows the same decline of 41 points in both its rural and urban areas, while Dholpur exhibits a much higher drop in the urban than in the rural areas. Surprisingly, Kangra and Fatehgarh Sahib show higher declines in their rural areas than in their urban areas, pointing to a rural-urban convergence in these urbanising rural areas. Rohtak shows a higher decline in its urban than its rural areas, in keeping with a state that is urbanising rapidly but has yet to 'catch up' with Kangra and Fatehgarh Sahib.

Table 1.4 Sex Ratios in 1991 and 2001 in Selected Districts

State/District	Morena	Dholpur	Kangra	Rohtak	Fatehgarh Saheb	Morena	Dholpur	Kangra	Rohtak	Fatehgarh Saheb
	Census 2001					Census 1991				
	RURAL									
Overall Sex Ratio	817	821	1,032	839	861	826	786	1,029	843	871
0-6 sex ratio	839	863	835	807	757	880	870	942	875	872
0-14 sex ratio	814	823	888	842	813	824	785	956	865	-
	URBAN									
Overall Sex Ratio	842	857	902	862	838	826	841	934	881	873
0-6 sex ratio	830	839	852	781	791	871	901	885	879	881
0-14 sex ratio	816	835	866	819	820	833	868	903	875	-
	TOTAL									
Overall Sex Ratio	822	827	1,025	847	854	826	795	1,024	851	871
0-6 sex ratio	837	860	836	799	766	878	875	939	876	874
0-14 sex ratio	814	825	887	835	815	826	798	954	867	-

Note:

- Dholpur became a separate district in 1982; Fatehgarh Saheb district came into existence on 13 April 1992.
- As computed from the Census of India 2001 and the 1991 Socio-Cultural Tables on Single Year Returns by Sex.

Table 1.5: Sex Ratio Differences in Selected Districts between 1991 and 2001

State/District	Morena	Dholpur	Kangra	Rohtak	Fatehgarh Sahib
	Point Difference between 2001 and 1991				
	RURAL				
Overall Sex Ratio	-9	35	3	-4	-10
0-6 sex ratio	-41	-7	-107	-68	-115
0-14 sex ratio	-10	38	-68	-23	—
	URBAN				
Overall Sex Ratio	16	16	-32	-19	-35
0-6 sex ratio	-41	-62	-33	-98	-90
0-14 sex ratio	-17	-33	-37	-56	—
	TOTAL				
Overall Sex Ratio	-4	32	1	-4	-17
0-6 sex ratio	-41	-15	-103	-77	-108
0-14 sex ratio	-12	27	-67	-32	—

Tables 1.6 and 1.7 capture some of the indicators of well-being for women and their relative positioning vis-à-vis each other. It can be seen that Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan share certain comparable characteristics, as do Haryana and Punjab, with Himachal Pradesh placed in between. This is true for a number of demographic and economic variables.

Table 1.6: Development: Comparative Demographic Indicators

	M.P.	Rajasthan	H.P.	Haryana	Punjab
0-6 SR (Census 2001)	933	909	897	820	793
SRB Census 2001 (Female per 100 Males)	106.2	108.9	108.9	115.7	117.5
SRS 1998-2000 (RGI 2003)	110.3	114.0	110.9	125.5	126.3
Female literacy (Census 2001)	50.28	44.34	68.08	56.31	63.55
Total fertility rate (NFHS 1998-99)	3.31	3.78	2.14	2.88	2.21
IMR & Diff. Boy-Girl (India 4.0) (NFHS 1998-99)	> India 9.0	> India 2.0	< India 11.0	< India -13.0	< India -16.0
MMR (SRS 2000)	498	670	—	103	199
Life Expectancy (Female) 2000-2004, (RGI 2007)	57.2	62.0	66.8	65.8	69.8
Age at Marriage (NFHS 1998-99)	18.0	18.3	22.1	19.8	22.1

Table 1.7: Development: Comparative Economic Indicators

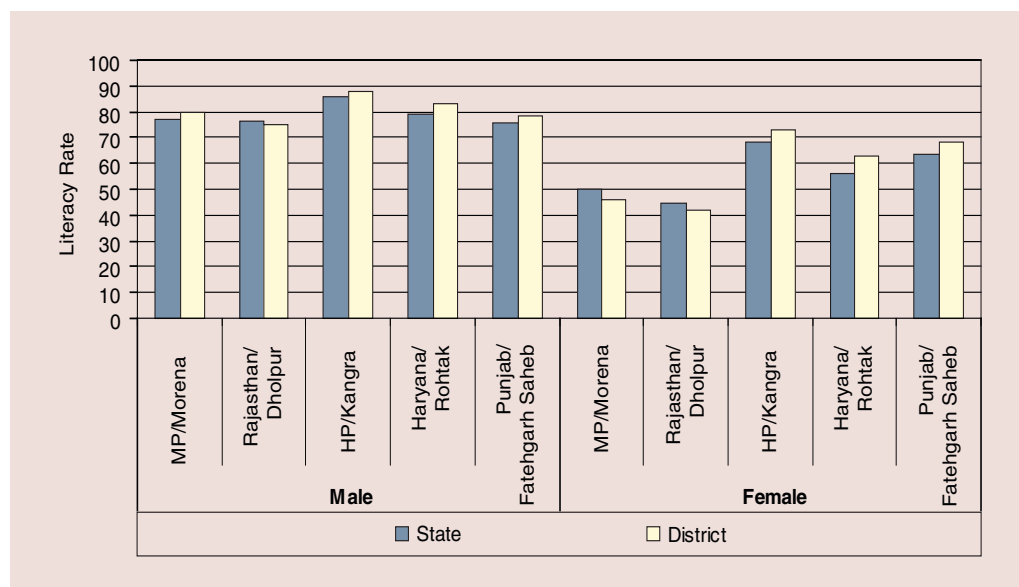
	M.P.	Rajasthan	H.P.	Haryana	Punjab
Primary GER (G) for 1999–2000 (GOI 2001)	102.94	83.81	80.83	82.98	81.71
Urban population % Census 2001	26.67	23.38	9.79	29.00	33.95
State per capita income in Rs. (at current prices 2003–04)	14,011	14,748	24,903	29,963	27,851
Poverty % (GOI 2001 for 1999–2000)	37.43	15.28	7.63	8.74	6.16
Male Work Participation Rate % (Census 2001)	51.5	50	54.6	50.3	53.6
Female Work Participation Rate % (Census 2001)	33.2	33.5	43.7	27.2	19.1
% Primary sector (main workers) (Census 2001)	68.75	64.11	58.85	50.74	45.13

Workforce participation rates vary across states. Overall, Punjab and Haryana have always been characterised by relatively lower workforce participation for women in official statistics. According to the 2001 Census, these are 19 per cent and 27 per cent respectively. Himachal Pradesh, on the other hand, has recorded the highest rate of 44 per cent; Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh have one-third of females classified as workers. The decadal increase from 1991 to 2001 has been the highest in Haryana, followed by Punjab. However, the 2001 increases need to be noted with some care. Much of the increase can be attributed to a significant definitional change in the 2001 Census; the care of livestock has been added to the category of ‘main’ work, which hitherto was far more likely to be recognised as ‘marginal’ work.

When the primary data produced by the fieldwork is examined, a more differentiated view of both main and subsidiary work will be offered in order to better capture the invisibility of women’s work and its corresponding lack of value. The next chapter looks at the data gathered as part of the study. We will have occasion to see how ‘representative’ these findings are compared to the broad characteristics of the district or state discussed so far.

Graph 1.3 provides a comparative view of literacy rates at the state and district levels. It will be noted that relative to their states, district male and female literacy rates were higher in Kangra, Rohtak, and Fatehgarh Sahib, while in Dholpur these were lower than those for the state. In Morena, too, the male literacy rate is slightly higher than that of the state. Literacy is a significant variable for locating levels of development, and thus helps in situating the districts within their states.

Graph 1.3: State-wise Comparative Literacy Rates (7 years and above), Census of India, 2001 and Primary Data



Source: India, Registrar General, Tables on Educational Levels by Age and Sex - C8, Census of India, 2001, Census CDs.

Sex ratios at birth (SRBs) (see Table 1.8) can be suggestive of sex selection prior to birth, which under 'normal' conditions should be around 950 girls per 1,000 boys. But the data's robustness depends upon the accuracy of the coverage/registration of births, which is poor or erratic for some states. Keeping this limitation in mind, the data for the period from 1998–2000 to 2004–06 show that overall SRBs for all the five states remain well below the figure of 950, indicating that fewer girls continue to be born. Within this negative scenario, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan continue to reveal a marginally deteriorating situation. However, what may be noteworthy is that the SRBs for Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, and Punjab—the states that had shown the worst drops in child sex ratios in the 2001 Census—showed a steady improvement between 2000 and 2006. Whether this is a pointer towards any positive change that may be beginning to take place is discussed at a later stage in the report.

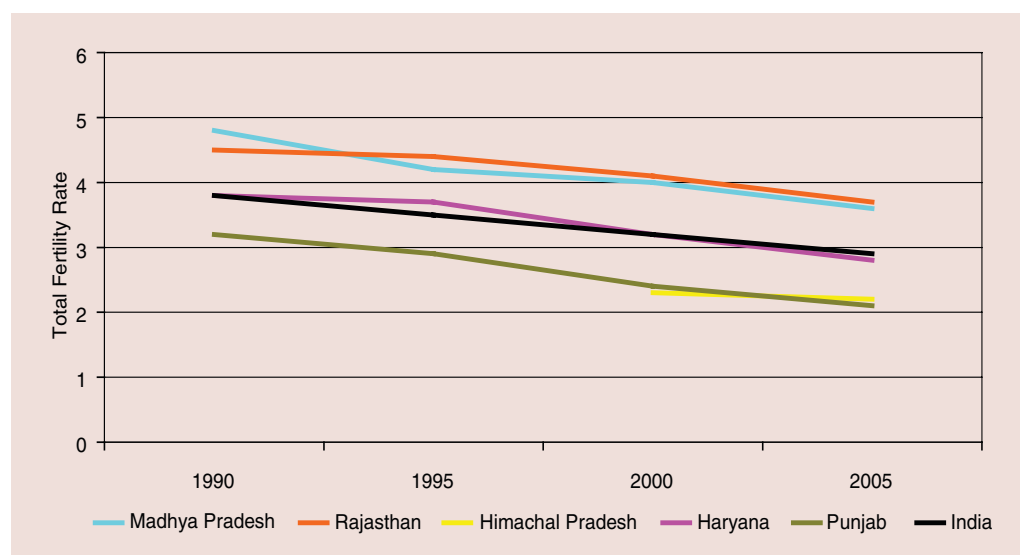
Table 1.8: Sex Ratios at Birth

Sex Ratio at Birth						
Year	India	Madhya Pradesh	Rajasthan	Himachal Pradesh	Haryana	Punjab
	Total					
1998–2000	898	907	877	902	797	792
1999–2001	894	915	885	858	803	775
2000–02	892	920	890	826	804	775
2001–03	883	922	855	803	807	776
2002–04	882	916	838	851	821	797
2003–05	880	911	839	858	829	801
2004–06	892	913	855	872	837	808
	Rural					
1998–2000	901	908	885	907	807	799
1999–2001	899	925	886	863	814	782
2000–02	898	933	886	826	817	781
2001–03	888	929	849	799	816	780
2002–04	884	916	837	849	825	804
2003–05	882	912	835	857	831	808
2004–06	895	914	855	870	838	813
	Urban					
1998–2000	886	903	830	823	755	767
1999–2001	871	857	876	785	758	750
2000–02	868	849	917	826	745	757
2001–03	866	882	893	865	765	761
2002–04	872	918	842	876	807	777
2003–05	872	906	853	872	824	786
2004–06	881	907	856	888	834	800

Source: Registrar General of India, Sample Registration System Statistical Reports, Delhi: Controller of Publications: Various Years

Graph 1.4 profiles the total fertility rates (TFRs) for the years from 1988 to 2005. It shows a downward trend in fertility, with women giving birth to fewer children during their reproductive span. Of the states in the study, Haryana has registered the sharpest decline. Despite the overall downward trend, women in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan continue to have larger families, an observation borne out by the micro data as well.

Graph 1.4: Total Fertility Rate



Source: Registrar General of India, Sample Registration System Reports, Various Years

District-level data are not available to show these fertility trends, but 2001 estimates for overall TFR by the IIPS (International Institute of Population Sciences, Mumbai) broadly corroborate the state profiles, although as compared to the Sample Registration System the IIPS figures are higher for Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

The decision to have fewer children is closely linked with life expectancy at birth, which is an outcome of the availability of, access to, and utilisation of health facilities. The state-level data show that life expectancy at birth (see Table 1.9) has gone up everywhere for both men and women, but there are large-scale variations among the states under study. Once again the disparities between urban and rural averages, on the one hand, and between Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan and the rest, on the other hand, are evident.

Table 1.9: Life Expectancy at Birth, 2002–06

	Rural		Urban		Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Madhya Pradesh	56.7	56.3	64.2	66.0	58.1	57.9
Rajasthan	53.6	50.5	63.4	60.6	61.5	62.3
Himachal Pradesh	66.4	67.0	67.5	70.8	66.5	67.3
Haryana	65.4	65.2	67.4	70.7	65.9	66.3
Punjab	67.7	69.2	69.7	72.7	68.4	70.4
India	62.6	64.3	68.9	71.3	64.1	65.8

Source: Registrar General of India, Sample Registration System Reports.

Marriage has a bearing on child sex ratios. The data for the period from 1971 to 1998–99 show a consistent increase in the mean age at marriage in all states, although

in this case also Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan lag behind, with 19 and 18 years respectively, as compared to Himachal and Punjab, where the mean age at marriage is 22 years. Haryana occupies an in-between position, with a mean age at marriage at 20 years. The state, however, has the largest age gap in marriage between men and women.

As per the 2002–04 Reproductive and Child Health II data a little less than half the girls in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan were married below the legal age of marriage. These figures were slightly higher for the districts from which the survey sites were selected. Haryana follows with 29 per cent of girls married below the age of 18 years; the district figure for Rohtak is about the same. Interestingly, the district of Fatehgarh Sahib has half the state's average (5 per cent) in terms of the share of girls married under the legal age.

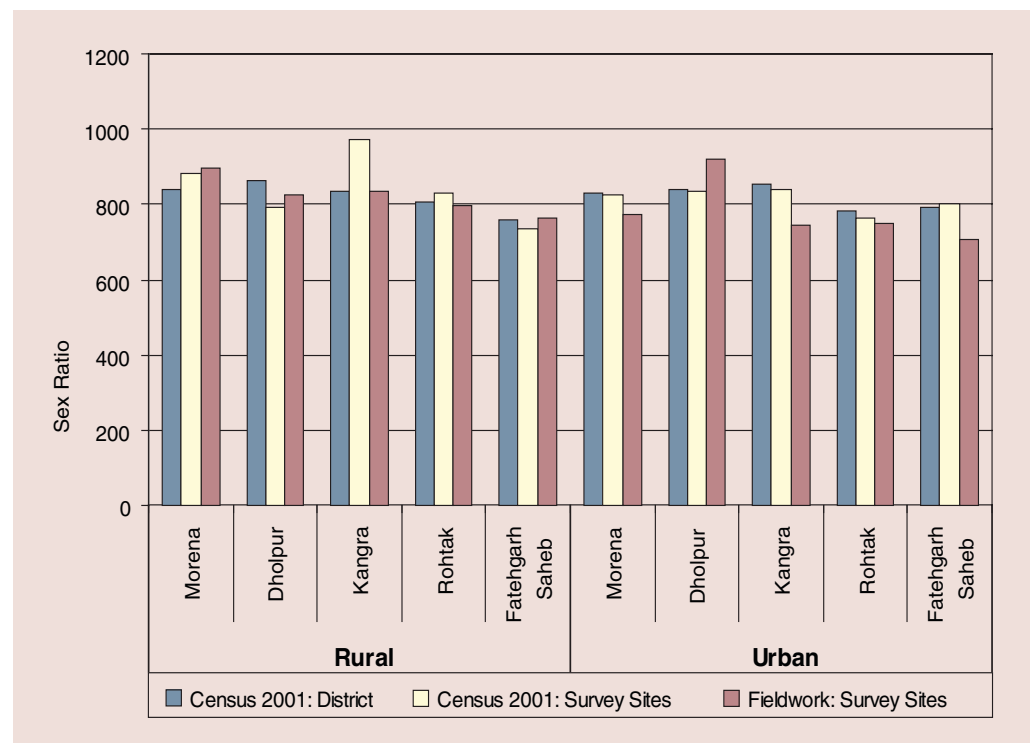
Having provided a background to the states and districts in which the study was undertaken, we now move on to the detailed findings of the study in relation to the specific sites selected to understand the local and particular contexts in which the decline in child sex ratios has occurred.

Chapter A SITE-WISE ANALYSIS

This chapter introduces the basic characteristics of the sites drawing from the primary data that was gathered with the help of survey questionnaires. Since sex ratios are the focus of the study, we begin with a discussion of these.

Graph 2.1 provides a bridge between the child sex ratio figures of the different districts and those of the specific sites chosen for study within them, by rural and urban location. The first bar in each group refers to the corresponding district according to Census 2001, the second to the Census 2001 values for the average of the villages (rural) and wards (urban) selected for the study, and the third to the field-based primary data collected. These have been provided for comparison. With the exception of rural Kangra, there appears to be a close match between census district figures and census averages for the respective sites. A discussion of the specific sites will be undertaken with the help of Table 2.1.

Graph 2.1: Child Sex Ratios (0-6 years) in Survey Sites (Census 2001 and Fieldwork)



Note:

- Sex Ratio of Census 2001 District refers to Census 2001 figures for the entire district; Census 2001 survey sites refers to Census 2001 figures of the survey sites selected for the study; Fieldwork survey sites refers to the primary data figures of the survey sites obtained by the study.
- Fieldwork data for Morena, Dholpur, and Kangra done in 2003, and for Rohtak and Fatehgarh Saheb done in 2005.

Table 2.1: Sex Ratios in Survey Sites (females per 1,000 males)

Sex Ratios in Survey Sites										
	Census 2001					Fieldwork*				
State	Madhya Pradesh	Rajasthan	Himachal Pradesh	Haryana	Punjab	Madhya Pradesh	Rajasthan	Himachal Pradesh	Haryana	Punjab
District	Morena	Dholpur	Kangra	Rohtak	F. Saheb	Morena	Dholpur	Kangra	Rohtak	F. Saheb
RURAL										
Overall sex ratio	846	818	1,052	841	891	859	860	1,001	831	866
0-6 sex ratio	881	792	974	829	735	895	823	835	798	762
0-14 sex ratio	-	-	-	-	-	857	797	852	862	735
URBAN										
Overall sex ratio	831	867	851	858	853	824	885	921	878	864
0-6 sex ratio	825	836	841	766	803	771	922	743	751	706
0-14 sex ratio	-	-	-	-	-	763	850	764	806	696
TOTAL										
Overall sex ratio	837	851	923	853	874	842	874	961	855	865
0-6 sex ratio	851	819	900	785	765	842	871	789	776	734
0-14 sex ratio	-	-	-	-	-	815	824	807	834	716
Village- and ward-level data from field surveys carried out in 2003 and 2005.										

The order of the five study sites provide a broad reflection of patterns of development – Morena and Dholpur are the least developed by most conventional indicators, Fatehgarh Saheb is at the other end of the spectrum along with Kangra, with Rohtak in between.

2.1 Broad Sex Ratio Patterns

Table 2.1 provides a basic overview of the sex ratio patterns in the specific study sites in comparison to the 2001 Census data for these sites. Average figures for the rural and urban sites taken together have been provided.

As already mentioned in the introduction to this report, this study was conducted in phases, beginning with Morena, Dholpur, and Kangra in 2003, followed by Rohtak and Fatehgarh Saheb in 2005. In the first phase, three rural and three urban sites were selected having relatively high, medium, and low sex ratios in their 0–6 populations according to 1991 Census data, since disaggregated 2001 Census data were not yet available. Not unlike the negative trends at the state and district levels, once 2001 Census figures for the respective local sites became available, one of the first findings was that, between 1991 and 2001, the situation deteriorated in most of these sites. (In the case of Kangra, due to problems related to the changing definitions of site boundaries, the 2001 Census data were unfortunately no longer comparable with either the 1991 Census data or with the primary data collected by this study.) The only exception to the general deteriorating trend was Morena. Whereas the 1991 Census data had shown the rural sites with lower sex ratios than the urban averages, the rural sites according to the 2001 Census data had improved while the urban sites had dropped further. (It might be worth recalling here the 1991–2001 drops in the child sex ratios for the districts and states discussed already in chapter 1.)

This discussion will confine itself largely to the data generated in the course of the study. The numbers are not large when it comes to a site-wise analysis of, say, the 0–6 population. Numbers at this level are, therefore, indicative rather than conclusive. Thus, for instance, a typical urban site in Kangra where most families have no more than two children would have about 100 children in this age group. In such cases, small changes in the number of girls and boys produce large changes in the sex ratio. However, by grouping together the urban and rural sites as well as by considering the 0–14 age group, we find that the figures are considerably more robust.

What do the primary data indicate? We have provided the overall sex ratios of the sites by way of contextual information. As is well known, overall sex ratios are much more complex phenomena, especially when they are part of a micro-level study. Considerable variation can be brought about by local migration patterns, not just for work, but also for schooling, marriage, and so on. Even so, low rural sex ratios are more unusual, since it is more common to find proportionately higher male rural–urban migration patterns. Only rural Kangra in the study area depicts a high overall sex ratio, and fits in with well-known patterns of male out-migration from Himachal Pradesh. It would appear, therefore, that barring such migration and possible undercounting, the presence of fewer women compared to men in almost all the sites even at higher age cohorts is indicative of older histories of gender imbalance, if not discrimination, for which the region of north-west India (barring Himachal) has been known. At the same time, the lowest sex ratios in all the sites are among children.

As mentioned earlier, the order of the five study sites, beginning with Morena and Dholpur, followed by Kangra, and finally by Rohtak and Fatehgarh Saheb, provides a broad reflection of the patterns of development. While Morena and Dholpur are the least developed by most conventional indicators, Fatehgarh Saheb is at the other end

of the spectrum, along with Kangra, with Rohtak in between. However, as we shall see, there is nothing hard and fast about this ordering, and each site has its own distinctive characteristics. Moreover, these sites are not simply ‘backward’ or ‘prosperous’. A more nuanced appreciation of the dimensions of development is required in order to better understand what is happening to child sex ratios in these districts, and why. An overall comparison of the 0–6 sex ratio figures, both rural and urban, yields the following conclusion: almost all the average figures are low, if not very low. Thus, even though there was some variation within the sites, with occasional ‘good’ sex ratio sites, the greater predominance of low, and at times extremely low, sex ratios in most of the sites has resulted in low averages overall.

Second, the urban figures are particularly low—with figures in the region of 750. While the rural figures for Morena, Dholpur, and Kangra are in the 800s, the rural–urban difference narrows in Rohtak and Fatehgarh Sahib. The only exception to the general pattern is Dholpur, where the urban sex ratio of 922 is relatively better, a matter that will be discussed later. Note also that the fieldwork figures (taken in 2003 and 2005) are either similar to or lower than those of Census 2001 for the same sites. A comparison of the 0–14 and 0–6 figures is another way of looking at recent trends. In the urban sites, there has either been no overall change or the figures show a slight worsening among the younger cohort. Again, the exception here is urban Dholpur, where the 0–14 age sex ratio is worse than the 0–6 age sex ratio, if somewhat higher than the equivalent figures in the other study sites. In the rural sites, there is some improvement in the low sex ratios in Morena (it is difficult to call the small rise in Fatehgarh Sahib an improvement because the figures are so low), and there is a worsening in Kangra and Rohtak. A fuller analysis of sex ratio patterns will be undertaken below once a better picture of local conditions in these sites has been obtained.

2.2 Socio-economic Profile of the Sites

Tables 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, and 2.5 provide a set of the basic characteristics of the sites by rural and urban averages. We will draw from these selectively in order to give an overview.

2.2.1 Morena

Morena district, according to 1991 Census data, had the lowest child sex ratio in the state of Madhya Pradesh. Morena district, which borders the state of Rajasthan, is infamous as part of the Chambal region, with its historical association with dacoity. Madhya Pradesh is among the poorest states of the country, with a per capita income of Rs 14,011 in 2003–04. Apart from its ‘bandit economy’, Morena is also known for its mustard production. Morena district has the highest rates of child malnutrition and anaemia among women. It, therefore, comes as no surprise that in a state already known for its poverty, Morena has the lowest gender-related development index of 0.44 as computed by the District Human Development Report compiled for Madhya Pradesh in 2002. (This index is not sex-ratio sensitive, but is composed of indicators based on comparative work and wage rates, life expectancy, literacy, and school enrolment.)

The Morena sites are characterised by high levels of poverty, overt gender differences in work and education, though urban men have relatively high literacy rates for a “backward” town.

This study focused on three wards in the district headquarters of Morena town and on three nearby villages. The rural sites, in particular, display very poor infrastructural

Table 2.2: Socio-economic Profile of Survey Sites (in percentage)

State		Madhya Pradesh		Rajasthan		Himachal Pradesh		Haryana		Punjab	
District		MORENA		DHOLPUR		KANGRA		ROHTAK		F. SAHEB	
		Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
RURAL	Literacy rate	51	80	34	70	84	94	68	93	70	82
	Marital status	83	69	82	68	73	62	85	66	78	68
	Workers (main)	7	76	14	84	16	62	18	65	10	70
	Workers(subsidiary)	29	7	32	3	26	8	32	5	25	3
URBAN	Literacy rate	73	90	58	80	93	97	84	94	77	88
	Marital status	75	61	72	60	70	64	80	67	73	64
	Workers (main)	9	62	14	71	23	69	13	59	15	66
	Workers(subsidiary)	13	6	12	2	12	2	10	1	1	0
TOTAL	Literacy rate	62	85	47	75	89	95	76	93	73	85
	Marital status	79	65	76	64	72	63	82	67	76	66
	Workers (main)	8	69	14	77	19	66	15	62	12	68
	Workers(subsidiary)	21	6	21	2	19	5	21	3	13	2

Source: Village- and ward-level data from field surveys carried out in 2003 and 2005.
Literacy rates are of the population aged 6 and above.
Marital status is of the population aged 13 and above.
Workers are from the population aged 15 and above

Table 2.3: Activity Status of Population (Age 15 and Above)

State		Madhya Pradesh		Rajasthan		Himachal Pradesh		Haryana		Punjab	
District		MORENA		DHOLPUR		KANGRA		ROHTAK		F. SAHEB	
		Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
RURAL	Worker	7	76	14	84	16	62	15	62	10	70
	Student	5	12	3	10	16	20	11	16	5	8
	Housework	86	7	80	3	63	12	64	8	71	3
	No work	3	4	3	3	4	6	9	14	4	8
URBAN	Worker	9	62	14	71	23	69	13	59	15	66
	Student	16	22	18	19	19	19	12	16	12	10
	Housework	73	8	61	2	55	6	67	9	60	2
	No work	2	8	7	7	3	5	8	15	6	13
TOTAL	Worker	8	69	14	77	19	66	18	65	13	58
	Student	10	17	11	15	18	20	9	15	9	9
	Housework	79	8	70	2	59	9	62	6	66	3
	No work	2	6	5	6	4	5	11	14	5	11

Source: Village- and ward-level data from field surveys carried out in 2003 and 2005.

facilities, without direct road access. One village is occasionally visited by an ANM (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife), another has a single private clinic, and the third and the poorest of the three villages has nothing at all. Morena town, while an agricultural district centre, offers some factory employment in the oil and lentil mills (which attract workers from other poorer states), as well as limited government and service jobs. Many migrate elsewhere in search of other work. A government hospital, private clinics, and *anganwadis* are found in the better-off wards. In terms of schools, government schools are very few, with the better-off wards having several private schools, up to high school.

The sites are characterised by very large households, averaging 8.4 members in the rural sites and 7.8 in the urban sites, which are larger than the district averages of 6.7 rural and 6.5 urban. Demographically, population decline has set in only recently—in the 1–4-year age group in rural sites and in the 5–9 age cohort in urban areas. Levels of literacy show a large gap between men and women (measured here in terms of crude literacy rates), averaging at 85 per cent among men and 62 per cent among women (age 6 and above). However, it should be noted that the urban male literacy level is, in fact, only 7 per cent lower than that of urban males in Kangra, the most educated of the study sites. Therefore, even though gender differences in literacy and access to schooling are stark, the sites cannot simply be characterised as backward from the perspective of male literacy. (A fuller discussion of issues pertaining to education will follow in the next section.)

Work participation rates are higher in rural than in urban sites, among both men and women. Agriculture is the dominant occupation in rural areas, with cultivators being prominent in the better-off villages and daily wage labourers in the poorest. In urban areas, service and business jobs are more common among men, while a small number of women are found in agriculture-related jobs and in a mix of other occupations. The gap between men and women is enormous in the realm of work. Among women, work participation is only 7 per cent rural and 9 per cent urban. In other words, almost all women declared that their primary activity was housework. The problem of the undercounting of women's work in contexts such as India is well known, where official statistics continue to show very low rates of work and where much of women's economic activity remains invisible. In this study, while women's responses to the question regarding what they did most of the time were duly recorded, further questions were also asked, and with significant results. Thus, when probed about women's additional work, the picture changes in Morena, especially in the rural and the poorest urban sites—by as much as 44 per cent in the poorest village site and by 22 per cent in the poorest urban site. This means that in the rural sites, unpaid family labour and the labour of poor women in urban areas go unacknowledged.

In order to get a broad sense of the standard of living, a measure practically identical to that composed by the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) has been computed, an index made up of the quality of housing, living amenities, property, and various assets. The index has been divided into low, medium, and high; the low index implies conditions of severe poverty, while the high index indicates a relatively well-off household in terms of assets. (This index is an alternative to income information, which is notoriously difficult to obtain, and which may not reflect standards of living accurately in agricultural households. However, it is dependent on property and visible

assets, ranging from the type of house to the presence of bicycles or cars, and so on.) The rural sites display high levels of poverty, with as much as 66 per cent of rural households in the lowest category, compared to 10 per cent urban. As the figures in Table 2.3 show, the situation is inverted when it comes to those in the highest category. (Compared to NFHS II data for Madhya Pradesh as a whole, where the lowest categories are 42 per cent rural and 20 per cent urban, the rural study sites are poorer while the urban sites are distinctively better off, with a much higher proportion in the highest category.)

There is some variation within the sites. In terms of social groups, there is little religious diversity; one rural site has a very small Muslim population under 2 per cent, and one of the urban sites has 10 per cent Muslim and 9 per cent Jain populations. In terms of caste, there is considerable variation among the sites. The Scheduled Castes are significant in all the sites, the highest being in the poorest rural village (58 per cent, mainly Chamar) and in the working-class and middle-class urban site (58 per cent, mainly Jatav). The dominant rural caste is Thakur (Tomar), and in the urban sites Brahman and Baniya castes are prominent. Smaller percentages of OBC castes such as Gujjars and Mallahs are also to be found, being more rural than urban.

We will see how these characteristics relate to sex ratio patterns after looking at the other study areas.

2.2.2 Dholpur

While Dholpur had the lowest child sex ratio in the state, according to the 1991 Census, its position moved to the second lowest after Ganganagar (in Rajasthan) in the 2001 Census. Interestingly, Dholpur has the lowest gender development index of 0.27 in Rajasthan's State Development report of 2002, while Ganganagar has the highest. Rajasthan is similar to Madhya Pradesh in having very low per capita incomes (Rs 14,748). Like Morena, Dholpur is part of the Chambal district, and is characterised by a mixed terrain of ravines and low sites hills; it has small landholdings, which suffer from water shortages. Agriculture is increasingly being supplemented by animal husbandry.

The Dholpur sites are even poorer than those of Morena, and two of its urban sites have particularly severe levels of illiteracy and impoverishment.

While the sites shared many of the economic and social characteristics of Morena, being contiguous and part of the same region, there are some differences as well. The village are between 4 to 23 km from Dholpur town, the district headquarter. Two of the three villages have minimal health care facilities in the form of an intermittently running primary health centre and a private clinic, but for all serious illnesses the nearby towns of Maniya and Dholpur are visited. All the villages have government schools at least up to the primary level. Dholpur town is highly segregated in class and caste terms, with small pockets of upper-middle-class sections (businessmen and men employed in service jobs), contrasting with spread-out semi-rural wards having extremely high levels of poverty.

Households are large, averaging 7 members overall. Two of the urban wards are similar to the rural wards in this respect, indicative of a strong rural ambience. Demographically, the picture is very similar to the Morena sample in terms of the

recentness of demographic transition and the highest concentration of the population in the 0–14 age group. In terms of literacy, there is a difference with the Morena sample in that schooling is somewhat more recent among both men and women, and not universal among children, leading to literacy rates among men that are as much as 10 per cent lower than that of Morena. One of the urban sites has, in fact, even lower literacy rates than the rural sites, an indication of the extent of its poverty.

Female literacy rates are by far the lowest of all the study sites, at 34 per cent rural and 58 per cent urban. Dholpur district has lower literacy rates according to Census 2001 figures (by approximately 5 per cent points compared to Morena district) for men and women. Even so, literacy rates in the sites appear to be below the district average, and in spite of the fact that the primary data were collected two years later. On the other hand, work participation rates are comparatively higher than for Morena and for both men and women. The figures, as can be seen from Table 2.2, which provides basic socio-economic information for all the five study areas, are 84 per cent and 71 per cent among rural and urban men, compared to 14 per cent among both rural and urban women. There is, therefore, a greater acknowledgement of women's work, and the urban rates in particular once again demonstrate relatively higher levels of poverty. (At one end of the spectrum are a few women who are employed as teachers or nurses; at the other end are daily wage workers, domestic servants, and municipal cleaners.) Moreover, when subsidiary work is included through further probing among women who see themselves primarily as housewives, as much as 50 per cent from one of the villages and 29 per cent from the poorest urban ward have women engaging in unpaid labour, mainly agricultural and dairying.

The standard of living pattern in Dholpur shows similar levels of poverty in the rural sites as in Morena, coupled with higher urban poverty in two of the urban wards. (The NFHS II data for the state of Rajasthan show a somewhat better standard of living compared to Madhya Pradesh. This implies that the study sites are considerably poorer compared to Rajasthan as a whole.)

In terms of religious groups, the rural sites are more homogeneous (as in the case of Morena), with just one village having 5 per cent Muslims. The picture changes somewhat in the urban sites; while Hindus remain the large majority at 85 per cent, significant Muslim populations are found in two of the three urban wards, and Balmiki castes reported themselves as Balmikis and not as Hindu. Caste-wise break-ups yield a mix of castes, with considerable variations across the sites. In the villages, Tomar and Rajput Lodhi castes are prominent upper castes, followed by Gujjars and Lohars (who are OBC). Scheduled Castes (Balmiki, Jatav, and Chamar) are spread unevenly across the sites, averaging 32 per cent rural and 16 per cent urban. In the urban sites, both OBC and upper castes are prominent (Gujjars, Yadavs, Kumhars, and Mallahs, in particular), and among the upper castes, Brahmans, Rajputs, Thakurs, and Baniya castes are prominent. There are strong caste and class correlations, with the poorest families being primarily Muslim, Mallah, and Scheduled Caste.

The Kangra sites depict better standards of living, a growing service economy, and high levels of urban-rural convergence especially in education and marriage.

2.2.3 Kangra

Compared to other states in northern India, Himachal Pradesh has one of the highest per capita incomes of Rs 24,903 (2003–04); Kangra recorded a per capita income of Rs 18,121 (2001–02). Kangra is the most populous district of the state of Himachal Pradesh. It is relatively well connected by roads. Not much of the land is cultivated because of the hilly terrain. The ‘Kangra tea’ estates are being revived with the aim of creating an alternative source of income, along with dairying and wool production. The gender development index of Kangra, according to Himachal Pradesh’s Development Report, places the district at number 4, with a value of 0.5.

The study sites in the district of Kangra are in considerable contrast to those in Dholpur and Morena. Kangra, located in southern Himachal Pradesh, close to the Punjab border to which it had historical links as part of PEPSU (Patiala and East Punjab States Union), has long been somewhat different from its surroundings in the rest of the state. Yet Kangra is an example of a Himalayan economy undergoing rapid change. Out-migration—led by educated men in search of service jobs—has grown. Social and cultural influences from neighbouring Punjab have also increased. The urban study sites were selected from the town of Palampur, and the three villages are located in Bhawarna block, which is well connected to Palampur town. A specific characteristic of this region is the smallness of its villages as well as of its wards (which also resulted in problems of matching census village/ward-level data with panchayat definitions).

In terms of medical facilities, the rural sites are poorly served. One has a small government-run primary health centre, the second is served by a dispensary and a community centre located 4 km away, and the largest village has only one dispensary. All serious illnesses, therefore, require a trip to Palampur, which has a government hospital and at least 10 private clinics, including one that was frequently named by the respondents as being a well known centre for sex determination testing.

Unlike the previous study sites, however, the villages are relatively well served in terms of schools. In all of them, government schools are present at least up to the intermediate, if not the high school level along with additional private schools. Palampur has numerous educational institutions, including a degree college. Class and caste distinctions are evident in the type of school to which children are sent, with private schooling enjoying a higher status.

Households are relatively very small, with little rural–urban difference, averaging 4.7 in the rural sites and 4.3 in the urban sites. Demographically, there are clear trends of population decline going back to two decades—in the 10–14 age group in the rural sites and in the 15–19 age group in the urban sites. The larger proportions of adult and older women in the rural sites especially are indicative of male out-migration from these sites as well as from the region altogether.

Literacy is extremely high, and close to 100 per cent in two of the urban sites among men, with roughly a 10 per cent gender gap. Among women 84 per cent and 93 per cent are the rural and urban literacy rates respectively.

Work participation rates among men (measured as the proportion of the population aged 15 and above who reported work as their main activity) are unusual in the Kangra study sites. First of all, rural rates are slightly lower than urban ones at 62 per cent and 69 per cent respectively. In both rural and urban sites, significant proportions of younger men are still students. However, as can be seen from Table 2.3, more rural men are reporting no work available as well as reporting housework as their main activity. On further probing, such 'housework' was found to cover a range of activities—working on the family farm by men who had retired or who had returned from jobs elsewhere, actual care of children, or, more commonly, figuring as a form of disguised unemployment.

Economically, while in the perception of the local people, villages are dependent on agriculture as the main source of livelihood, this is, in fact, no longer the case, at least in the sites in the study. The survey data revealed the predominance of service jobs among rural men (33 per cent), with smaller percentages primarily engaged in self-cultivation and wage labour. Interestingly, it is women in these sites who are mainly responsible for agricultural cultivation and related activities. Thus, men are moving out of agriculture, even preferring to call themselves unemployed, or engaging in housework, with the salaried job occupying normative status. In the Palampur wards of the study, service sector jobs, both government and private, and small business jobs are prominent, and among women as well. While the gap between men and women in the realm of work is large, it is noticeably not as wide as it is in the other study sites, and speaks of the greater acceptability of paid non-household work for women in Kangra. Indeed, a special characteristic here is that proportionately more urban women claim to be employed than do women in the rural sites—23 per cent urban and 16 per cent rural. As in the other study sites, this changes when subsidiary work is brought in—26 per cent rural and 12 per cent urban—among women who are either primarily engaged in housework or are studying.

In order to provide a more credible sense of the standard of living, we modified the NFHS standard of living index (SLI) by excluding those assets that were to be found in even the poorest of households, given the climatic conditions of this area. (Compared to NFHS figures for Himachal Pradesh and using the same scale, the Kangra sites, both urban and rural, are better off than the state average.) Even with the revised SLI, we find that the rural sites are clearly better off than those in Morena or Dholpur, with almost half the households in the middle category, and roughly equal amounts in the low and high groups. In the urban sites, there is a clear improvement; only 11 per cent are in the lowest category and 66 per cent are in the highest.

Barring tiny Muslim and Sikh populations in the urban sites, the respondents are overwhelmingly Hindu. Caste break-ups reveal that all the sites are quite diverse. The upper castes are numerically dominant in both rural and urban sites; these are mainly Thakurs, followed by Khatri and Brahmans. Jats, Chowdhurys, and other middle castes are prominent in two of the rural sites. Interestingly, the Scheduled Castes, mainly Balmikis, are more urban than rural, ranging from 15 per cent rural to 22 per cent urban. Class and caste are closely correlated.

The Rohtak sites are intermediate between Morena and Kangra, with significant urban and rural differences in work and education.

2.2.4 Rohtak

Rohtak district, according to the 2001 Census, had one of the lowest child sex ratios (796 girls for 1,000 boys) in the state of Haryana. The state has one of the highest per capita incomes (Rs29,963 in 2003–04) in the nation, and Rohtak is one of its fastest urbanising districts. Rohtak boasts of the highest number of dairies in India, Asia's largest cloth market, and a reputable university and medical college. The economy of the district is primarily agricultural.

The study focused on two wards in the district headquarters of Rohtak town and two nearby villages. Located within an agricultural belt, the rural sites are well connected by road to Rohtak, and the means of communication and information (telephone, television, radio, mobile telephones) are diverse and plenty. Despite this, the rural sites lack in basic infrastructure (water supply, toilets, and medical facilities). One village has several government facilities (health centre, electricity board, *anganwadis*, government schools, etc.), while the other is lacking in all these, except for a private school and a government school. In contrast, the urban sites are well provided for (roads, water supply, sewerage, medical services, electricity, and street lights), although one site is better off than the other.

The average household sizes in both urban and rural sites are much the same at 5.5 members, in comparison to the mean household size for the district (as per the 2001 Census), which is 5.7 rural and 5.3 urban. The overall age pyramids are broadly congruent, indicative of a rural–urban convergence, with a fertility decline observable from the 10–14 age group. The 15–19 age group is particularly noteworthy both for the drop in frequencies and for the small number of girls. Male literacy is remarkably high across all sites, both urban and rural, whereas female literacy ranges from about 68 per cent in the survey villages to 84 per cent in the urban sites. The male–female gap in literacy is much higher in the survey villages, about two and a half times greater than that in the urban wards.

Coming to work patterns, a noticeable trend in the Haryana and Punjab sites is that significant numbers of men in the rural sites are engaged in multiple jobs. This is one of the clearest indications that agriculture is no longer an activity fetching sufficient returns. A small but significant number of men reported housework as their main activity—6 per cent in rural areas and 9 per cent in urban areas. In addition, there are higher proportions of men in the category of 'no work' (15 per cent for urban and rural men), which includes both retired and old people as well as those who are openly unemployed. In the urban sites, while the more prosperous ward had a much higher concentration of services and businesses, the other had a more rural ambience, with more people engaged in daily wage work and artisanal labour.

On the part of women, the Rohtak sample is indicative of relatively higher rates of work among rural women, which is more typical of Haryana, and is in some contrast to Punjab in particular. This is visible in that 18 per cent rural women reported themselves as primarily workers compared to 13 per cent in the urban sites. Half of the rural women workers are engaged in dairying, followed by daily wage labour. When probed further, as many as 32 per cent housewives in both rural sites reported being engaged in agricultural and allied activities, again mainly in buffalo rearing and dairying. Interestingly, open unemployment is also a significant feature among Haryanvi

women; women reporting 'no work' were 11 per cent in rural areas and 8 per cent in urban areas. Among urban women workers, interestingly, it is in the more prosperous ward with more Jats that comparatively higher proportions of women are working, mainly in services, while in the poorer, more rural ward, very few women are able to find work of any kind.

In terms of standard of living, using the same NFHS index, the Rohtak sample is indicative of lower levels of rural poverty than we have seen so far from the previous sites. Compared to the NFHS II figures for Haryana state, both rural and urban sites have higher proportions in the highest category, even if the poorest categories are similar. As always, urban sites have a clear edge over the rural in terms of prosperity, as is clearly seen with as many as 85 per cent of those surveyed being in the category of the high living index (the more prosperous ward has no one in the lowest group). While a minority in all the sites are in the poorest category, the rural sites have sizable numbers in the medium category.

The upper castes are numerically dominant in all the sites, both rural and urban. In rural sites the Scheduled Castes are the next significant group, while in urban wards Other Backward Castes (OBCs) comprise higher percentages of the population than the Scheduled Castes. In terms of more detailed caste break-ups, especially among the upper castes, Jats dominate in the rural sites, while the urban sites are more mixed, with more Baniyas, Aroras, and Khatri.

As far as religious composition is concerned, rural areas are completely inhabited by Hindus, whereas in urban locations Muslims are a very small minority, along with a few Jains.

2.2.5 Fatehgarh Sahib

Fatehgarh Sahib is a place of historical importance where two sons of the tenth Sikh guru, Guru Govind Singh, were sentenced to death. The district has the lowest child sex ratio in Punjab (754 as per the 2001 Census). Punjab, like Haryana, has one of the highest per capita incomes (Rs 27,851 in 2003–04) in the country. The district is well irrigated, with tube wells and canal irrigation being the main sources of irrigation. It is also extensively serviced by commercial and land development banks. Mandi Gobindgarh, a sub-tehsil, is known as the Steel Town of India; it has a large number of steel rolling mills. Bassi Pathana town is a centre for the manufacture of sewing-machine parts and mining machinery. The gender development index, according to the Punjab Development Report of 2004, places Fatehgarh Sahib in the second-last position with 0.56 (followed by Amritsar with 0.54).

Fatehgarh Sahib has the highest rates of urbanisation in the rural sites, but also literacy rates closer to those of Morena than either Kangra or Rohtak.

The study focused on two wards in the town of Sirhind and two nearby villages. The rural sites are well connected by road; means of communication and information (telephone, television, radio, mobile telephone, and post office) are diverse and plenty. Compared to the previous study sites, rural Fatehgarh Sahib displays many urban characteristics as far as facilities are concerned, ranging from water supply to beauty parlours. While the poorer village has only an elementary government school, the other village also has a high school. The second village also has better government

health facilities (nurse, doctor, pharmacist, laboratory attendant, etc.) than the first. The urban sites are also broadly well provided for. However, there are no government hospitals in the urban sites, which are serviced by private clinics and hospitals, along with chemist shops and a primary health centre. Schools are also unevenly distributed across the wards, with the poorer ward having only one government elementary school, while the other has both government and private schools up to the high school level.

The average household sizes in both urban and rural sites are 5.8 rural and 5.6 urban, with a close match to 2001 Census district data (5.9 rural and 5.3 urban), indicative of patterns of a rural–urban convergence. Compared to all the other sites, the Punjab sites show the earliest signs of population transition going back to two decades, comparable to Himachal Pradesh. Indeed, these sites display earlier signs of population transition than the NFHS II data for the state as a whole. What is noteworthy in the age pyramid is that the age cohorts of demographic transition are coinciding with the ages at marriage for women. This implies that the number of eligible women is no longer larger than the male pool, as was the pattern earlier, but that a reverse trend is setting in, with possible consequences in terms of a marriage squeeze.

Interestingly, literacy rates indicate that the Fatehgarh Sahib sample is closer in some respects to Morena than to either Rohtak or Kangra. Indeed, literacy rates among men (including in one of the urban wards) are in the region of 82 per cent, and there is a 10 per cent gap in the case of women. Education presents a complex picture (which will be discussed more fully in a separate section later), indicative of a lower investment in education than in Rohtak or Kangra, at least among men educated beyond high school.

In terms of work status, though the vast majority of men are working, it is worth noting that 8 per cent rural men and 13 per cent urban men reported that they had ‘no work’. Among rural working men, significant proportions reported additional work—not unlike the Haryana sample—with small farmers or labourers working on others’ or their own land, some buffalo rearing and dairying activities, but also other kinds of jobs, ranging from truck driving to running a shop. In other words, there is considerable supplementary and additional work among men, whose main occupation, especially in agriculture, is no longer sufficient. Among women, the majority are housewives (80 per cent rural and 76 per cent urban), with 15 per cent rural women and 19 per cent urban women reporting themselves as being mainly engaged in work. Thus, Punjab has similar characteristics to Kangra in terms of higher urban compared to rural work participation rates. When probed further, rural housewives reported significant involvement in subsidiary working activities (such as dairying and embroidery), thus unmasking to some degree the low rural work participation rates. In comparison to Haryana, the proportions of those reporting ‘no work’ among women are very low, confined to older women.

Standard of living patterns, interestingly, once again point to a rural–urban convergence, with minor variations within the sites; overall 9 per cent are in the lowest category and 70 per cent in the highest. Compared to NFHS II data for the state of Punjab as a whole, the urban sites are less well off, while the rural sites are doing better. Sikh Jats are the largest caste in the rural sample (40 per cent), followed by OBC castes (almost 30 per cent) and Scheduled Castes (22 per cent), so that non-Jat upper castes are

insignificant in rural areas. In urban areas, interestingly, the single largest group are Scheduled Castes (36 per cent), followed by OBC castes (23 per cent) and Baniya castes (18 per cent). The break-up by religion shows the strong dominance of Sikhs in the rural sites at 86 per cent, compared to 58 per cent in urban areas; urban Hindus are 37 per cent, but only 11.5 per cent in rural sites.

2.3 Education

Education is one of the remarkable ‘conundrums’ of the study, as subsequent sections of this report will also demonstrate. We have seen the vast socio-economic range of the study sites, extending from the high poverty of Dholpur to the relative prosperity of Kangra and Fatehgarh Sahib. The discussion of literacy levels so far says very little about schooling, since a single measure of literacy cuts across all age groups and levels of educational attainment. There is also the complex question of what kind of education is available, and the class, caste, and gender variations in schooling.

In the space of one generation, schooling is widely perceived to be a necessity for girls in all the sites.

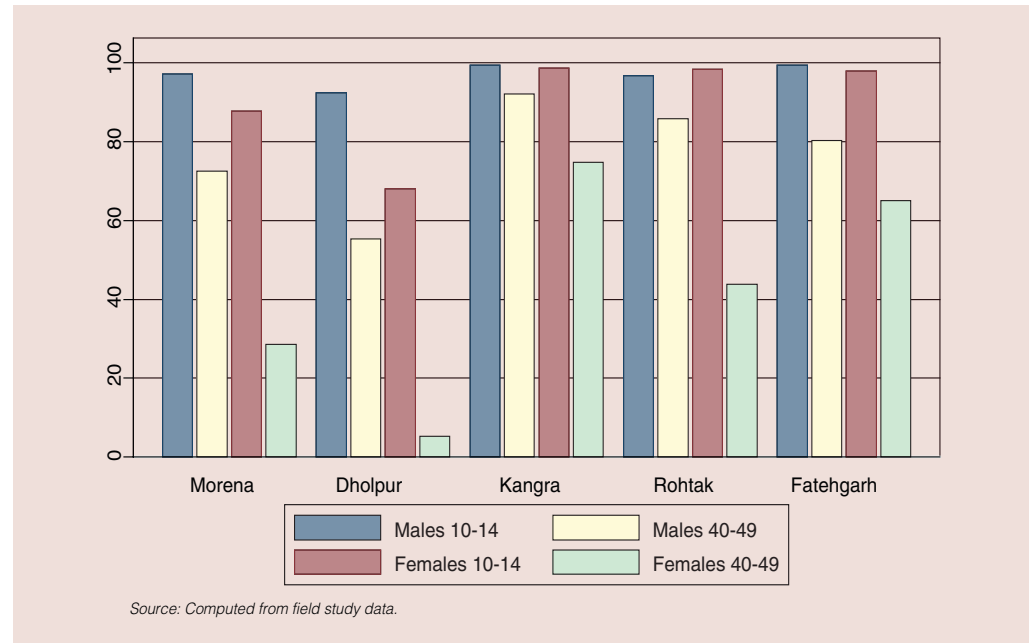
In order to provide a more differentiated picture, Graphs 2.2 and, 2.3 and 2.4 illustrate the changes that have taken place in the last three decades. The bar graphs compare educational attainment and/or enrolment between 40–49-year-olds (men and women, in the rural and urban sites) and 10–14-year-olds. Therefore, widespread levels of schooling are a relatively recent phenomenon in the rural sites, with the exception of Kangra and Fatehgarh Sahib among men. (In Kangra, and especially in Fatehgarh Sahib, it is among cohorts older than 50 years that illiteracy is more common.) However, the extent to which boys in rural Morena and Dholpur are ‘catching up’ with their counterparts elsewhere is noticeable. When it comes to rural girls, it is only in Dholpur that significant numbers of 10–14-year-olds have had no schooling whatsoever. And yet it is also in the worst-off sites in Morena and Dholpur that the biggest changes have taken place over a generation. Indeed, schooling for girls was practically non-existent in the rural Dholpur sites thirty years ago.

Comparatively, older cohorts in the urban sites have had somewhat greater access to education, especially older women. Moreover, the gender gap among the 10–14-year-olds has been vastly reduced in urban Dholpur, even though not all boys are going to school; elsewhere no gap exists. Schooling, therefore, is widely perceived to be a necessity for girls in all families in the study sites; only the high poverty in some of the urban Dholpur sites prevents this from being practically universal.

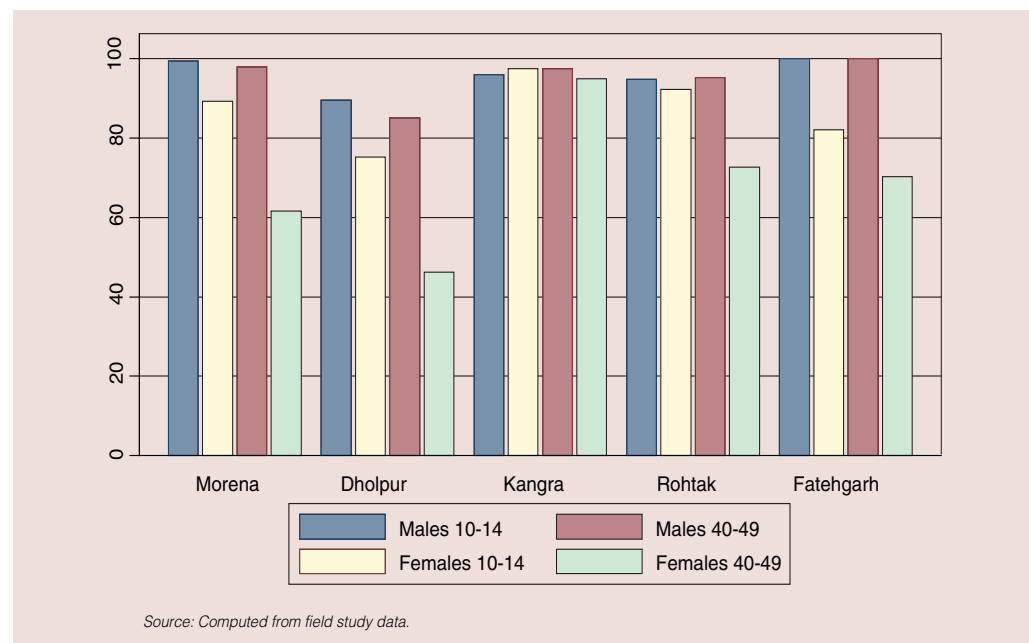
Further questions can—and should—be posed about the kind of education availed of. Taking the example of the Rohtak sites, where schooling is almost universal, one indication of hierarchies within education emerges from attendance in government versus private schools, given the greater status and cost associated with the latter. In the rural sites, where more families are dependent on government schooling, 47 per cent Jat boys are attending government schools but 60 per cent Jat girls do so. On the other hand, among Scheduled Caste families, 80 per cent boys and 91 per cent girls are attending government schools. There is, therefore, both a caste and a gender dynamic at work here. In the urban sites, proportionately more children from all castes are going to private schools. Attendance or enrolment at government schools ranges from 34 per cent boys and 42 per cent girls among Jats, to 1 per cent boys and

3 per cent girls among Baniya castes, and 64 per cent boys and 69 per cent girls among Scheduled Castes. Gender differences are, therefore, less pronounced, and caste is the overriding factor in accessing more expensive private schools.

Graph 2.2: Education by Age Group, Rural Location: (Ages 10–49) by Site and Sex



Graph 2.3: Education by Age Group, Urban Location: Ages (10–14 and 40–49) by Site and Sex

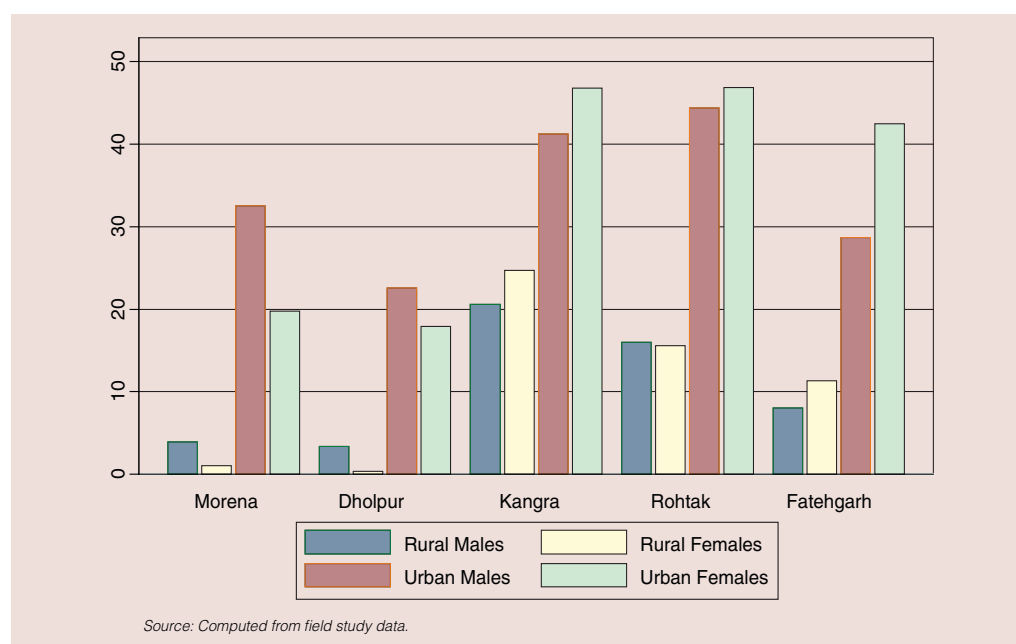


2.4 College Education

Matters become more complex when one moves beyond school to higher education, whether college or technical education. Graph 2.3 shows the proportion of those in the 20–29 age group who have accessed some form of higher education. Rural and urban comparisons among men and women are being made here. Clearly, no one is going beyond high school in rural Morena and Dholpur (and many not even beyond middle school). A college education is, therefore, an urban phenomenon among a minority, along with a definite gender gap. (In higher age groups, the numbers drop further, indicating the newness of college education.) However, something quite different emerges in the remaining three sites. The proportion of women outstrips that of men, even in the rural sites where the proportions are much lower than in the urban sites. Indeed, the very sites with the worst child sex ratios, such as urban Kangra and Fatehgarh Saheb, show the greatest lead by women over men. In the Sirhind sites in Fatehgarh Saheb, for instance, over 40 per cent of women in this age group have entered college compared to less than 30 per cent men. In fact, the proportion of men in higher education is, relatively speaking, quite low; only urban Dholpur has worse figures. Thus, it is seen that while higher education is of a variable value for men in the study sites, especially in rural Rohtak and Fatehgarh Saheb, where many men are not studying beyond high school, proportionately more women are doing so. While some of these women are also looking for employment opportunities in these sites, their education is a critical ingredient for marriage. This unusual phenomenon whereby sites with the lowest child sex ratios are giving daughters a higher education will be explored more fully in later sections of this report. Moreover, this is by no means a peculiarity of the sites. Similar patterns can be seen in the figures made available from larger statistical data sources, such as the recent National Sample Survey data for 2003–04, where certain states as a whole, including Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Delhi, have more girls than boys in higher education.

Matters become more complex in higher education – in the three better off sites, the proportion of girls accessing higher education outstrips that of boys.

Graph 2.4: Percentage of Graduates in Age Group 20–29



2.5 Marriage Patterns

Table 2.6: Proportion of Population Never Married by Age Group

State	Madhya Pradesh				Rajasthan				Himachal Pradesh				Haryana				Punjab			
District	MORENA				DHOLPUR				KANGRA				ROHTAK				FATEHGARH SAHEB			
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
RURAL	98	96	97	91	99	99	99	99	98	99	97	99	98	99	95	96	95	96	95	96
	88	52	89	63	95	96	95	96	97	82	95	82	95	82	95	93	95	93	95	93
	37	3	33	4	91	53	91	53	72	25	72	25	68	25	68	46	68	46	68	46
	9	0	12	0	56	8	56	8	32	2	32	2	32	2	32	7	32	7	32	7
	3	1	2	1	5	2	5	2	6	-	6	-	6	-	6	1	6	1	6	1
	3	1	2	1	3	1	3	1	2	1	2	1	4	1	4	-	4	-	4	-
URBAN	99	98	99	98	99	98	99	98	100	99	100	99	100	99	97	98	97	98	97	98
	95	82	95	76	96	95	96	95	99	91	99	91	96	91	96	94	96	94	96	94
	65	29	57	20	85	65	85	65	82	49	82	49	83	49	83	52	83	52	83	52
	29	4	19	3	52	22	52	22	38	7	38	7	40	7	40	13	40	13	40	13
	4	1	2	1	3	1	3	1	3	1	3	1	4	1	4	2	4	2	4	2
	2	1	4	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1

Table 2.7: Median Age at First Marriage by Select Age Group

State	Madhya Pradesh		Rajasthan		Himachal Pradesh		Haryana		Punjab	
District	MORENA		DHOLPUR		KANGRA		ROHTAK		F. SAHEB	
Median Age at First Marriage	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
RURAL										
< 19	18	16	17	16	NA	19	17	17	19	19
20-24	18	16	19	18	22	20	20	18	24	20
25-29	18	16	20	16	25	21	22	18	23	20
30-34	18	15	19	16	26	20	21	17	23	20
50 & above	18	14	20	15	25	18	20	16	22	18
URBAN										
< 19	18	17	16	15	NA	19	22	17	NA	19
20-24	20	18	18	17	21	20	22	19	24	20
25-29	21	18	20	16	24	21	26	19	25	20
30-34	21	16	20	16	26	21	25	18	24	20
50 & above	18	14	20	14	26	19	23	17	22	19
TOTAL										
< 19	18	16	17	16	NA	19	17	17	NA	19
20-24	19	17	19	17	21.5	20	20	18	23	20
25-29	20	17	20	16	25	21	22	18	24	20
30-34	20	16	20	16	26	20	23	18	24	20
50 & above	18	14	20	15	25	18	21	16	22	19

Source: Village- and ward-level data from field surveys carried out in 2003 and 2005.

Primary data verifies the compulsory nature of marriage for women – and for men as well.

Trends in marriage are an important aspect of the study, and indeed are essential for grasping the significance of contemporary developments and the contradictory structures of modernity in the sites. In this section, data on changing trends are provided using two sources of information. Table 2.6 provides an overview of the proportions of the entire household population who are not married by age group. Table 2.7 looks at patterns of the median age at marriage (a measure that tells us when 50 per cent of a given cohort has been married, which is different from the mean or average age at marriage) from among ever-married men and women in the sample.

Table 2.6 demonstrates the compulsory nature of marriage for women; by the age of 30 years the number of unmarried women in any of the sites is completely insignificant. There are, as one might expect, differences across the sites, as well as between urban and rural areas. In Morena and Dholpur, between 36–48 per cent of all rural women in the age group of 15–19 years are already married. At the other end of the spectrum, in rural Kangra, this is the case for 48 per cent women in the next cohort of 20–24 years, a clear indication of the role that education is playing in deciding when women are to be married. In urban areas, the proportions change in all the sites; the greatest differences among rural and urban women are, in fact, in the less developed sites, once again emphasising the effect of education as well as other considerations that shape the norms of marriageability. In urban sites such as Sirhind and Palampur (with the worst child sex ratios), as much as 13 per cent and 22 per cent women respectively are not married in the 25–29 age group.

Table 2.7 shows how the median age at marriage has been changing among all ever-married respondents. Here it becomes evident—once again across all sites—that the age at marriage has been rising. (The age group of those less than 19 has very few numbers apart from those for Morena and Dholpur, and hence is not an indication of a fall in marriage trends.) The difference between the median age at marriage among those 50 and above and among those in their twenties varies from 2–4 years. The only sites that show less marked changes in trends are urban Palampur in Kangra and Sirhind in Fatehgarh Sahib, where the median age at marriage among older women is on the higher side at 19. These sites have longer histories of relatively higher ages at marriage compared to Rohtak, Morena, and Dholpur. The implications of this rising trend for how daughters are viewed within families will be discussed in subsequent chapters of this report.

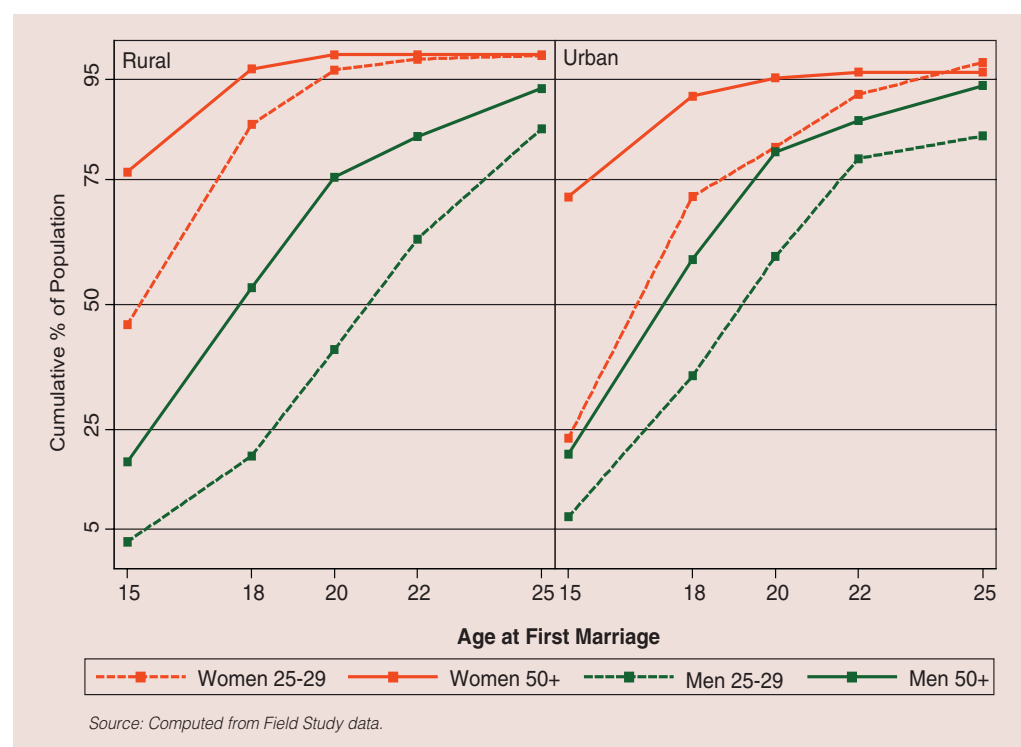
Among men, on the other hand, Table 2.6 shows that there are proportionately more men who have not married in each age cohort. This can be seen to be simply the effect of different norms for men and women, and the convention of a necessary age difference between husbands and wives in arranged marriages. Once again there are significant differences across sites, with rural Morena at one end of the spectrum (only 9 per cent unmarried men in the 25–29 age group) as against 52 per cent unmarried men in this age group in urban Kangra. While it is true that the vast majority of men are also married by the age of 30—thus pointing to strong norms of marriage for men as well—small percentages are not married even among older cohorts. This ranges from 10 per cent in rural Fatehgarh Sahib who are above 30 years of age to 4 per cent in rural Dholpur. Interestingly, the rural figures are higher than the urban ones, thus pointing to higher degrees of unmarriageability for certain rural men. Notice also the relatively high figures in urban Morena and urban Dholpur

among men above 25 years, possibly indicative of a greater degree of ‘ineligibility’ in these more backward towns. Median ages of marriage among men are shown in Table 2.7. The first row showing figures pertaining to those below 19 years has too few numbers to be useful, and this is also true in the case of the Kangra sample for the 20–24 age group, given the very small numbers of men who marry at this age, both rural and urban. Taking the 25–29 age cohort for which the numbers are robust, it is seen that the median ages vary from 18 years in rural Morena to 25 years in rural Kangra, with Dholpur, Rohtak, and Fatehgarh Saheb in between.

In order to provide a comparative picture of the proportions of those who are married in the different age cohorts, Graphs 2.4, 2.5, and 2.6 illustrate patterns for three of the sites, Morena, Rohtak, and Kangra, among ever-married respondents. The contrast is between the age cohort of 25–29 years and those 50 and above among men and women in the urban and rural sites.

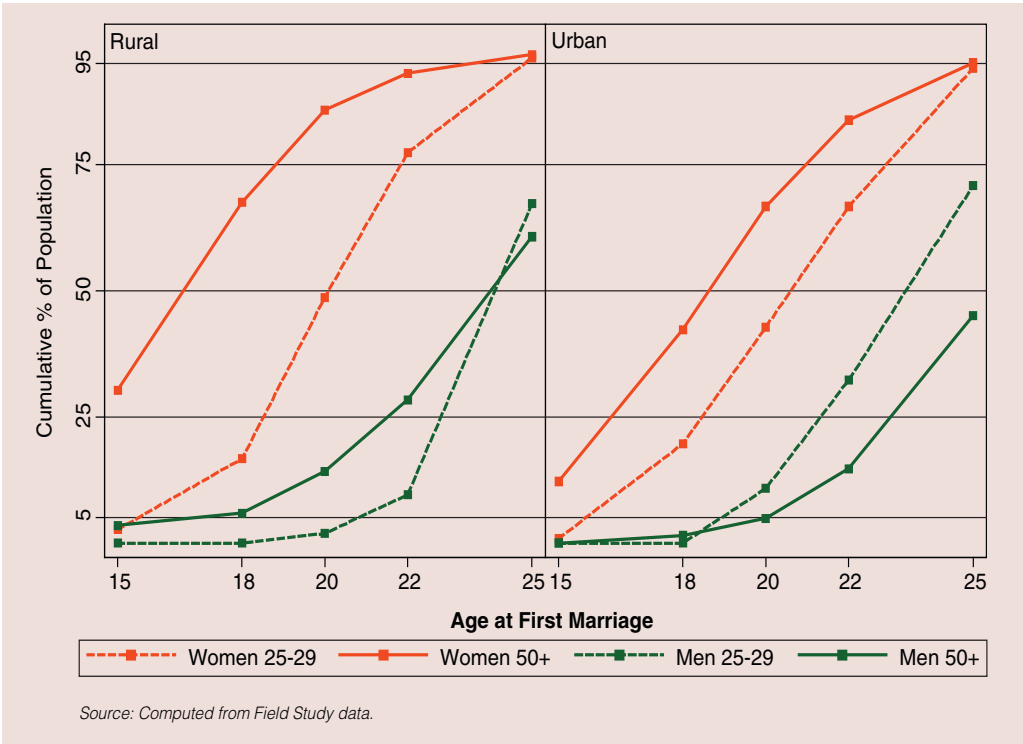
2.5.1 Morena, Madhya Pradesh

Graph 2.5: Age at First Marriage, Morena



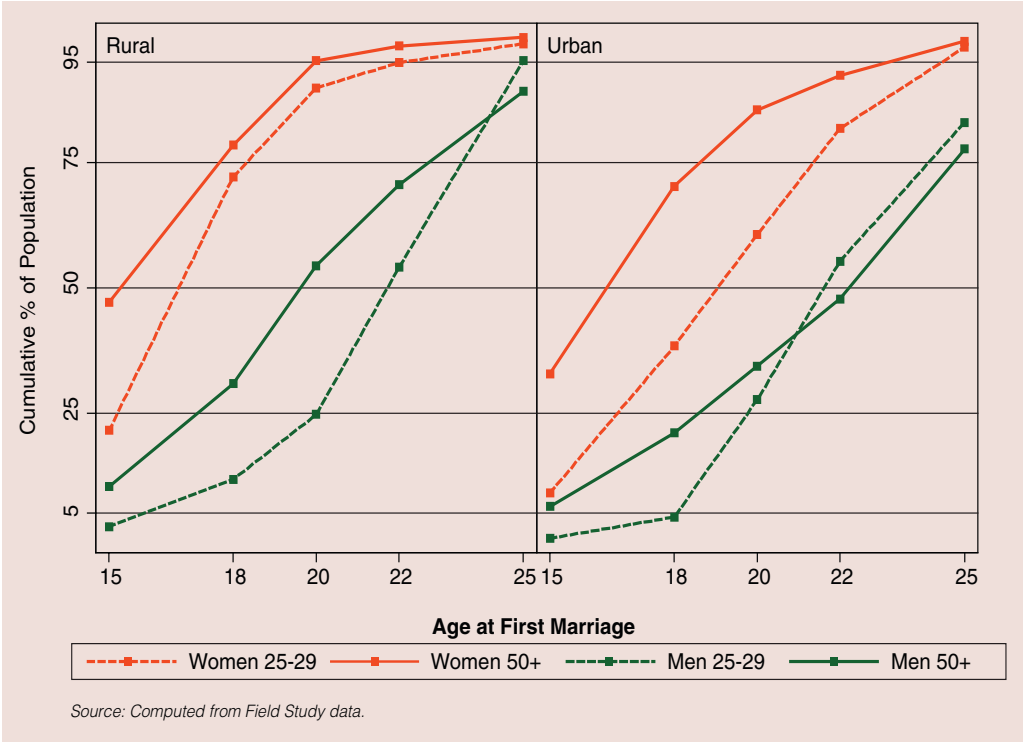
2.5.2 Kangra, Himachal Pradesh

Graph 2.6: Age at First Marriage, Kangra



2.5.3 Rohtak, Haryana

Graph 2.7: Age at First Marriage, Rohtak



Graphs 2.5, 2.6, and 2.7 are largely self-explanatory and have been taken from the reported ages at marriage among all those who are ever married. In Morena, significant proportions of women in the rural sites are marrying by the age of 15 years. Whereas as much as 75 per cent women above 50 years had done so, this drops to below 50 per cent among women who are 25–29 years old. In urban areas, there is a much greater drop in the younger age group, to below 25 per cent. However, practically all women are married by the age of 22. Among men, on the other hand, with very small percentages marrying below 18, notice that in the 25–29 age group about 20 per cent in rural and urban sites are marrying above 25 years of age.

Kangra, as we have already seen, has the highest median ages of marriage at all the sites. In Graph 2.6, the rise in the age at marriage among women is very stark; in the rural sites only 75 per cent women in the 25–29 age group have married by age 22, and in the urban sites 65 per cent have done so. Among men in this age group, the interesting feature is that rural ages at marriage in the 25–29 age group are lower than their urban counterparts; barely 10 per cent rural men are marrying by 22 years compared to 32 per cent urban men, and the difference only shrinks at higher ages. Rural men are, therefore, having to wait longer to get married, in spite of (or because of?) somewhat lower levels of education. (The only anomaly for which we have no explanation is that the older urban cohort of men aged 50 and above have higher ages at marriage than the younger group, which could be due to recall errors. It is possible that a decline in age at marriage occurs among those who have experienced some prosperity, and then again a rise in age at marriage occurs because the pursuit of education and the search for non-agricultural employment leads to a delay.)

Rohtak displays an intermediate pattern. The difference between older and younger women is very small in rural areas as almost all women are married by the age of 20 years, while the rise in the age at marriage is most visible in urban areas. Among men, on the other hand, there is the greatest difference between older and younger age cohorts in rural areas, as ages at marriage among rural men have risen to similar levels as those found among urban men. Once again, one has to remember that in the Rohtak sample very few men are studying beyond high school, so that this rise in Rohtak also points to greater difficulties in finding wives among rural men.

2.6 Sex Ratios and Fertility Patterns

The purpose of the study is to understand the range of forces that structure the changing dynamic within families in relation to the number and sex distribution of their children, whose outcome at the local aggregate level has led to declining child sex ratios. Chapter 1 and specifically Table 1.1 have already provided the background for the low child sex ratios in the five states as a whole, within the districts chosen for investigation in this project, and in the specific study sites. It has been seen that—with the exception of urban Dholpur—all the average figures for child sex ratios are low, if not very low. In order to understand these patterns better, it is necessary to approach the issue from different angles. There are, to begin with, some differences across the sites. It has also been found that there are particular villages or wards with either good sex ratios or particularly low sex ratios. Then again, the concern

of this study is to understand how child sex ratios are affected by standards of living or how they vary across particular caste groups.

Child sex ratios are the product of fertility patterns within families, that is, how many children are born and how many survive. How many children do families say they want to have, and what are their revealed preferences? By looking at birth order within particular families, it is possible to see whether there are changing trends across births. Finally, respondents were asked their views on family planning and sex selective abortions.

Broadly speaking, Morena and Dholpur show high child mortality rates significantly skewed against girls, which is not found in the other sites

2.7 Child Mortality

Beginning with the least developed sites in Morena and Dholpur, it has already been seen that these are characterised by comparatively severe levels of poverty. In terms of the life chances of children, what sets them apart from the other three sites are correspondingly high levels of child mortality. While child mortality is most pronounced among older families, it is by no means confined to them. Thus, among mothers in the 25–29 age group where the number of ever-born children averages 2.85, the survival rate is 2.56 (due to the death of 90 children from a cohort of 300 families). This is even worse in Dholpur, where the equivalent figures are 3.36 and 2.86 (with 95 children dying among 200 families). In the other three sites, on the other hand, child mortality has declined considerably and is largely confined to older families with mothers above 50 years of age. In the case of Haryana, for instance, looking once again at mothers in the 25–29 age group, the average number of children ever-born is 2.36, which drops to 2.22, with just 20 children dying from a cohort of 180 families. In Kangra, the mortality rates are even lower; the equivalent figures are 1.67 and 1.57 (20 children dying from a cohort of 270 families). Certainly in the study sites, therefore, larger families are associated with higher rates of mortality, with smaller families experiencing very low mortality rates.

The next question that needs investigation would be the extent to which child mortality is skewed against girls. Broadly speaking, Morena and Dholpur show significant skewing against girl children, which is not the case in the other three sites. Differential mortality rates are, therefore, not a factor in Rohtak, Kangra, or Fatehgarh Sahib. Here negative sex ratios are solely the product of ‘choices’ made around the number and sex distribution of children, and the role that sex selection is playing in achieving the desired choice. Interestingly, however, there is also a difference between Morena and Dholpur in this regard.

Morena displays the most severe skewing against girls from the very first birth. This skewing becomes pronouncedly worse with the successive order of births, and is particularly skewed among younger mothers. Thus, for instance, the figures for non-surviving girls versus boys among first-, second-, and third-order births are 51 girls/31 boys, 40/17, and 31/15 among women aged 34 years or less (a cohort of 950 mothers). The phenomenon of neglect, therefore, is most severe in Morena. This factor will be discussed in the next sections of this report by drawing also from the qualitative findings of this study.

In Dholpur, the equivalent comparative numbers of dead children among the same age of women (here a cohort of 580 mothers) are 24 girls/49 boys among first-borns,

33/26 among second-borns, and 28/18 among third-borns. Indeed, it is among first-borns that boys are twice as vulnerable, and severe skewing against girls is visible among third-borns. In the context of the discussion on Dholpur, not only were the high levels of poverty prevailing in this district noted but also noted was that this poverty was particularly severe in two of the urban wards. The relatively 'better' child sex ratio in urban Dholpur, therefore, is partially due to the fact that high levels of child mortality caused by severe poverty are resulting in high death rates among boys as well. Hence, it is always necessary to examine child sex ratios carefully, since it is a relative measure. (In the subsequent discussion of how child sex ratios are affected by class and caste, the case of Dholpur will be examined in more detail.)

At the same time, this does not mean that child sex ratios in Morena and Dholpur are solely the product of child mortality. The low sex ratios in Morena can only be explained by including other factors in the analysis. As the subsequent chapters will show, sex selective abortions in Morena and Dholpur are clearly on the rise, and families even from the rural sites in these districts are accessing the new technologies available in nearby towns, including in Morena and Dholpur themselves. But what must be considered in a context of transition from older practices of female infanticide, ongoing forms of neglect and deprivation, and more recently available methods of sex selective abortion is that the mixed effects of all of these factors in sites such as Morena and Dholpur is being witnessed. Thus, improvements in child sex ratios in some of these sites arguably could be due to a reduction in forms of severe female neglect or infanticide before the new technologies are more widely availed of. Thus, for instance, in both rural Morena and rural Dholpur (apart from urban Dholpur), there are small improvements in the child sex ratio from the 0–14 age group to the 0–6 age group, even though these are still low. But once again it must also be allowed that such improvements could be partially due to greater child mortality among younger boys as well.

2.8 Child Sex Ratios by Standard of Living and Caste

The relationship between child sex ratios and standard of living and caste identities is a complex one. We know from other studies that there has been an urban bias in the decline of child sex ratios as well as a so-called prosperity effect in that the worst sex ratios have been found among better-off groups. The data present a mixed picture in this respect, with significant variations across the different study sites.

2.8.1 Standard of living

Data on standard of living have been provided in Table 2.4. In the rural sites, two very different locations, Morena and Kangra, show a progressive worsening of sex ratios with improvements in the standard of living. In the case of Kangra, it can be said clearly that there is neither overt neglect of girls nor the widespread use of sex selection among its poorest rural families. Moreover, unlike the other study sites, practices like female infanticide were confined to smaller castes such as Thakurs and Chowdhurys, and the greatest changes in terms of having smaller families and adopting sex selection are spreading from urban to rural areas. In the Morena sites, on the other hand, the poorest rural sites with the highest levels of poverty are also characterised by high levels of child mortality. It is in the somewhat better-off rural

Unlike other researches that have emphasized the link between bad child sex ratios and prosperous groups, this study demonstrates complex relations between standard of living, caste and child sex ratios.

sites, therefore, that there is both a greater skewing against girls and an increasing recourse to the use of sex selection.

The other rural sites, however, do not show such patterns, with the exception of the medium category in Fatehgarh Sahab. Low sex ratios are to be found across all economic levels in rural areas. In other words, whether it be the combination of mortality and sex selection in rural Dholpur or a more pervasive recourse to sex selection in rural Rohtak and Fatehgarh Sahab, the rural poor are having fewer surviving daughters and show little difference from the better-off groups. Moreover, since the rural sites in Rohtak and Fatehgarh Sahab the very poor constitute smaller numbers, these groups are arguably more influenced by practices among the better-off families.

In the urban sites, two very different sites—Dholpur and Fatehgarh Sahab—exhibit high sex ratios among their poorest sections. The case of urban Dholpur has come up earlier in the discussion on child mortality. Here is an even sharper indication of a ‘high’ sex ratio (1,093), which is the product of greater male child mortality, which outweighs female neglect and practices of sex selection. In the case of urban Sirhind, it must be kept in mind that the high sex ratio among its poorest sections is composed of small numbers (19 boys and 26 girls) given the comparatively low levels of poverty in these urban sites. These are families, moreover, that have more children with more girls, a phenomenon that is also found among some families in Rohtak, and which will be discussed later in this study. Otherwise, extremely low sex ratios among different urban classes are seen. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the worst sex ratios in any site are found not in the highest class fraction, but either in the lowest or the medium group. In other words, there are strong indications that in urban areas, poverty combines with the striving for upward mobility and the availability of the new technologies to produce outcomes that deepen an aversion to daughters.

2.8.2 Caste groups

While some of the previous discussion is matched by looking at how different caste groups fare, caste introduces some new dimensions as well. Table 2.5 provides an overall picture across the different sites. Thus, in the case of Kangra, with a close match between standard of living and caste, it was found that in the rural sites the Scheduled Castes have a very high sex ratio, in sharp contrast to both the middle and the upper castes. In the urban sites, where the poorest are overwhelmingly Scheduled Castes (mainly Balmikis), it is here that the worst sex ratios are to be found. On the other hand, rural Rohtak has one of the worst child sex ratios among the Scheduled Castes, comparable only to the upper castes in rural Kangra and Fatehgarh Sahab. Here most rural Scheduled Castes are spread between the poorest and the middle economic levels. In the urban sites of Rohtak, the Scheduled Castes have once again the worst sex ratios, with some households economically better off than their rural counterparts. Indeed, with the important exception of urban Dholpur (and rural Kangra), one significant finding is that the Scheduled Castes overall have very low sex ratios in most of the sites. In urban Morena, for instance, one of the wards with a high concentration of Jatavs, who are working class and lower middle class, also displayed the widespread use of sex selection, resulting in a very low sex ratio of 590

in that particular ward. (It is in the exceptional urban Dholpur sites that we find Balmikis, Chamars, Mallahs, and Muslims composing the poorest groups with the highest rates of child mortality who have the positive child sex ratio discussed above.)

The other interesting difference between looking at class and caste is that the OBC castes display a much more mixed picture. The Gujar castes in rural Dholpur show very low child sex ratios, as do the Chowdhury castes in rural Kangra, but this is not the case among the equivalent castes in Morena, Rohtak, and Fatehgarh Saheb. Interestingly, while the upper castes display some of the worst sex ratios when taken together, and in both rural and urban sites, the picture becomes more differentiated among the upper castes. Rajput and Thakur castes, which are particularly prominent in rural Dholpur and Morena, and which have been traditionally associated with practices like female infanticide, do not have the worst sex ratios. As predominantly landed families with larger numbers of children, the presence of surviving girls modulates the fact of practices like sex selection, which are undoubtedly becoming more widespread. By far the worst sex ratios in the rural sample are the Jat Sikhs in rural Fatehgarh Saheb (child sex ratio 590), where the agrarian crisis and a growing desire for just one son are taking the structural influences on family composition/sex distribution to a new level. In urban sites, where, as it has already been noted, all upper castes have bad sex ratios, it is the Hindu upper castes (Jats, Baniyas, and Brahmans) in Sirhind who have an extraordinarily low sex ratio of 300. Indeed, in one of the urban wards, there was not a single girl below 6 years to be found in the sample of the Baniya and Brahman households.

In terms of caste, therefore, a particular trend at both ends of the spectrum is seen—the upper castes are leading the way in most sites, especially in urban areas, while the Scheduled Castes are demonstrating the combined effects of poverty and upward mobility in terms of greater masculinisation among their children.

2.9 Fertility Patterns by Birth Order and Sex Distribution of Families

Broadly speaking, and as the discussion so far would lead us to expect, the number of children in the different sites has been declining from older to younger families, but at different rates. Table 2.8 provides basic information on the children ever-born to mothers in different age cohorts to illustrate changing trends. Table 2.8 is self-explanatory and is only meant to provide a broad background. Clearly, Morena and Dholpur are distinct in that even among mothers in the 35–39 age group, 4–5 children are being born. This figure declines among younger women, where the drop is quite large. Keeping in mind the lower ages at marriage in these sites, it is likely, therefore, that these figures do not only reflect incomplete families but are also indicative of new norms about how many children a family should have. In the case of the other sites, with higher ages at marriage, the 25–29 age group will also include incomplete families. The Kangra sample emerges as the site with the lowest fertility trends, followed by Fatehgarh Saheb. Interestingly, however, fertility patterns in Fatehgarh Saheb show a greater spread than in Kangra, with a small but significant number of women having just one child, and across different age cohorts.

Table 2.8: Mean Ever-born Children

	Madhya Pradesh	Rajasthan	Himachal Pradesh	Haryana	Punjab
Age of Mother	MORENA	DHOLPUR	KANGRA	ROHTAK	F. SAHEB
25–29	2.85	3.36	1.64	2.36	1.6
35–39	4.04	5.22	2.41	2.96	2.9
50 & Above	5.58	5.78	3.47	4.59	3.88

Generally, child sex ratios worsen by birth order among those born after 1990, with the biggest drops in the second birth.

Table 2.9 provides a picture of sex ratios by birth order among surviving children for the first three births. This information has been taken from data for all children born after 1990 since there appeared to be recall errors on the part of older respondents with adult children. Though the numbers are on the smaller side, one can nonetheless gauge roughly the extent to which the number of sons and daughters is affected by their birth order. To begin with, only Morena and Dholpur have acceptable sex ratios among the first-born children. Thus, in the case of Kangra, Rohtak, and particularly Fatehgarh Sahib, sex selection appears to have been resorted to from the very first birth, and more so in urban than in rural areas, though in the case of Rohtak and Fatehgarh Sahib the differences are small. There is also a major drop with the second birth in all sites barring urban Dholpur, indicating that it is among second-borns that changes in family size as well as in sex selection are having the greatest impact on sex ratios. When it comes to third-borns, the small numbers make the sex ratios less robust, and there are some fluctuations. However, comparing these figures, what does appear to be the case is that in rural Kangra, urban Morena, and rural and urban Fatehgarh Sahib, measures to ensure that daughters are not born continue with the same if not greater ferocity as with the first-borns.

Table 2.9: Sex Distribution of All Children Born after 1990

State		Madhya Pradesh	Rajasthan	Himachal Pradesh	Haryana	Punjab
District		MORENA	DHOLPUR	KANGRA	ROHTAK	F. SAHEB
RURAL	1st born	955	991	927	905	840
	2nd born	792	705	858	770	770
	3rd born	842	1,016	629	870	600
URBAN	1st born	958	941	869	884	820
	2nd born	838	965	681	850	710
	3rd born	653	817	909	890	580
TOTAL	1st born	957	966	898	895	830
	2nd born	812	822	770	810	690
	3rd born	743	919	737	880	590

Changes in the sex distribution of children can also be looked at from the perspective of the sex distribution of families, irrespective of birth order. On the one hand, when asked how many children a family ought to have, most respondents gave normative

answers. In Morena and Dholpur, one son and one daughter, as well as two sons and a daughter, emerged equally in the responses, with small numbers saying that large families with many sons were needed. In Rohtak, respondents in one of the rural sites also gave similar answers in terms of either two sons and a daughter, or one son and one daughter, but in the other sites the normative one son–one daughter formula was trotted out. In Kangra and Fatehgarh Sahib, the overwhelming majority said they wanted a son and a daughter; a very small number openly said that one son is enough, at least in the course of responding at the time of the survey.

But what do actual family patterns reveal? Looking at family patterns in the entire sample, including both older and younger families, Morena and Dholpur, as one might expect, are at one end of the spectrum, with a prominence of large families with different combinations of sons and daughters. The small family has yet to emerge to any significant extent. An intermediate position is occupied by the Rohtak sample, while 15 per cent rural and 13 per cent urban have one boy and one girl. This is closely followed by 12 per cent families that have two boys and a girl in both rural and urban sites. A range of other combinations, both small and large, follow. At the other end of the spectrum is Kangra where 20 per cent rural and 23 per cent urban have one boy and one girl, followed by two boys—12 per cent rural and 15 per cent urban. In Fatehgarh Sahib, on the other hand, while there is a similar preference for one boy and one girl (16 per cent both rural and urban), interestingly, the rural sample then shows an equal 10 per cent families having one son, two sons, and two sons and a daughter. The urban sample is followed by 14 per cent having two sons and one daughter, and smaller percentages of other combinations. Thus, it is evident that the idea of the small family is ahead of the practice in Morena and Dholpur, while it is being significantly articulated in all the other sites in terms of revealed preferences. Interestingly, it is in rural Fatehgarh Sahib that the earliest signs of one child—a son—become visible.

We now examine families whose first child was born after 1985 to see how patterns are changing among younger families. Here predictable patterns begin to emerge or become more pronounced. In Morena, it is a two-son pattern that takes the lead in the rural sites at 12 per cent, followed by 10.5 per cent one boy/one girl, whereas the urban sites show a stronger preference for one boy/one girl at 15 per cent, closely matched by two boys/one girl at 14.5 per cent. Other combinations, both small and large, follow these. In Dholpur, the one boy/one girl as well as the two boys/one girl combinations emerge in both rural and urban sites among around 10 per cent families. In all the other sites, there is a heightening of the one boy/one girl norm, which increases to as much as 33 per cent of all families in rural Kangra, followed by Fatehgarh Sahib and Rohtak at 25 per cent. After a gap, this is followed by two sons, as well as by other combinations. Fatehgarh Sahib continues to stand apart in that the second revealed preference in both rural and urban sites is that of one son.

What is noticeable in all the sites across the board are the insignificant proportions of families with just two daughters; the proportions range from 3 per cent in Morena and Dholpur, to 6 per cent in urban Kangra, and barely 2 per cent in Fatehgarh Sahib. When one looks at these patterns all together, the following contradictory picture emerges: on the one hand, more and more families have the one boy/one girl combination, but this is complemented by a greater degree of small families with more sons and an

After 1985, the emergence of the small family norm becomes visible to different degrees in all the study sites, with insignificant numbers of families having only daughters.

insignificant number of small families with only daughters. It is this combination that results in growing masculination, and, therefore, a greater skewing of the child sex ratio.

Another interesting feature is the changing pattern of the large family, visible in particular in Rohtak and Fatehgarh Sahib. Among older cohorts as well as in sites such as Morena and Dholpur, large families with many sons have been common. After 1985, however, there are practically no families with at least six children left in the Rohtak and Fatehgarh Sahib sites. When we look at the smaller number of families with at least four children, moreover, we find that these families have significantly more daughters than sons. Thus, no one wants more than one or two sons anymore. On the other hand, families who do not have a son, but who do not go in for sex determination at an early stage, have more daughters in order to have one.

Overall, therefore, the following trends are seen: The growth of the small-family norm in the sites is indistinguishable from planning for sons. Such families have one or two sons and one daughter or none at all. On the other hand, in the small number of large families, daughters predominate, but they may be largely unwanted but are born as parents try to fulfil their desire for a son.

2.10 Changes After 2001

Given the timing of the second phase of the study in Rohtak and Fatehgarh Sahib in 2005, about four years after the results of the 2001 Census became public, along with the attendant media and state attention that followed, it is possible that some of this publicity might have affected the use of sex selection in the sites. We have, therefore, looked at some of the more recent data pertaining to children born after 2000, even though the numbers are small.

In the case of Rohtak, looking at children born after 2000, there is indeed a change. In both urban and rural sites, the first-borns show a clear improvement—48 boys and 53 girls (rural) and 40 boys and 38 girls (urban). However, the situation worsens considerably among second-borns, even though the numbers are small—24 boys and 18 girls (rural) and 17 boys and 10 girls (urban). The Fatehgarh Sahib data show a similar improvement, but only in the urban sites—52 boys and 43 girls (rural) and 44 boys and 50 girls (urban). Again, with the second births there is a huge drop—22 boys and 10 girls (rural) and 17 boys and 8 girls (urban).

It may be recalled that the 1985 data in Table 2.9 showed a negative sex ratio from the very first births in these sites. Therefore, it is possible that after 2001 families in Rohtak and urban Sirhind are not resorting to sex selection with their first-borns. However, it is being widely resorted to for the next birth. Though there are signs of positive change at the first birth, one cannot predict future trends.

Views on family planning, abortion and sex selection in the survey were filtered by circumspectness and political correctness, making it impossible to interpret these views directly.

2.11 Views on Family Planning, Abortion, and Sex Selection

Finally, we present some of the survey findings concerning the views of respondents on family planning and practices related to sex selection. This discussion is somewhat different from the preceding discussion, precisely because it is the

respondents' views that are being elicited here. Moreover, as it will be seen, there is no simple way of interpreting the results. What becomes apparent is that the views are being filtered by circumspectness and political correctness as much as being influenced by other considerations.

Respondents were asked a series of questions to elicit their agreement or disagreement about adopting family planning for various reasons. The reasons provided were as follows: to achieve an ideal family size, on detecting deformity in the foetus, for reasons of spacing children, because of the health of the mother, and different ways of naming sex selection, if one has daughters and is having another, if the foetus is female, and to make sure of having a boy child. Multiple answers were therefore possible, as well as in a 'yes' or 'no' form.

When it came to general questions related to family planning and abortion, respondents across all the sites responded largely in the affirmative, ranging from 80 per cent in rural Kangra and urban Morena to 99 per cent in Fatehgarh Sahib. With only minor variations across the lines of caste or education, it is evident that the idea of limiting family size is largely an uncontroversial issue and is considered acceptable. The picture changes somewhat when it comes to abortion following the detection of a foetal abnormality. Interestingly, the Morena and Dholpur respondents show the smallest change, varying from 80–70 per cent. However, in rural Fatehgarh Sahib and Kangra, only about 40 per cent answered positively, while in urban Kangra this figure dropped to 5 per cent. It would appear, therefore, that in those sites where sex selection is, in fact, more prevalent, the answers given were more circumspect.

As one might expect, therefore, the biggest drop relates to those questions that address sex selection through abortion. In Morena and Dholpur, urban respondents were more open in acknowledging the practice; over half of them did so, compared to one-fourth in the rural sample. In Kangra, however, the opposite was the case; here it was the rural sample that was more open compared to the urban one. Indeed, even within the rural sample, the Scheduled Castes spoke out more openly (75 per cent) than the upper castes (30 per cent), while in the urban sites this figure drops to 5 per cent, with small variations across the castes. This is the clearest indication that there is no simple match between views and actual practice, since it is among the rural Scheduled Castes in Kangra—among whom sex selection has yet to take hold—where respondents were most outspoken, with the opposite being the case in the urban sites. Interestingly, there was much less political correctness in the responses voiced by the Rohtak sample compared to Fatehgarh Sahib. Half the sample in both rural and urban Rohtak answered in favour of having an abortion in order to ensure the birth of a boy child; 20 per cent and 10 per cent are the average rural and urban figures in Fatehgarh Sahib.

Given the kinds of constraints under which respondents operate, it is, therefore, essential to recognise the potential as well as the limits of different methodologies. Survey formats (including those followed in the NFHS, for instance) are, in our view, not reliable gauges for assessing something like son-preference. At most they give a sense of the prevailing ideological climate at the time. This is why building rapport with respondents over a period of time and more ethnographic forms of interaction were crucial to this study. The following chapters draw more fully from the qualitative fieldwork against this background to take the discussion forward.

‘STRATEGIES’ AND ‘TECHNOLOGIES’ OF PLANNING FAMILIES AND ISSUES OF AGENCY

This chapter addresses the strategies and technologies of planning families in the five sites. As we saw in chapter 2, the various sites show different levels of economic development and urbanisation. Morena and Dholpur are located in backward, less developed, and poorer states, while Kangra, Rohtak, and Fatehgarh Sahib are part of high per capita income states. Although the situation of different castes and classes varies within the sites, on average, people in Morena and Dholpur have poorer access to health care and need to travel farther to access sex determination technology. This implies that expenditure on sex selection efforts can be higher even though the cost of ultrasound tests and abortion services may be lower due to the lower levels in their standard of living. In the latter group of sites, the difference between the rural and urban sites is not marked, and access to sex determination technology is pervasive. There is further variation, as Fatehgarh Sahib showed signs of sex selective abortions as early as 1985 compared to Rohtak, where one sees evidence of sex selective abortions around 1990. All sites other than urban Dholpur show worse sex ratios at second- and third-birth orders, evidence that the use of sex determination technology is widespread.

Certain broad similarities and differences are visible between the two groups of sites. The main similarity is that conscious and unconscious strategies for determining family size and sex distribution have been in operation in most of these sites over a long period; long histories of daughter-discrimination and son-preference characterise all the sites. This was manifested in evidence of infanticide in all the sites in the past, and even carrying into the present in a few cases. Thus, there appears to be some continuity between the past and the present situations, with girl-child elimination through infanticide and neglect having been transmuted into a much more focused pre-birth elimination. Another similarity is that all the sites are part of agrarian economies, with large dominant agricultural castes, where land is an important source of livelihood. Among these communities, fear of land fragmentation is a major reason for wanting fewer children. With the size of landholdings having dwindled over time and the rule of equal inheritance among sons dividing land into ever-smaller parcels, the fear of landholdings turning uneconomical becomes a factor in family-building strategies. Daughters, too, can chip away at landholdings and family wealth through the need for costly marriages.

Family size is much larger in the first two sites and much smaller among the second set. However, this does not mean that son-preference or daughter-dislike is any less intense in any of the sites. It simply means that the strategies and technologies available and employed for achieving the desired number of sons vary, and that they are combined differently in different locations to achieve the desired outcomes.

3.1 Family Planning and Planning the Family

This study shows that families unconsciously and consciously decide on the ‘needed/ desired family’. The desired family is one of a certain size with a certain sex distribution. Thus, families have begun to decide roughly on the number of children they want and can afford, and within that number how many girls and boys they wish to have. It is not necessary that people will be able to achieve their desired family easily. At one extreme, both size and sex distribution can come to be determined by the sex of the first child, a phenomenon that is visible in at least two of the sites, Kangra and Fatehgarh Sahib. The Fatehgarh Sahib data indicate that significant numbers of families stop procreating if the first child is a son. If the first child is a daughter, major efforts continue to be made to ensure that the second child is a son and that the family size stays at two children. In the case of the other sites, similarly, many families that want two sons will try to ensure that the boys are born within the first three births. Among families with restricted access to money and technology, a son may be born after two or more daughters. Families with only girls were few and far between in all the sites, irrespective of the level of development. In poorer families or among those who were opposed to sex selection practices, a higher number of daughters appeared, not because daughters were wanted but because of repeated attempts to have a male child or children.

Despite past strategies that had outcomes similar to the results of present strategies, the study reveals that there has been a shift from *conscious to more deliberate strategies*. This shift is of two types. The first shift is at the level of consciously planning the family as a household strategy, and the second shift is seen in the kinds of technologies being used for achieving family planning goals. If in the past the planning of the family unfolded as children were born, with active intervention such as infanticide and passive intervention through selective neglect to reduce the number of girl children, today the goals are more directly expressed and achieved through deliberate, planned strategies. Technological interventions now take place earlier in the pregnancy, and require explicit action rather than implicit inaction. In most sites, planning for, conceiving, and giving birth to a son gets linked with carefully thought-out individual strategies and rituals, the consumption of local medicines, and the following of special diets. If all these measures fail, then more ‘scientific methods’ of ultrasound testing for sex determination are resorted to, followed by abortion if the foetus is a female. It is only in instances where a woman has difficulty in conceiving a child that the birth of a daughter is accepted gladly in order that there is at least some progeny. Adoption of a child of another family, even a boy, is the last resort.

In the present phase of declining child sex ratios, one is thus looking at some new factors and reasons for the continuation of earlier patterns of son-preference and daughter-discrimination. *Planning the family now means planning for families with sons and preferably without daughters, and certainly not more than one daughter.* Family planning strategies

are strategies aimed at having sons and preventing the birth of daughters. This is especially the case in the more economically developed sites.

'It was a girl, and the doctor asked what we wanted to do. We wanted to abort it. We paid Rs 1,200 and got it over with. What would one have done with another girl? Already we had two.'
(urban Kangra)

There is a clear shift from the traditional to the modern idea of family size, albeit with variations. A small family today is seen as the ideal family, and it is considered rational to plan this family deliberately. The national family planning programme has been advocating a family of two children as the appropriate or ideal family for several decades now. This has been accompanied by the introduction of contraception and the popularisation of ideas

of proper child spacing and required medical check-ups during pregnancy. The messages conveyed through the family planning bureaucracy and advertising campaigns have percolated to people everywhere, with the family planning symbol of an inverted triangle being well recognised. One cannot say whether the message is being followed assiduously by everyone, but fertility, for various reasons, has been declining. More important is the ideational impact—that a small family is modern and desirable. There is an acceptance that families must be consciously planned. In more recent times, with the medicalisation of birth, ultrasound check-ups have become normalised as a part of safe pregnancy, especially in urban areas. This normalisation has no doubt helped the misuse of ultrasound to eliminate female fetuses.

However, such medical and social interventions often have unintended consequences. In India, family size is largely controlled through contraceptive use by women. Male contraceptive use is much rarer. Whether it is bearing sons or daughters, or producing the required number of children, it is the woman on whose shoulders the responsibility for the 'production' of the 'correct' family rests.

The data show that among the younger generation especially, the knowledge and use of contraceptives appears to be widespread. Yet MTP (Medical Termination of Pregnancy) allowed by Indian law is regularly used not for abortion under specified conditions, but more often for limiting family size, enabling child spacing, and regulating the sex distribution of the family. This is evident from much of the data gathered during the project. This poses a double danger for the woman as facilities for safe abortions are few and far between, especially in rural areas. Among the sites, only Haryana and Punjab are well equipped with MTP facilities, while the other states face a paucity of such services. Many women in the sites complained of ill health after having undergone abortions. Although the field research for this study did not document cases of maternal mortality after sex selective abortions, it is well known that unsafe abortions are a major cause of maternal morbidity and mortality in India. Further, sex selective abortions may be conducted in the second and even in the third trimester if the sex of the foetus could not be determined earlier. In a number of cases, women have undergone multiple abortions in their search for the elusive male child, subjecting their bodies to repeated danger and damage. Yet the mother's health seems to be of secondary concern to the family, and even to her own self. Abortions are often simply reported and named as 'miscarriages', making it difficult to specify the contribution of sex selective abortions to declining child sex ratios. Thus, miscarriage, considered as the involuntary loss of a foetus, can conceal the voluntary nature of sex selective abortions. To give an example, an early field visit to urban Morena revealed 104 abortions of which 71 were reported as 'natural' (or as miscarriages) and 33 were

reported as MTP in one particular site (field notes). The incidences of miscarriages were very high in all three urban sites and were lower in the rural sites. In Dholpur, both rural and urban sites reported high rates of 'miscarriage'. We certainly do not wish to deny the occurrence of miscarriages, particularly among poorer women, and in the sites in Dholpur and Morena especially. Nor is it our claim that all abortions are sex selective in purpose. Indeed, far from being an open and safe practice, abortion suffers from stigmatisation to begin with. Though questions on abortion were part of the survey questionnaire, it was clear that in most cases answers were not forthcoming in any reliable fashion. What has changed the situation is the selective entry of ultrasound technology on the scene.

There is little doubt that in these sites (and in other parts of the country), ultrasound, the technology introduced for detecting foetal abnormalities, is largely being used for sex determination, followed by abortion of the female foetus. The precipitous decline in child sex ratios, following the introduction of this technology in the 1980s and its widespread adoption for sex determination, is not by any means a coincidence. All the five states in the project show steep drops in child sex ratios in the decade 1991–2001. Many families in the study sites did not see ultrasound as part of the regular monitoring of the health of the mother and her pregnancy, but as indelibly related to the need for sex determination. Thus the ban on the prenatal diagnosis of the sex of the child is being violated and so are the provisions of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971.

It appears that the higher the level of economic development, the more 'conscious' is the planning of the family and the more deliberate the use of technology for achieving these goals. In Punjab, women with higher levels of education have been shown to practise sex determination more. The same is true of Kangra and of more educated and richer families in the other sites as well. People with more disposable income tend to use more expensive and sophisticated technologies to achieve their ends.

The quantitative and qualitative data of this study also show the extent to which sex selection is not confined to the well-to-do sections or the upper castes. One also needs to explore whether the production of a family with few or no girls by people who are better educated and prosperous is a passing phase or not. How deep-rooted is son-preference and its obverse, daughter-aversion? What are the old and new factors that structure the perceived need for one or two sons and only one or no daughters? The case of South Korea shows that the introduction and availability of ultrasound affected sex ratios negatively even as son-preference was falling. The recent improvement in South Korean sex ratios is being attributed to the long-term effects of legislation that support greater rights for women and to changing livelihoods in which families are less dependent on support from sons. These structural changes are seen as overcoming the 'technology effect'.

In the case of India, while the more prosperous northern states at present show the worst sex ratios, many poor and populous states have yet to go through the loop

On abortion

When a young informant from a poor Mahabrahman family in urban Rohtak was asked about PNDT, she said that she had never tried to determine the sex of her child. She stressed that she had got abortions done at her own free will and because she did not want children at that time. She also said that having too many children meant having to fend for them.

Sex selective abortion of daughters

In this family, no daughters have been allowed to be born for three generations. Babli, wife of Raju (eldest son of Shivkumar), has two sons. She said she had also lost two children. She was hesitant about answering as to how she had 'lost' these children, but the youngest son of the family, Surendra, said, 'You know how the world is nowadays. We got both of them aborted.' (urban Dholpur)

where a combination of the transition to the small-family norm, higher education, and rising incomes will enable wider use of technology for determining the size and sex distribution of the family. The trend has not been encouraging—SRBs at birth fell between the two NFHS rounds of 1992–93 and 1998–99 even in those parts of the country where these had earlier been more balanced. In the study sites, while child sex ratios fell further in Punjab and Haryana, and stayed constant in Himachal Pradesh, they actually improved somewhat in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

Neighbourhood networks

A woman from a poor Dhanak family said, 'When I discussed medical consultation with my neighbours, the women of the lane informed me that near Jhajhar Chungi there is a doctor who conducts the sex determination test and women from here go to her. Many women have undergone such tests.' The investigator asked the women in the neighbourhood whether the woman from the poor Dhanak family had indeed undergone such a test. The neighbourhood women replied, 'Yes! She did undergo the sex determination test. She went there with the other women of the gali (street).' (rural Rohtak)

In the sites, it was found that Fatehgarh Sahib in Punjab, Kangra in Himachal Pradesh, and Rohtak in Haryana are unabashedly availing of new technologies to design the family. Morena in Madhya Pradesh and Dholpur in Rajasthan are characterised by a greater mix of traditional and modern technologies aimed at achieving family sex distribution ends. Nevertheless, people in most of the study sites, and especially in Punjab, continue to rely on various indigenous prescriptions and practices to ensure the birth of males, even as greater reliance is placed on ultrasound technology. Sex determination through ultrasound is being availed of across castes and classes,

in both rural and urban areas, in combination with traditional methods. Though some women may deny having used modern technology, others quite openly narrate their experiences, naming doctors and clinics, and detailing the costs involved in the ultrasound test and the subsequent abortion. Often the frequency with which sex selective tests are used reflects the urgency experienced by a family that feels it needs to complete its planned child bearing, with a specific mix of the sexes as soon as possible.

3.2 Patterns of Desired Families

This section recapitulates the findings on the specific patterns of desired family size in the five sites. The sites show a range of preferences as described earlier: in Morena and Dholpur, larger families in the pursuit of at least two boys; in Haryana, smaller families but still wanting two boys and perhaps one girl; and in Kangra, and especially in Fatehgarh Sahib, even a one-son family.

- In Fatehgarh Sahib and Kangra, a two-child norm has clearly set in. While boys continue to be the preferred sex, in these sites, among certain social groups (Jat Sikhs and urban Punjabi Hindus), more than one son is less and less welcome. *The need for a daughter is no longer being articulated.* There is evidence that among some groups (the landowning Jat Sikhs in Fatehgarh Sahib) there is a desire for a family composed of a single son. Preventing property division among sons, and now among sons and daughters under new inheritance laws, preventing wealth outflows through dowries, and the need for high investments in education are cited as reasons for wanting only a single son. The felt necessity to have a son continues despite loud criticism of 'worthless sons', especially in Fatehgarh Sahib where unemployment and drug addiction are taking a toll on an entire generation of young men. Girls continue to be looked upon as 'outgoings' rather than 'incomings', and hence the focus is on not having any at all. The concerns of rural propertied

groups are mirrored by urban propertied groups, as demonstrated by the extremely low sex ratios among upper-caste urban Punjabis. Out-migration of males remains a livelihood-diversifying strategy in both these sites, even though the family size is demonstrably smaller.

- In Rohtak, family livelihood strategies still demand two sons who are needed to perpetuate the family, with one son farming the land, thus freeing the other son to take on non-agricultural and preferably government employment. Equally emphasised is the need for 'manpower' to protect the land and the family; having only one son is like being a one-eyed man. But a third son is explicitly not wanted. There is some genuflection towards the idea that girls are necessary to complete a family, but no one goes out of their way to ensure the birth of a girl child as they do with boys. Yet the Rohtak data reveal a high incidence of contention over sex determination and abortion decisions. In many cases, the men were against taking steps to eliminate girl children, but the women were adamant and did so secretly, often repairing to their natal homes for the purpose. In one of the urban sites, the Baniya castes showed the highest incidence of miscarriage and abortion. Women admitted to being under intense pressure from both family and society to bear only male children. Within this caste, cash is a necessary component of dowry, and the marriage of a daughter cannot be arranged without the cash component being negotiated.
- In Morena and Dholpur, although family size is declining and abortion of female foetuses and neglect of girl children are helping to achieve the desired size and sex distribution, several sons remain welcome. Many families, especially among landed castes like the Thakurs, do not practise birth control and prefer to eliminate girls through abortion or neglect. Similarly, among the Gujjars, girls continue to be eliminated after birth, largely through neglect. Various reasons were given for wanting more than one or two sons. In addition to all the usual reasons—performing ritual duties, continuing the family lineage, inheriting family property and supporting parents in old age—villagers in a rural site in Rajasthan argued that more sons are needed to maintain the power of the family. Frequent quarrels between villagers are linked to political aspirations and to the need for exerting rights over economic resources, which are defended through raw male manpower. In contrast, among the higher castes, girls are not wanted because they have to be married into higher-status groups, which requires the payment of exorbitant dowries. Different justifications are thus used to build a higher value for sons and construct the daughter as a burden.
- Despite the fact that government family planning policy norms have been imbibed in general by the entire population, actual family size was seen to vary by caste, class, and location. Poorer families in general tend to have more children.

'Despite loving and praising daughters, no one wishes to plan the family with a daughter as the first child. No family said that one cannot manage without a daughter, while this was often said about boys. The birth of the first-order male child is a deciding factor in planning the family.'
(Researcher's note, Fatehgarh Sahib)

Composing the desired families
A woman from a poor Dhanak household aborted a female foetus after the birth of five daughters. The woman said, 'I would have given birth to just one son, but because of the traditions and customs of society, and my future in my marital home, I had to go for six children . . . Everyone said that whosoever is born, boy or girl, if God gives a mouth to feed, then he would also give food to eat. Listening to this advice from relatives, six children were born.' (rural Rohtak)

Anjali, an educated woman belonging to the Nai caste, has a son and a daughter. She wants her son to be well educated and become a good person. She wants to have another son, so she has not yet got a tubectomy. After the birth of Rinkie, she aborted two female foetuses. Arti said, she had decided on her own whether she wanted to have a boy or a girl.
(urban Dholpur)

As one informant said about his community, 'They also dislike girls and love boys because they think that when the boy grows up he will help them with work and in running the household. He will earn money. Also, if I have four family members to wield the latthi in times of trouble then I will be powerful in the village. This is why people in villages want to have more sons. A wealthy man thinks that if he has lent Rs 5,000 to someone in the village and there are four latthi-wielding boys at home, then he will be able to take back Rs 10,000 in a year. Or he can take over that person's land.' (Dholpur)

Contraception is not availed of, and the concomitant desire for sons inevitably leads to a larger family size. Often rationales such as 'they will feed themselves', or simply the lack of resources for availing of sex determination technology contributes to a higher number of children. Ideas of masculinity among the poor translate into exercising control over women through a continuous cycle of childbearing and thus higher fertility. Among castes such as the Gujjars, larger family size is a function of the agricultural/cattle-rearing economy combined with a desire for sons rather than daughters. The Gujjars have long had a tradition of female infanticide, which may now be changing to one of sex selective abortions. The Bajigars (Muslims) in one of the villages in Punjab were poor, ill-educated, and had large families. A religious injunction against the use of contraception and the belief that children are a gift from God have contributed to the prevalence of large families among this group. However, the data also show that even among the poor and the Scheduled Castes, especially in the urban sites, more and more families are having fewer children, with strong patterns of masculinisation, sometimes even greater than those seen among the better-off upper castes.

3.3 Technologies Used for Achieving Desired Family Size and Sex Distribution

3.3.1 Ideas of 'Sin' in Relation to Female Infanticide and Sex Selective Abortions

Perceptions of whether committing female infanticide or foeticide is a sin varied across the sites and in rural and urban areas. Even within the sites and within rural and urban locations, there was no uniformity in opinions and views. While people did not admit openly to committing infanticide, there were plenty of voices that testified to its practise, especially in Morena and Dholpur. In the case of Fatehgarh Saheb, the voices were those of *dais*, who talked of the past, or even the present, when they had been asked to kill girl children but had refused. Most sites afford proverbs showing that daughter-elimination was a part and parcel of daily life. The Sikh religious establishment had in the past issued edicts against the practice of *kudi-maar* (killing of girls), and more recently had to do so once again in the face of rampant sex selective abortions in Punjab.

Many voices in the field condemned infanticide and foeticide as a sin. Thus, a Brahman couple in Morena had six girls after the first son and wanted another son. The wife had wanted to use sex determination in her later pregnancies, but the husband did not allow her to do so since he considered it to be a sin.

In another case, a woman felt that God had given her three more daughters to punish her for the first one whom the family had allowed to die of deliberate neglect.

In general, it was the older generation who condemned sex selective abortion as a sin. For some members of the older generation, abortion itself is a sin, whether of a boy or a girl. But this disapproval does not appear to have stopped people in any of the sites

from getting rid of unwanted female foetuses. In Himachal Pradesh and Punjab, people in general appear to have developed a very practical attitude towards the new technologies of daughter-elimination. Since the act is now committed by a machine, little guilt is attached to it.

Some of the ‘technologies’ used for eliminating females, especially girl children, are discussed below.

- **3.3.1.1 Female infanticide:** Female infanticide was a characteristic of all these sites historically, and the various ways in which female infants were killed have been well documented. There is some evidence that vestiges of female infanticide survive in many of the sites. In Morena, there were rumours that in one case in which several daughters died, the mother-in-law had stuffed tobacco in the infants’ mouths. In another case, the mother herself was known to have done so and had dumped the body in a drain. In some cases, girl infants were throttled and thrown into ponds. In Dholpur, girl infants were fed seeds of a poisonous plant, *dhatūra*, or were dropped from a height. Midwives were also commandeered to kill female infants in many sites. Fathers, mothers-in-law, and fathers-in-law were the ones who issued orders to get rid of the newborn female infant. The fact that there is no cultural requirement for social mourning or for the cremation of an infant facilitates the committing of infanticide.

- **3.3.1.2 Neglect of the girl infant:** Neglect of the girl infant takes many forms. Neglect is the act of not taking steps that could save the life of a child. The results of neglect may or may not be fatal, but certainly points to discrimination. The nutrition and health needs of girl children are systematically neglected in Morena and Dholpur, as well as among poorer families across the sites. Poor post-natal care, such as allowing the umbilical cord to become infected (in Dholpur, for instance), is one way that leads to a greater number of girl child mortalities. Although infant and child mortality in general was high in the Morena and Dholpur sites, many more girls than boys appear to have died, pointing to the hand of wilful neglect. Only in urban Dholpur did the investigation reveal extreme levels of poverty where boys, too, are not surviving. Girls are neglected in the hope that they will die. Many voices in the field spoke about the uselessness of girls or of their burdensome nature as girl infants or children lay sick, needing medical attention. While death through neglect is thus differentiated from infanticide, which follows very soon after birth, in the case of the former, there is little desire to save a female infant who the family has decided it does not want. Thus, lack of love and affection and the absence of a desire to see a girl child live can be added to other facets of neglect, such as the withholding of nutrition and

On Infanticide

‘It is said that many infant girls have died in a Thakur’s house, but he never lets on to this. Now he has only one daughter. One of the girls was killed in cold blood by his wife. The infant’s mouth was filled with tobacco and she was thrown in the naria (drain). One of the villagers heard the cries of the child and rescued her. He brought the child to the Thakur’s house, but the latter refused to accept the child and she died in the next four–five hours.’
(rural Morena)

‘There was a Motti Bhua who used to kill the girls soon after their birth. She used to keep one leg of the stool (peedhi) on the neck of the infant and sit on it while saying, “Go, bitto (baby), you go and send your brother.’
(rural Morena)

Neglect of girls

Kishore said that one daughter died due to illness. Right then his wife shouted from inside the house, “The truth of the matter is that he “ate” her. I told him several times to take her for treatment, but he remained careless because of which she died.’
(rural Dholpur)

R. S. Shekhawat’s widowed daughter, who lives in Rampura, herself said, ‘What is it? After all, she is just a girl. Treatment could be done if it was a boy.’ Rekha retorted loudly, ‘If everyone thought this way—that girls do not have to be treated when they are ill—then all girls would have been dead by now and everyone would have become wealthy.’
(rural Dholpur)

A Harijan woman’s husband is a carpenter at the army base and their sons work as wage labourers or carpenters, depending on the availability of work. The couple had three daughters and two sons, but two daughters died mysteriously, no one knows how.
(Kangra)

medical care. *Girl children in poor families are especially vulnerable to getting less than their share of family entitlements.*

- *3.3.1.3 Absence of access to technology:* In the absence of access to technology, neglect becomes the default option aimed at weeding out unwanted children. This was explicitly demonstrated in a case in Morena where the daughter was not given the treatment she needed and died due to the lack of the father's desire to save her. Technologies of neglect lead to attrition of girl children up to age 14, as seen from the data. In rural Morena, in one family, a woman gave birth to four girls and then died. Subsequent to her death, only the youngest daughter survived. There was no money for treatment and, more importantly, 'no custom' of treating girls. The father exercised deliberate neglect, knowing that so many daughters would reduce his chances of remarriage. Two daughters borne by his second wife again died. The mother-in-law did not allow the mother to seek medical help. In these sites, we see a helplessness due to a lack of access to medical facilities combine with a weak or absent desire to save girl children.
- *3.3.1.4 Discrimination in care:* In the richer sites, although few girls die from neglect, they can still suffer discrimination in care. In urban Kangra, a handicapped girl was not provided the medical assistance and care that a similarly handicapped son would have been given.

When a girl child dies, the death does not become an issue either for the family or for the local society. In one case in a village in Rohtak, a family with five daughters allowed two of them to die. The general opinion of the villagers was that it was 'good riddance'. Discrimination in health care was evident in many of the sites. In another village, a girl who was sick was sent to her mother's brother for treatment, relying on the support customarily expected of the maternal uncle. In an urban ward in Rohtak, in a Scheduled Caste family from Rajasthan, a girl child was allowed to die, while a boy suffering from epileptic fits was treated by the family at great expense. In many poor families, it was explicitly stated, 'We do not have money to spend on the treatment of girl children.'

In the richer sites and among well-to-do families, the number of girls dying due to neglect falls considerably. Here 'pre-emptive' action before birth itself is found.

Absence of public health facilities or difficulty in gaining access to such facilities as may exist emerge as crucial factors in the greater neglect of girl children.

- *3.3.1.5 Herbal potions and ritual prescriptions:* In most sites, instances of the use of herbal prescriptions and potions for conceiving a male foetus were documented. Methods prescribed by religious specialists for bearing male children were adopted by many couples. In Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, there is a belief that the sex of the child in the womb can be reversed by various precautions, abstinences, and locally prepared potions. The method used is called *palta* or overturning. In Madhya Pradesh, bandaging of the torso in particular ways by specialists is another technique adopted. Amulets and blessings are other methods resorted to in many of the sites. In Himachal Pradesh, tantric specialists can make the 'to be born later' son come earlier in the birth order. A drink called *kadha* is often administered to a pregnant woman who is suspected to be carrying a female foetus, resulting in a miscarriage.

- *3.3.1.6 Religious aids and specialists:* In Punjab, there is a widespread phenomenon of religious *deras* where herbal remedies and potions are given to people. These *deras* have a very strong influence in the countryside, which raises questions about the efficacy of using religious leaders to spread the message of protecting the girl child. Thus, on the one hand, religious leaders are asking people to abstain from sex determination and selection and, on the other hand, socially legitimate religious organisations and individuals are reinforcing son-preference by supplying people with methods of giving birth only to male children. This contradiction was clearly seen in the case of a *granthi's* (gurudwara priest) family who, despite being bound by their religion to avoid rituals and superstition, availed of a *baba's* (holy man) help to conceive a male child. There is a further contradiction in the case of Punjab; it is also the state most willing to employ and able to afford the newest technologies for sex determination and selection; at the same time, old methods remain equally popular, pointing to the desperation for sons.
- *3.3.1.7 Sex selective abortions:* The pervasiveness of sex selective abortions was documented in all sites, whether rich or poor, developed or less developed. Despite PNDT [Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994] and PCPNDT [Pre-conception and Prenatal Diagnostic Technique (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, 2003], sex selective abortions continue unabated. Access to ultrasound tests is found in both rural and urban sites, and in both small towns and big cities. As a respondent from Punjab stated, 'Today's women do not have to make guesses. Ultrasound is the biggest of all guesses. You can get a clear report. No need to get involved in anything. Get your ultrasound done and you know what is there.' In most sites, even if people resorted to traditional methods, they felt the need to confirm the sex of the child through an ultrasound test as the ultimate proof.

In many sites, the use of the ultrasound test varied by class. The richer people resorted to it at the earliest, not wanting to go through several pregnancies to achieve the desired goal. They do not wish to prolong childbearing in the search for a son nor do they wish to have more than a certain number of children. Among some poorer families, the decision to control the family size and sex distribution through ultrasound comes much later, if at all. But in other poorer families, ultrasound is being resorted to increasingly. There was, for instance, a case in urban Kangra where a lower-caste/class employee took a loan from a higher-caste employer to undergo an ultrasound test. In many sites, poorer families expressed regret that they ended up with several daughters in the search for a son. Hence, son-preference is equally strong among all castes and classes, although the same means for pursuing this preference may not be available to all.

Thus, in 'developed' states rich people resort to technological intervention early in their fertility careers, while many poorer people do so later or simply regret that they cannot due to lack of financial means.

A 31-year-old woman from the OBC Tarkhan caste, married to a carpenter, is part of a joint family. She has a daughter aged five years and a son aged two years. She said that at the time of her second pregnancy, she was very fearful as she did not want to have another daughter. To confirm the sex of the baby, she went with her mother to the Suman Nursing Home in Sirhind, which charged Rs 7,000. But she was not satisfied and got an ultrasound test done a second time to ensure that it was a male baby. She further said that had it been a daughter again she would have aborted the foetus because she and her husband wanted one daughter and one son. (Health Diary, Fatehgarh Sahib)

Women 'knew' that ultrasound tests were carried out by doctors in clinics and centres in Karnal, Sonapat, Panipat, Jhajjar, Rohtak, and Delhi. The costs cited varied between Rs 1,500 and Rs 8,000. A number of informants said that the abortion of female foetuses would stop if doctors refused to abort them and if the law were implemented more actively. (Rohtak)

Then when I got pregnant after two years of Bunty's birth [girl child], we got a three-and-a-half-month-old foetus checked by Dr N. in Rohtak . . . The doctor told us that the foetus was a girl and asked for Rs. 1,000 for the abortion. We got it aborted. After that, a year later I became pregnant again. We again went to N. and the doctor again told us the foetus was a girl and took Rs. 1,200 for the abortion . . . Then I became pregnant again after two years. N. told us the foetus was a boy and charged only Rs. 800 for telling us.

*We got to know about N. from some women in the village.
(respondent, Rohtak)*

Costs of sex determination tests and abortion of female fetuses varied across the sites. Sometimes several tests were needed to confirm the sex, and women underwent repeated abortions to attain that one much-desired male child. Chapter 4 of this report examines the compulsions faced by women to bear male children. Despite knowledge of sex determination being an offence, and despite the higher costs involved, couples are continuing to resort to this test and justifying abortion. Expenditure on ultrasound tests and abortion is not considered to be wasteful; it is often viewed in the context of future savings by having a small family, with no more than one girl.

In all sites, respondents admitted to availing of ultrasound and abortion facilities to get rid of unwanted girl children.

In Morena, couples accessed facilities in Bhind (a neighbouring district) and even as far as Agra. People from Dholpur often go to Morena for sex determination. In Kangra, couples may even go to Pathankot in Punjab for sex determination and abortion if they do not wish the community to know of it. Families wish to maintain secrecy about visits for such purposes in the context of widespread knowledge of the illegality of sex determination. In many cases, second or third pregnancies are concealed from health workers such as ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Midwives), engaged by the government to provide health advice and services to pregnant women. This makes it easier to get rid of unwanted fetuses if they turn out to be female.

*The doctor running the Suman Nursing Home, a clinic to which many couples in the area go for sex determination tests, argued that the government policy was contradictory—on the one hand, propagating small families and, on the other hand, banning to see selective abortion. She said that people perceived girls to be a burden, so they should be allowed to abort them. The doctor at this clinic was considered to be a powerful individual. She was also the district member of the PCPNDT committee.
(Fatehgarh Sahab)*

*A female health worker gave the example of a woman who had two daughters and was pregnant for the third time. This woman came to the primary health centre. She was crying and wanted to know the whereabouts of an ultrasound test clinic. Seeing her condition, the health worker told the woman that the ultrasound tests were being done in Pathankot. The reason: 'Her in-laws have warned her that they will throw her out if she doesn't give birth to a son.'
(urban Kangra)*

3.3.2 Ban on Sex Determination and Sex Selection

Despite PNDT and PCPNDT, the acts prohibiting the use of technologies for sex determination and sex selection, the use of ultrasound was found to be rampant in all sites, with doctors, nurses, ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Midwives), and other medical personnel benefiting monetarily from these practices. Before the law banning sex selection and determination came into effect, there was widespread collusion of government family planning and health workers in aiding and abetting sex selective abortions. A nexus was built up between ANMs, local doctors, radiologists and obstetricians with pecuniary benefit accruing to all. Women who had conceived for the third time were encouraged by ANMs to undergo ultrasound examinations and guided to doctors for abortions. While much of this has gone underground, surreptitious help is still offered to those wanting to undergo a 'check'.

Respondents in all sites identified and named clinics that were responsible for providing the above-named services. Yet the authorities have found it very difficult to target and bring to book the offending clinics and medical personnel. Nor has the government attempted to check the involvement of para-medical and family health personnel in advocating and facilitating sex selective abortions.

The moral stance adopted by the medical fraternity is itself a matter of major concern, and there will be little success in curtailing their role unless they accept that sex selective abortion is unethical. Interviews with doctors revealed a divided opinion; many argued that if girls were not wanted they should not be born; others argued that elimination of girl children helped the larger goal of population reduction, having imbibed the official idea that small families are good both for individuals and for the nation. Others talked about providing a needed social service to people and allowing them to exercise their choice. The collusion of the medical community with providers of technology and users of technology is well documented in the literature. Hence, to effect any change measures have to be taken on all fronts by targeting and prosecuting offending practitioners.

3.3.3 Pre-conception Sex Selection

Although the project sites did not yield evidence of use of pre-conception sex selection technologies, these are known to be in use in Punjab. State intervention is thus needed to strictly regulate pre-conception/prenatal technologies and to prevent the import of newer at-home sex determination technologies. It is equally important to re-evaluate government family planning programmes and their aims and methods, in light of persisting gender inequalities.

3.4 Choice and Agency in Deciding Family Size and Sex Distribution

Who decides? The question of who decides has become important in the face of allegations that 'it is women who kill other women'. It is said that it is the *dai*, the mother-in-law, and the mother herself who arrange to have the baby eliminated. But an examination of the evidence from the five sites makes it clear that agency in the elimination of girl children or female foetuses is multiple. Even though a woman may on her own take the initiative to visit a doctor for contraceptives and/or take the decision to undergo a sex determination test, and subsequently may even contemplate abortion, most often it has been seen that the ultimate right to decide on matters pertaining to family size, sex distribution, and fertility control lies with the man, or in some cases the extended family. The couple, the mother-in-law, the father-in-law, and the woman's parents are all actors in a system that systematically devalues the girl child and the mother without sons. To understand agency in its full measure, we have to ask who decides how many children will be born, and of what sex? Who pays for sex determination and for abortion? Where does it take place? Who accompanies the mother on the fateful journey? Who allows the death of the girl child through neglect? Who ultimately has control of familial resources and their distribution? And, ultimately, if women do make decisions to kill girl children, and to undergo sex determination tests and abortions, what is the context in which their actions have to be placed?

Parental help

A poor Lohar woman said, 'During my next pregnancy, after [the birth of] my first son, I went through the test and found that I was carrying a girl. I had an abortion. My parents provided the financial assistance for the operation—Rs 3,000. If I had been at my marital home, it would have been difficult for me to arrange that much money for the abortion, as my husband was unable to arrange it.'
(rural Rohtak)

3.5 Agency in Reproductive Decision Making and Family Building

It is important to recognise that reproductive decision making in India is not a sphere of individual or purely couple-oriented decision making, and thus has to be looked at in the broader context of family and society. An important dimension that the study explores is the intra-family dynamics of planning families. There is a contentious politics of reproduction within the family, with fertility itself having become a contested arena between couples and between generations. In most households, especially in households that live jointly and where property is held in common, the influence of the older generation on fertility decisions is significant. Even if the reproducing couple is living apart, the influence of the senior couple can be considerable. Peer pressure of neighbours, sisters-in-law, and other relatives is reflected in advice, exhortations, and taunts. Apart from members of the family, health providers also give advice and suggest ways and means of regulating the family.

Given below are a few cases revealing the role of different actors in decision making about the choice of sex of the child.

- In Morena, the wife of an army man was warned by her husband over the telephone that a 'girl should not be born'. The fear of dire consequences if she were to give birth to a daughter forced the woman to get a PNDT done at her parents' home in Bhind, a nearby town.
- Another respondent from Morena was helped once by her brother's wife to undergo a sex selective abortion at her own natal home and once by her husband's sister in Morena.
- A woman in Dholpur had two abortions at Dr G.'s clinic. She took her sister-in-law's help. She said, 'A mother wants to give birth to each child she conceives, but the circumstances were such that I had to compromise.'
- In Rohtak city, a pregnant woman was keen on knowing the sex of the child while the man was not. She eventually underwent an abortion at her parents' place. 'Girls have no value. They get no respect in society,' she said. The husband had warned her that if she aborted children, he would not take her back. Hence, she kept her two abortions a secret until she gave birth to a boy.
- In Dholpur, a Balmiki educated man refused to bend to family pressure to marry again after three sons died at birth and he was left with four surviving daughters. All the girls were being educated.
- In Fatehgarh Sahib, Jat landowning couples are choosing to restrict the family to only one son against the wishes of the older generation who still fear for the survival of that one son.
- In rural Rohtak, elders in the family insist on women bearing two sons in the event that should one son die, the surviving son will carry on the family name; a son is necessary for securing the future of the family.

- In urban Rohtak, in prosperous families in urban sites women are able to exercise their agency in fertility decisions more visibly within a nuclear family set-up than in a joint family. In joint households, they are as handicapped as their counterparts from poorer households. It is seen that despite poorer women bearing more children, they are under far less pressure from the extended family and have more support from their husbands in making their fertility decisions.
- In Morena and Dholpur, parents-in-law and even parents play an important role in dictating childbearing requirements.

In the case of large agrarian castes (both high and low), such as Thakurs, Gujjars, and Jatavs, in Morena and Dholpur, it was found that men have a much stronger voice in deciding matters related to childbearing. Women are subjected to repeated childbearing and are not allowed to restrict their fertility. Fertility is seen as a symbol of masculinity, and women who wish to abort a foetus are accused of infidelity, implying that the child they wish to get rid of has been fathered by another man.

In some of the sites, there were instances in which women had been told explicitly how many children they must bear and of what sex. A woman who has given birth to a female child often gets no help from her in-laws. The mother-in-law refuses to visit her to help her in the initial days after the birth of the child. In other cases, couples with too many girl children are asked to leave the family home and fend for themselves. Women who repeatedly bear girl children are taunted and abused by the in-laws and even the husband. Under these circumstances, the exercise of their agency has to be understood as a manoeuvre and a means of negotiation within the parameters of a normatively defined life as a good wife. For the woman it often becomes a necessary strategy for survival and a hope of improving the domestic life. The desires of others are visited on to her body and her life as she ultimately is the bearer of children.

The caste and class dimensions of reproductive decision making cannot be ignored either. Poverty has consistently been seen to impinge on girls in poor and Scheduled Caste families in a worse manner. The desire for a male child, shared with the upper castes, leads poor Scheduled Caste women to frequent childbearing and equally to the neglect of the girl children who are born. Precious resources, needed for nutrition, health and education are diverted increasingly to prevent the birth of girl children.

Male agency in the reproductive process generally operates 'backstage'. Men are rarely responsible for using contraception. Yet they generally dictate the number of children that should be born and of what sex. As the ultimate holders of the purse strings, they are the ones who finance both ultrasound tests and abortions. The woman can variously be accompanied by either a sister-in-law (from either side) or by the husband or by an ANM. Some women take the initiative of getting the test done on their own without the knowledge of the husbands because they are convinced that the men do not want a daughter. With or without the husband's knowledge, the woman often accesses facilities in her natal home and her parents take care of the expense. Behind her decision to retreat to her parents' home are the threats of the in-laws and the fears and worries of being constantly harassed, or even being replaced by a new wife or

Voice: Husband

'If my wife says that she wants only a son and a daughter, then even if her body does not have the strength to have more children, she will have to produce as many [children] as I will tell her to. There may be fights and bickering over this too. In such situations, the woman may even be beaten up.'

(Gujjar household in rural Dholpur)

a co-wife. The parents, too, wish to see the daughter happy in her marital home, and thus cooperate in carrying out the plan to eliminate female foetuses.

Voice of the in-laws

According to Anita, a female health worker, if a woman has to listen to warnings by her in-laws and husband from morning to night that she has to bear a son, she is under tremendous pressure and she cannot speak about it to anyone. Her own parents also tell her the same thing. She faces constant mental trauma. (urban Kangra)

As significant in decision-making is the psychological impact on a woman without a male child and the way she in which she is treated by the family and the larger society. The instant glorification of the mother and her raised status in the family and community following the birth of a male child reinforces in the minds of all present that a male child is necessary. Sociological research has shown that sons are considered essential by women in a society in which a woman, despite contributing all kinds of labour, remains without any means of her own. The son is her only source of security.

The direct and indirect pressure on women to produce male heirs is immense. The woman not only feels ashamed of producing a girl child, but also loses her self-worth and regains it only after giving birth to a son. If she does not comply with family demands to bear sons, serious repercussions can be desertion by the husband, bringing in of a co-wife, and physical, mental, and emotional ill-treatment.

In many cases, there is contestation—between husband and wife, between couple and in-laws—over family size and sex distribution, and instances where the husband has wanted to keep the girl child. A Balmiki woman's husband in Kangra supported her decision to give birth to a female child despite pressure by parents to abort the foetus. In Morena, when a female infant was killed and dumped into a pond by female members of a Thakur family, the husband, who did not know of the incident, called his wife to identify the body and scolded her for having got rid of the child. In the case of a family in urban Morena, the woman wept when she was made to get rid of female foetuses at the bidding of the husband.

A 28-year-old poor Brahman housewife living in a nuclear household had an abortion after the birth of three daughters. She said, 'I first had three daughters. The fourth time my relatives pressurised me for a boy. They said that I must have a son. My daughters would also say that they do not have a brother. If somebody gave birth to a boy in the neighbourhood, then the girls said that the neighbours had a boy, why could they not have a brother. They would ask me to get a brother... (urban Rohtak)

A few couples have stopped childbearing even if they have only two daughters (as seen in a case from rural Fatehgarh Sahib), while others have had to reluctantly reconcile themselves to a son-less family. Nevertheless, the desire for a son in the family remains paramount, and most couples feel a family is not complete without a son. Even 'only girls' families that are supposedly content with their offspring claim that a 'brother' is necessary for tying *rakhi* (for the protection of sisters) and for arranging their marriages. Many sources in the field data reiterated and supported the fact that families felt the lack of a son when the daughter's marriage was to be arranged. A son/brother is expected to take on the life-long gift-giving responsibilities for the married daughter/sister after the death of the father.

The decision to eliminate a female foetus or child is thus a complex one, with no particular member of the family being the only instigator. It is the outcome of calculations within existing female discriminatory regimes, both past and present. Equally, agency in reproductive decision making cannot be separated from agency in

other areas, whether related to economic, work, or education. In Morena and Dholpur, and even in Rohtak, men often expressed the opinion that women were incapable of taking decisions in general. They claimed that women had little knowledge and understanding of the world and insisted that the man's decision was final. Even if consultation did take place on various matters, the decision of the man would be final. These are clearly backward areas, where women have less access to education, health care, and paid work opportunities, and have limited exposure to the outside world. In Kangra and Rohtak, women who were able to empower themselves economically were seen to have a greater say in all decision making in the household. Home-based work did not bring about the same kind of empowerment in any of the sites. In Punjab, women were vocal in retrospect about their own life experiences and in promising a different life for their living daughters.

A 24-year-old woman, who is from a goldsmith joint family and has been educated up to the high school level, has two daughters, one aged five years and the other two years. Though she said that she is satisfied with two daughters, she admitted to facing a lot of pressure from her parents-in-law to give birth to a son. She said that at the birth of the first daughter, it was fine, but when the second daughter was born, the whole family was sad. She is now stressed about having a son the next time.
(Fatehgarh Sahib)

Yet as far as sex-choice decisions are concerned, it has been shown that there is no guarantee that an educated woman with paid work would necessarily make the decision to keep the girl child. In families in which girls have been saved, this comes about as a result of joint decision making on the part of the couple. Educated working couples living in nuclear families do sometimes take independent decisions that are girl child friendly. Some change is perceptible in sites where the gender gap in education has narrowed and where educated women have higher aspirations for their daughters, which are not limited to fulfilling marriage requirements alone. In such cases, families educate their daughters and sons equally, care for their health needs, and are not averse to the idea of daughters being employed before marriage. Female agency is more visible in such families in decision-making processes, and the parameters for decision making are set by both husband and wife.

Supportive Husband

A woman from a prosperous Jat family, who has studied only up to the primary level and who lives in a nuclear household, said her husband was supportive. She and her husband have only one child, a daughter, who was born after four years of marriage. The woman is unable to conceive again. Her in-laws tried very hard to convince her husband to marry again so as to have a son. The husband refused. He and his wife took this decision together.
(rural Rohtak)

Thus, social change in favour of the girl child has to impact the society and the family, not merely women alone. A change in structural factors, such as equal property rights and equality in other inter-generational transfers, would then interact with the narrowing of the gender gap to produce equal life chances for girls. At the same time, this requires a movement towards less rigid gender roles and expectations such that the role of 'provider' and male responsibility for parental support become more shared with daughters and sisters.

STRUCTURAL CONTEXTS OF ADVERSE SEX RATIOS

The second time I was pregnant I got an abortion because I did not want a daughter.

I went for a sex determination test and found out that it was a daughter. I then expressed a desire to abort the girl, over which my husband and I fought. I told my husband that this society does not value girls and I do not want to give birth to one.

During the abortion I actually felt more pain than when I delivered my first child...

Though I recognise that abortion is a sin, I did not have any other option. The taunts (from society and the in-laws) that I have borne for not having a son, and knowing that women have a low status in society, forced me to abort my child... I told my husband that girls are a burden on the family. It is difficult for them to carry on with their lives, given that people around are very insensitive. They have to face violence in all spheres of life... If a girl commits even a small mistake she and her entire family have to bear the burden of her mistake. When I gave birth to a daughter I was pitied by everyone. They all told me that unfortunately I could not have a son. When I

got pregnant the second time, I told my husband categorically that if I am pregnant with a girl, I will abort it. Knowing the amount of harassment that she will have to go through after her birth, it is much better to die.
(young, well-off, urban woman, Rohtak)

The knowledge of sex selective abortion biased against females was one immediate impetus to this study of declining child sex ratios. Following from this was another initial consideration. While son-preference has long been the orientation of families in much of north India, especially among the upper castes, landed groups, pastoral castes, and Hindus, and female infanticide and daughter neglect have also been long known, things have clearly changed. One explanation that has been suggested is that technologies are now available that enable a more efficient and blatant assertion of an age-old preference. This is evidentially true, but insufficient as a description of the phenomenon or as an explanation. A critical concern remains in terms of understanding ongoing processes and possibilities for change—the question as to what is this desire for a son that translates into actions oriented to the elimination of girls. Do the families not think of the daughter? How and why do people choose to test the sex of a foetus, to abort or not? How and why do they think, plan, and choose their families?

In chapter 3, the methods and strategies of planning families were discussed. It was seen how—particularly in the districts of Kangra, Rohtak, and Fatehgarh Sahib—the desire for sons has combined with the modern rationality of planning families, of planning small families, and of using modern technologies to do so. At the same time, these measures

are combined with a range of ‘traditional’ methods, depending on belief, accessibility, economic situation, and geographic location. What is also evident from both the survey data and the ethnographic material on planning families is that along with sex selective abortion, the deliberate or ‘benign’ neglect of the female child is also a factor in the low sex ratios, at least in Morena and rural Dholpur.

Significantly, agency and decision making in this field is not individual, and not even the prerogative of the couple concerned. A range of kin, particularly the parents of the husband, have an important say at various points in the taking of a particular decision and over the reproductive life cycle of a woman/couple. This influence ranges from vetoing, insisting that their views be respected, to offering practical assistance,

which directs the couple/mother in the direction of sex selective abortion or culpable/benign neglect, or stops the couple/mother from doing so. While the mother/couple may have preferred not to abort and/or to provide care, the study data suggest that more often than not, even when left to herself/themselves, the mother/couple would not have chosen to act differently. While the control or influence of kin varies with rural and urban, and with the district under consideration, depending on the actual presence and proximity of kin, children and marriage are central to individual and familial aspirations and strategies for the future. These are matters that are too important to be left to the 'young'. Decisions and choices pertaining to them are embedded in familial and kinship relations, both in terms of who has the right to intervene and in terms of the issues that will be taken into account.

This highlights the view that critical to our enterprise is an understanding of the habitus that orients agency, dispositions, choices, and strategies of family building. Habitus is in turn a creature of structures, even as strategies, habitus, and structures each reorient the others. In understanding how and why people are acting as they do, we need to move from the immediacy of reproductive decision making to an understanding of the other dimensions of this habitus and the structures that favour and value sons and devalue daughters. One step in this direction could be an examination of the various socio-economic features that make up the structural contexts in which people live.

We selected districts that were the lowest or near-lowest child sex ratio districts within their states, and within these districts we selected sites that offered a range of sex ratios, from 'good' to 'bad'. The survey data indicated a site-differentiated picture within the larger context of adverse child sex ratios. Broadly, the urban sites—where education and health facilities were better and were more availed of more often, girls' educational levels better, non-agricultural employment in general and white-collar, service, and business-based occupations in particular more prevalent, standard of living indices higher, caste and religious composition more diverse, nuclear households more characteristic, and ultrasound and abortion facilities more accessible—showed worse sex ratios (except for Dholpur) than the rural, within the overall 'low' scenario. No simple correlation between the low sex ratios and the dimensions of caste, levels of education, standard of living index, joint household living, women's work participation rate, or male employment has emerged. Thus, none of these features considered alone or together could help us in explaining the low child sex ratio.

A first conclusion drawn from the site-differentiated picture, in keeping with our initial contention, is that we see a change, a shift, rather than a straightforward continuity with tradition. The worst sex ratios were not necessarily found in those districts with the worst histories of female infanticide, and were also found in areas demonstrating the most development. Our ethnographic data also show that son-preference remains, but has been somewhat shaken. Questions are being raised, especially in Punjab but elsewhere too, as to whether sons are good for anything other than the ritual roles that only they can customarily perform, given that often they neither work the land, nor do they have jobs, do not do well in their studies, and get into 'bad habits'. Voices are heard that sons may not provide support for parents in

Manjudevi (Balmiki) is extremely grateful to her eldest daughter, Reena, who looked after her younger brothers and sister, thus enabling Manjudevi to perform paid work outside the home. She said, 'People think daughters to be a burden, but this daughter of mine has always lightened my burden.'
(Palampur, Kangra)

*A house in which a girl is born is blessed.
A girl is necessary as she is a blessing, and
girls are good too. That's why every house
should have a girl. A son, however, is
necessary to continue the family line—in
other words, for existence itself.
(rural Rohtak)*

their old age, because of either lack of inclination or lack of ability. And sons will not provide the care that daughters do. These are important considerations in determining the value of children. Yet, despite such articulations, there is a more thorough elimination of daughters before they are born in Punjab. This situation can only be explained if we accept that what was the obverse of son-preference—

daughter dis-preference—has now become daughter-aversion. Daughter-aversion as an emotion and as a practice has become the common sense and has taken on a life of its own, quite apart from son-preference. What we need to understand now is both son-preference and also the growing unwantedness of daughters.

There is, of course, an important caveat here. When we say this, we do not mean to suggest that this is equally so across regions, sites, classes, castes, individual households, and individuals. Fatehgarh Sahib and Kangra are the worst in ensuring that daughters are not born, and Morena and Dholpur go the farthest in neglecting daughters. It is in the latter contexts as well as in Rohtak that one hears most clearly and most often people expressing the view that a daughter should not have been born, that they have no time for her, and that she is a punishment to parents. Even within these contexts, however, there are people who accept being parents of brother-less daughters, who assert that daughters are better than sons, or who yearn for a daughter. In the first two districts, Morena and Dholpur, where we find clear articulations of discrimination against daughters in nutrition and food, health and education, there is also an assertion of the importance of treating the few daughters born with extra care. As we will see below, the condition of daughters is a sign of family status, and perhaps in situations of few daughters the idea that they are a burden has less significance. Indeed, this is an argument put forward by those who justify sex selective abortion; we did not find this necessarily to be true in practice. The fact that people do also want and care for daughters does not, however, take away from the force of daughter-aversion. It is also difficult to say whether the voices that express the value of daughters belong to the dissenters who exist in any and all cultures and societies, pointing to the possible paths of change, or whether these are reiterations of the common-sense view in their very opposition. Whichever may be the case, the dissenters are important in understanding the direction of social processes.

A second conclusion, along with the first, frames our discussion of the structural contexts of low sex ratios. This is that rather than any one process or structural feature in any one locale, we have to understand particular conjunctions of a complex of processes and features that lead to low child sex ratios. These conjunctions of processes combine with the new opportunities and justifications for sex selection of children to translate into conscious action and strategy, as discussed in the previous section. Several of the features have been long present, while others are new trends. We wish to understand how these features and trends make the habitus and people's strategies, or how the latter in turn are made by the former, acknowledging that some of the new trends are only half articulated. These are experienced without a rationalisation of their implications or meanings. These conjunctions become clearer when we delineate these processes and through the comparisons that we draw between the districts and the study sites and their surroundings, on one hand, and the study sites with each other, on the other hand.

In the following section, we will attempt to identify the various features and trends making for daughter-aversion, such that people through their everyday actions try to ensure a reduction in the number of daughters and an increased presence of sons. Many of these dimensions are well known, but must still be mentioned again, since it is the conjunction of processes that we wish to map out. We will first discuss social and cultural features and then move on to those aspects of the political economy and the infrastructure that we see as critical in the conjunction of the processes that we outline.

4.1 Kinship Structures and Family Formation

In all the five districts and among all the groups that have been examined in this study, a particular form of patrilineal descent, patrilineal inheritance, and patrivirilocal residence is prevalent. Uniformly, across all the communities and sites, patrilineal descent means that daughters cannot continue the family line. Among Hindus, the predominant, if not only, religious group in all the study sites other than Punjab, it is commonly held that only sons can perform important death and ancestral rituals. However, predominantly Sikh Fatehgarh Sahib in Punjab has the lowest declining child sex ratio from among the districts, and in exhibiting this characteristic the district does not differ from its surroundings. In all the sites, the equal inheritance of family property by all sons not only remains the dominant ideology, but it also remains the practice. A few cases were cited in Haryana where long-married daughters have demanded a share in natal property. Many widows have long claimed rights in this area, which is also known for its particularly harsh and sexually aggressive treatment of women seen to cross social bounds. In Himachal Pradesh, daughters are said to have rights to inheritance, and display a slight bilateral trend (inheritance from both parents) as compared to its surroundings. This is not true of Kangra, however, which is culturally close to and influenced by Punjab, a factor that marks out this district from its surroundings. However, even then we did see or were told of daughters who had been given an inheritance. These instances were few, but they seemed to have caused less angst than did such cases in the other states. This may have something to do with the inheritance being housing rather than land, of being of lesser value than elsewhere, or because of the proximity or cultural influence of groups where inheritance rules are more flexible.

In all the sites, sons' rights to parental property are coupled with the responsibility of care of parents in their old age and of continuing protection of and gifts to married sisters. Property rights tie in with a critical socio-cultural norm and practice—*patrivirilocal marriage*. Among rural Sikhs and rural Hindus in north India, other than in parts of Himachal Pradesh, this is combined with village exogamy. Thus, on marriage a daughter/woman becomes a member of another family/household, located at a distance of at least a couple of miles, and which has rights over her productive and care labour, as well as her reproductive capacities. While among all urban groups, the daughter may remain in the same town after marriage, it is unlikely that she will stay in the same neighbourhood. Among Muslims, cross-cousin marriage can diminish, if not eliminate the distance, but this practice is not predominant despite being the ideal preference. Thus, among all groups in this study, residential and descent practices combine to be expressed in the well-known idea that a daughter is a temporary member

Women are entitled to serve their parents-in-law and husband and to preserve their honour. Men are entitled to serve their parents and to receive their share of the family property.
(Thakur man, rural Morena)

Neither the family nor the village nor the Thakur samaj has ever witnessed a woman claiming her share of family property. Because no woman wishes to destroy her relations with her family members. The natal family members support a woman all through her life, but her in-laws do not. Sometimes the in-laws give advice to the daughter-in-law to demand her share from her natal family, and then leave her in the lurch once the share is procured. Then the daughter-in-law can neither go to her natal family for support and her in-laws are anyway no good to her. Why should the natal family support her after this?
(Morena)

Marriage is like a debt. The earlier one is free of it, the better it is.
(man, Dholpur)

If a girl is not married, people talk ill of her and might even force her to end her life.'
(Morena)

and resident of her natal family. The returns of spending on her cannot be care or support in old age, whatever may be the other (ritual, spiritual, status) benefits.

Patrivirilocal marriage also means that giving property to a daughter is seen as giving property to another family. With declining per capita availability of land and recent changes in law giving daughters equal rights in joint family property, the limited family property is to be further 'protected' from outsiders. This emerges most strongly among the upper castes such as Thakurs, among others such as Jats and Gujjars, and among urban Hindu and Sikh propertied castes in the districts of Fatehgarh Sahib and Rohtak. It appears that a short-term response to the new law granting equal rights in property is to not have any daughters at all. Although a positive step towards greater equality in gender rights, this law is leading to increased contentiousness over property inheritance. In Fatehgarh Sahib, accounts were heard of property being transferred to daughters and then being transferred back to sons/ brothers. The costs involved in the dual transfer exacerbated feelings against daughters. Although legally mandated, a daughter's inheritance of family property remains, to a large extent, unacceptable, often resulting in the alienation of a daughter who dares claim her share.

We will return to the issue of land and property again. At this point, it may be noted that post-marital residence practices seem to determine the lack of change in inheritance practices. It may also be argued that residential practices, together with the issue of support, are the most critical of socio-cultural determinants in the value of daughters.

Among all the groups and in all the locales that were examined in this study, *marriage is socially compulsory*, especially for girls, reflected in both the study figures and in the views of informants. Among Hindus, it is the one rite of passage that all women must customarily undergo, and the performance of *kanyadaan* by parents earns them religious merit. Not only among Hindus, but also in all other communities, the primary familial and social duty of parents towards daughters is to arrange their marriage. Further, their own status and the daughter's happiness and status requires that it be the best possible match for a household in their socio-economic group, following intra-caste endogamy, clan exogamy, and other social norms.

4.2 Marriage and Dowry Practices

The above discussion leads us to the most common factor articulated by the study informants, and also cited in analyses, to explain the unwantedness of daughters. Parents must spend time and money on ensuring a daughter the best possible wedding and marriage within the caste-class differentiated marriage market. This is demanded

of them by their own beliefs and by community and social norms. Further, compulsory and normatively correct marriage and patrilineal locality have combined with the increase and spread of the upper-caste practice of dowry and of expensive marriages, linking dowry to status. Groups that were earlier not insistent on observing dowry have denied this past practice. As informant after informant has reiterated, from her birth it is the marriage of a daughter with which the parents are obsessed. Dowry and a relatively expensive marriage cannot be avoided because a marriage must take place, and it cannot take place without dowry. In this we also see the continuing, if not more belligerent, assertion of caste identities and divisions, and it can be suggested that this is a factor in the unwantedness of daughters who have to be married correctly.

There are clear differences in the nature and style of marriage and in the volume of dowry between urban and rural, and by class, caste, occupation of parents, education, and status aspirations. More elaborate weddings and more lavish dowries are expected among the urban, upper-caste, upper-class families and in those instances where the groom is better educated and is employed in a government post. Not only does this iterate a differentiation of the marriage market, but it also engenders the feeling among people that they must reach far beyond their means in marrying their daughters, though they reduce their expectations regarding the 'match'. Even among the poor and among groups wherein dowry demands remains low, marriage of the daughter is compulsory and the wedding costs fall on the bride's family. While some Scheduled Caste informants in all the survey sites said that dowry was not a concern as they knew they could not give or receive it, others pointed to problems that they had faced. Thus, across the board, marriage and dowry were central to the discourse from the moment a pregnancy occurred, and certainly when a daughter was born, making her into a burden for the family.

One feature, though not articulated much by respondents in the survey sites, should be noted regarding Hindu upper-caste marriage, a feature that has spread particularly with the demand for dowry. This is the notion of hypergamy—the norm that bride-givers are lower than bride-takers, if not at the start, then certainly from the time that the engagement takes place. The bride's family members have to bow their heads to the latter, and continuously give the groom's family gifts. Particularly among the upper castes such as the Thakurs (who have long practised dowry), daughters are said to thereby lower their parents' dignity, adding to the aversion to daughters.

The hegemonic character of the notion of the daughter as burden is reflected in the denial—even in the more 'traditional' of the study sites, Morena and Dholpur—of the merit of *kanyadaan* (the gifting of the virgin, the central rite in a Hindu wedding) as being reason enough to want a daughter. This is a shift from even a decade ago; in recent years in neighbouring districts the ritual merits of having a daughter were cited. This shift was also evident in cases where boys and their parents no longer thought that the pleasure of the annual ritual of *rakhi*—affirming the brother-sister bond—was reason enough to have a daughter/sister. The devaluation of the ritual merit of having a daughter seems to have been accentuated with the inflation of wedding and dowry costs and with the increasing compulsion on a woman's natal family to give a lifetime of prestations to her marital family. This phenomenon, described by analysts as extended dowry, was found to have spread in all the study sites and was remarked on, particularly among the urban, better-off, and upper-caste respondents.

4.3 Inter-generational Transfer of Resources

The institution of marriage and trends in marriage and consanguinity in the context of the patrilineal, patrilocal family have implications for the inter-generational transfer of resources. The last is critical in influencing the parents' attitude towards daughters and in shaping the decisions made by families regarding the sex distribution of children. In all the sites, almost by definition, the inter-generational transfer of resources is critical in expressing and defining the relative value of sons and daughters. First, as already indicated, daughters are not expected to support their parents materially, and certainly not married daughters, who move away to become members of another family. Second, this normative denial of support from daughters is held along with the normative assertion that daughters must only receive, not give. Demands for lavish dowries and rising expectations of elaborate weddings for daughters means a greater investment in the very process of 'giving them away'.

After all that had been spent on ensuring the best match and the best wedding for a daughter, there is no surety that her marriage will be a happy and lasting union. In all the sites, there was talk of married daughters who had been harassed by in-laws and had returned to their natal home. In Kangra, Dholpur, and Morena, there were such cases in the field sites, where support was more readily available from parents than from brothers, but a tinge of resentment was not absent in a number of these instances. Not only was support from daughters/sisters not to be expected, but also continuing support to them could become necessary. While it is difficult to delineate any trend in marital breakdown, people expressed a sense that it is increasing, such that support to separated or divorced daughters appears as a constant possibility. From the side of the husband's family, marital breakdown is linked to the fact that girls are getting married at a later age (more on this below) and are being educated more, which makes them less pliable and less 'ready to adjust' in their conjugal homes. The woman's parents worried about the material burden of the married daughter who returns to stay, as well as the loss of face and status in the community. Their concern was not, however, only material. It also had to do with the daughter's happiness and their own emotional investment in this matter. There was an overwhelming concern for a daughter's well-being in her in-laws' home and her husband's treatment of her, most clearly articulated in Kangra and Fatehgarh Sahib. One woman in Kangra even said that she did not want a daughter as she feared her daughter would go through the same difficulties and harassment that she herself had faced, implying that this was the lot of a married woman.

4.3.1 *The Implications of the Rising Age at Marriage*

An important shift in the inter-generational transfer of resources is linked to the most striking change in marriage practices in all the districts—the clear rise in the mean age at marriage for both men and women. The implications of and the factors involved in the rising age at marriage for men will emerge in the course of the discussion, the focus here being on women. Even in Morena and Dholpur, where 37–48 per cent rural women in the samples between the ages of 15–19 are married (more than 50 per cent in both districts and above 25 per cent in Rohtak, according to RCH II), the mean age at marriage of women has risen, as the discussion on marriage in chapter 2 of this report demonstrated. While the highest median ages at marriage are in Kangra,

Fatehgarh Sahib, and Rohtak, in that order, it was noted that the rise in the age at marriage across age cohorts was between 2–4 years in all the sites. The rise has been more in the urban than in the rural, being closely associated with the spread of female education and the trend of women studying until higher and higher levels, particularly in Dholpur and Morena. It may be recalled that not only have dowry and wedding expenses risen more in the urban than in the rural, but also by and large urban sex ratios are worse than rural.

It may appear strange to discuss the rising age at marriage in the context of the declining sex ratio, particularly when so many Indian girls continue to be married as children, and it remains an issue on the agenda of campaigns for women's rights and emancipation. However, the ethnographic data show clearly that marriage age is a lens through which daughters and the gendered inter-generational transfer of resources are viewed. At the same time, it is also true that local rationalisations linking sex selective abortion and age at marriage are ambiguous, with the latter being tied to other intermediate factors. This was especially evident in Kangra (which has a higher age at marriage than that of the state in which it is located, Himachal Pradesh), and in urban Rohtak.

What are the implications of the rising age at marriage of daughters? Other than linkages that informants make with marital breakdown, in the immediacy this means that expenditure on a daughter has risen in terms of the sheer lengthening of the period for which her natal family must support her, giving her food and clothes if nothing else. As a child grows, the requirements of these basic needs become more expensive. In contemporary times, educational costs are added to this, particularly among urban residents and among middle- and upper-income households, and especially so in the three northern-most districts. If the girl is to go to school or college, this means a further increase in the expenditure on clothes, which have to be of a better quality and also of a greater number. Later marriage also makes for a larger dowry.

Investment in a daughter's education has also become important in the search for the most eligible match—an educated boy/man in a secure, non-agricultural, government job, and, among the elite, one who also owns land. While in Morena and Dholpur, primary school—and at the most middle school—is considered sufficient for the majority, in Kangra, Rohtak, and Sirhind, this level of education will not be enough to ensure the best match. In all these districts, a careful balance is sought between the level of education that will ensure an eligible groom, but not so much that an equivalent match becomes unaffordable. A good match is considered important for the daughter's future happiness, for the son's marriage, and for the family's status within the community and its social network. Thus, educating daughters can bring in indirect returns, but the social compulsion to ensure a good marriage for her leaves her parents with little choice in the matter. Thus, increasingly the institution and social practices of marriage mean more resources expended on a daughter before, at, and after her marriage.

All of this insinuates that a daughter is a certainty of economic loss, though she may indirectly bring social or spiritual gain or emotional satisfaction. This rests, of course, on the assumption and hope that sons/men will earn and support their parents, and

that the labour of daughters/women is not paid work, and hence cannot be acknowledged as such. In Kangra, the rise in age at marriage and education has enabled unmarried daughters to enter paid non-agricultural employment, and this was spoken of by the respondents, but the significance of this for the household budget was mostly denied, even if the daughters' important role in contributing towards their own dowry was accepted. The aspect of material support by sons will be discussed later.

Now girls are also being educated. Earlier people used to say, 'What is the purpose of educating girls?' But now they say, 'What is the use of educating girls so much?'

Both boys and girls should be educated . . . Since boys have to run the family, it is essential that they should be educated enough to be independent. If one has to send a boy to a distant place for higher education, it hardly matters. But in the case of girls, there is no need to spend much on their education, as they have to cater to domestic needs after marriage.
(Fat man, rural Fatehgarh Sahab)

Girls should not be given higher education because it spoils their mind (dimag sad jaate hain) . . . they are manageable only with a low level (of education) . . . The government is encouraging women, but it will have serious repercussions . . . Instead, there should be stress on love in the marital relationship. If you give freedom to women, they dance on your head and think of themselves as divine lights (khuda ka noor).
(man, schoolteacher, Morena)

A dissenting voice

Even though I was not able to study, I now realise how important education is. Hence, we came and settled in the city. All three of my daughters go to school. I do not want them to be left behind like me. Hence, I am getting them educated.
(woman, urban Dholpur)

4.4 The Costs of Education

In Kangra, Rohtak, and Fatehgarh Sahab, the gender gap in schooling has shrunk sharply. Most villages have a government primary school, or there is one located in a neighbouring village. However, middle and high schools were absent in the Rohtak villages, with girls having to commute for further education. There has been a sharp increase in the number of private schools, even at the primary level, in all the districts. The upper castes and richer households send their children to private schools in Haryana, a pattern also found elsewhere, such that the government schools are left to Scheduled Caste and poorer households.

In three of the study districts in particular, daughters are being educated. Nevertheless, there is a tendency in the rural sites to send daughters to government schools rather than private schools, though this is less prevalent in urban sites, as the data on education in chapter 2 demonstrated. In Kangra, gender discrimination in type of schooling was acknowledged by some of the respondents, precisely where female education and literacy levels are the best among all the study districts. Tutors will be hired for sons rather than for daughters. In Rohtak, Kangra, and Fatehgarh Sahab, it was also found that proportionately more girls are being sent to college than boys. In Fatehgarh Sahab, in particular, there are signs that sons are expected to join the family enterprise in agriculture or business or to find a salaried job, and are distinctly less interested and capable in studies. In Kangra, but also in Morena, there were cases of parents who had moved

to the town in order to enable not only sons but also daughters to study. Often this was done under pressure from the mother, who wanted to ensure that her daughter did not suffer like she had. These were, of course, the households that had the economic means necessary for undertaking such action—land and a business/ salaried job. For middle-income and rich households, as already mentioned, education of daughters has become both a must and a burden, in terms of both the costs and the fears of the daughter 'losing her way' (see below). In Morena and Dholpur, discrimination in education remains high due to the lack of properly running schools, particularly high schools, in the immediate vicinity. Rather than sending daughters off to study at a distance, they will be withdrawn from school and married off.

4.5 The Burden of Sexuality

The unattached sexuality of unmarried nubile daughters has always been a worry and was long reflected in the twin practices of low age at marriage and restrictions on the appearance and movements of young women. Particularly among those groups wherein the latter option was not possible, as women's labour and 'outside' earnings were important for household livelihoods, early marriage and a socially acknowledged sexual partner were important. Parents could transfer the burden of a woman's sexuality to her in-laws. These groups are among those who are most resistant to a later marriage age, reflected in the figures for Rohtak, Morena, and Dholpur. Other than possible violence to which she may have been subjected, any scandal or rumour of a sexual nature attached to a girl could ruin the chances of a 'correct and proper' marriage. The material and sexual burden, and the social and ritual stigma of having an unmarried daughter at home, would fall on the family.

It is very important to marry the girl early in today's times. The boy can marry at any time, but not the girl. If a boy and a girl are in a relationship and this relationship breaks or does not work out, then the man can still get married, but for the girl it is difficult as her honour is questioned. Even in the event of a divorce, one has to worry about the girl's future.
(middle-class Scheduled Caste woman, urban Rohtak)

Concerns regarding the chastity and sexual safety of young girls, the threats to it, and ways of ensuring it were heard from respondents from all groups in all the study sites except Fatehgarh Sahib. Both in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, restrictions on the public movements of women have been—and are—much less than in the other districts/states. Yet, especially in Kangra, fears are said to have increased, and the rising age at marriage and higher education are said to be the reasons for the increased threat. Nubile daughters going to college must pass through roads and bazaars, places where they may be—and are—harassed, or meet men who will seduce them. In Haryana and Rohtak in particular, there is talk of how unmarried, unemployed, and idle men lounge around in colleges and universities, in public places, 'teasing' the women who pass by. The dangers are said to have further increased with the large numbers of young and not so young unmarried men, men with no outlet for their sexuality. As already discussed, among the middle and upper classes and castes in Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, and Haryana, the option of not educating daughters and keeping them at home is no longer possible, though it is the route taken in Dholpur and Morena.

A young girl is like a vine or a climbing plant. Before one realises it, she is grown up. One does not even get time to think. People turn their evil eye on the girl from the time when she is little. The responsibility of having a daughter is also tremendous. On the other hand, if it is a son one need not worry.

We see in the above situation the *unintended consequences of social action and piecemeal reform strategies*. Stopping child marriage is unequivocally desirable. However, with other aspects of marriage practices—caste, kinship, descent and inheritance norms—remaining unchanged, marriage at a later age may have added to women's autonomy but has made daughters more of a burden.

4.6 Spousal Squeeze

One more aspect of marriage trends must be mentioned here, which is more an outcome of than a factor in the declining child sex ratios. Besides other social and economic factors that may be causes, demographics and the nature of the marriage market mean that men are getting married later, particularly in the three northern districts. Not only are they getting married later, but the possibility of never marrying also

looms large for men who are not 'eligible', in which rural location in itself can be a factor. A wife is necessary not only for fulfilling sexual desires and for performing housework chores, but in rural areas women's labour in animal husbandry, agriculture, and related work can also be important. Three social practices have emerged in coping with this situation, the first two being at the level of individual or familial strategy. The first is the return of polyandry among groups in these districts that had practised it earlier.

Anand and Rajwanti are from a rich Jat family. They are searching for brides for their three sons. They said, 'We want them to get married, but no one approaches us. If someone comes, he or she demands a groom who is in service. The girls of the present age do not feel happy getting married within the village. We also have little land. Otherwise perhaps their marriages would have taken place.'
(rich Jats, rural Rohtak)

I wonder if we will find girls at all for my two sons. This is happening because people don't want daughters. If we had a daughter, we would be worried about her wedding and dowry. I should not say if I had a daughter, because my husband's elder brother has a daughter and the entire family is worried about her dowry and wedding. At times I feel that it is necessary to have a daughter. I feel at the same time that it is a relief that I don't have a daughter or else I would have worried about her all my life.
(woman, Palampur, Kangra)

The second is the 'importing' of wives from other regions, who may be of another religion and caste, and who certainly are of a different language and food culture. This is most evident in Rohtak villages from among the field sites. While there has been a long history to this practice, the scale of the phenomenon is now entirely different, with important implications for future generations. These wives are brought in by brokers (often earlier 'imports'). Women are incorporated into the caste and household of the husband, without the permission of their natal homes. Implications for children born of these marriages lie in the future.

The third is the perspective we throw on community behavioural patterns, again expressed most clearly in Haryana, but also seen in Punjab. This is the strong reaction, endorsed by informants, to inter-caste, non-arranged marriages, which are seen to violate rules of village and clan exogamy, caste endogamy, and control of the family and the community over marriage. While these episodes are reported widely, they cannot be seen as a simple matter of continuity of tradition, for there is also a history of non-arranged, inter-caste, 'improper' marriages in all these districts. Both the numbers of these marriages and the reactions that they are provoking are quantitatively and qualitatively different from what past records indicate. One reading of the

strong and violent response may be that in a context of spousal squeeze and in an increasingly competitive marriage market, communities in general and the men of the community in particular are asserting a control over potential wives.

4.7 Land, Work, and Employment

Inter-generational transfer of resources, including in the areas of education and eligibility in the marriage market, is closely tied to trends in work and employment, which is discussed in this section. It will be pertinent here to draw attention to the fact that the gender development indices of our selected low(est) sex ratio districts are much lower than that of the states of which they are a part. Furthermore, the female work participation rates between 1971 and 1991 were lower than those for the state, though in 2001 they were higher due to the decision taken by the Census authorities to now include animal husbandry under the category of main work, whereas it had been largely marginal before. One may speculate whether the 2001 sex ratio figures reflected in part the lower 'work' value of women in these districts.

Across all the study sites, the proportion of women who gave ‘work’ as their main occupation was low, with no correlation between lower sex ratio and lower work participation rates. We also saw in chapter 2 the significant difference made by housewives who reported economic activities such as dairying as subsidiary work and the general tendency towards keeping their economically gainful activities invisible. Again, one can speculate that in all our low sex ratio districts women’s work participation rates were below a threshold value, which could have changed the worth accorded to them. Uniformly across the sites one found men and women falling into the expected designations of the earning, working breadwinner and the housewife/unpaid worker/burden. Women’s unpaid work was accorded low worth, and restrictions were imposed on paid work that women could do. These restrictions were tied to norms of the sexual division of labour and of women’s work responsibilities (in and around the home), restrictions on women’s movements in ‘public spaces (in Morena, Dholpur, and Rohtak), desired categories of work, expectations that men would be the breadwinners, and associated vulnerabilities of masculinity. In Morena and Rohtak, there were clear articulations that women’s paid work threatened the gender order and familial authority, and hence should not be encouraged. Thus, not only were women an economic burden, but also they were to be kept as such. However, this was in a context where the gap between aspirations and realities of male employment was increasing simultaneously with the gap in the imputed economic contribution of men and women to the household budget (reflected, for instance, also in the increasing wage gap between men and women workers in Haryana).

4.7.1 Livelihoods and Aspirations

The sense of women’s low economic worth and their contribution has to be placed within the sense of economic vulnerability and precariousness that was articulated by informants cutting across districts, castes, and classes. For the (relatively) rich, there was a gap between aspirations and concrete possibilities, the uncertainty of a future based on agriculture or employment. For the poor, there was a gap between subsistence requirements and returns to labour. The need for earning men rather than earning women was reified through the latter’s lower incomes and restricted mobility.

In all these districts, land is increasingly scarce and insufficient. Kangra, the district with the lowest sex ratio in Himachal Pradesh, also has a smaller average landholding and per capita income than the state as a whole; it is also the least agriculturally oriented of the study districts. Soil fertility and water/irrigation in Fatehgarh Sahib are much poorer than in other districts in Punjab, while costs of inputs remain equally high, if not higher. The risks of crop failure and indebtedness are constant threats. Decline in soil fertility—due to over-cultivation, excessive use of fertilisers and weedicides, and increased salination with a decline in the water table—was visible in Rohtak. Dholpur and Morena are the most agriculturally oriented in terms of occupation, more

I give my wife an equal right. But I am also scared that if somebody gets to see, then he will go to the office and say that he also washes clothes and utensils at home. And they would start making fun of me. As such there isn’t a hassle if they do so. But the problem is that one cannot hear the world speak about us.
(man, Rohtak town)

I consider only paid work as important. The chores that women do in the house are not work. If women don’t work at home, where else will they work?
(Brahman man, Rohtak town)

The work done by the wife comes under her duty of selfless service. To take care of the house and the children is the duty of the wife. The girls at their parents’ house do or do not work of their own will, but when they come to the in-laws’ house it becomes imperative for them to look after the household work. In my parents’ house, not much emphasis was given to daughters working at home.
(urban Morena)

Tulsiram Kori refused to acknowledge that the women of his family also work for wages. 'Though the women of other families go out to work as hired labourers, the women of our family do not do so,' he said. The women interrupted and questioned him. 'Why do you say that? Do we not go? We do go for labour,' they said. At this Mangi (Tulsiram's mother) tried to save the situation. 'They do work in our fields . . . What will we save if the family members don't work and we have to hire the labourers?' she said. Tulsiram's cousin then explained, 'If a member (a man) of the family gets a labour contract for a field, the entire family—wife, children, parents—work on it . . . that money is not divided . . . the malik (one who had got the contract) gets the money . . . he keeps it and spends on the requirements of the household.'
(rural Morena)

If I were just a housewife, I wouldn't have had much of a status except within the four walls of the house. But now I am a teacher. I am respected outside and my husband also respects me. I also earn and have the right to veto decisions in my house, which I have built. If I have the opportunity to choose, I would still choose teaching. My earnings are saved. Every month I deposit a thousand rupees at the post office. We make all expenditure plans together. We do not do anything without asking each other.
(urban Dholpur)

'A woman can only do a "desk job". I am determined that come what may I will make her [daughter] qualified to earn.' She saw education and employment as a security net in the case of desertion by a husband later on.
(Muslim woman, urban Dholpur)

than the other three districts, but with much poorer quality soil and a terrain that is difficult to cultivate. To this picture may be added the highly skewed distribution of land and the growing fragmentation of landholdings in all the sites. The sense of insufficiency of land cuts across the study sites, and even the largest landowners talk of the need of other income sources, this due to the uncertainties of agriculture.

A sense of an agrarian crisis with implications for family aspirations and family-building strategies was palpable. This sense of crisis was reflected clearly in articulations in the agriculturally richer sites of Fatehgarh Saheb and Rohtak of the desire to limit heirs, certainly to exclude daughters and to prevent possible diversion of property and wealth to them, but even to limit male heirs. In Morena and Dholpur, landed and upper-caste respondents were torn between the rationality of reducing the number of heirs, on the one hand, and the greater power that accrued through numbers (in the fields and through hands to use force if need be in village politics), on the other hand. More sons, however, were possible at the present times only if daughters were fewer, and even here among younger families norms are changing.

Aspirations in this context also put greater pressure on the need for, and increased the value of, non-agricultural work and occupational multiplicity within a household, though levels of men engaged in 'work' were higher in the rural than in the urban sites in all the districts other than Kangra. The growth of service occupations in both rural and urban Kangra is striking, even while it dominates male (and female) aspirations in all the sites. The desired white-collar, service, and government jobs require prior investment in education, as well as possibly in social networks and 'purchase' of certificates and recruitment approvals. Given behavioural norms and notions of the public world as a male world, restrictions on inter-gender interaction, and the insistence on the role of the male breadwinner, this investment is best directed at men. They are more likely to get such work

and are also more likely to bring their earnings to the natal home, unlike women. The levels of male unemployment, including in the more developed districts, reinforce the insecurity and the sense that investment should be directed at sons rather than daughters. Concerns about how sons were growing up and developing, the dangers of 'bad habits' to which sons might fall prey, and the future prospects of sons in the employment and marriage markets were voiced particularly in the more developed districts in the study sample.

The growing importance and role of non-agricultural employment in the family budget has another effect—the further devaluation of women's labour and contribution to agriculture. This view was heard in all the sites despite the fact that the diversion of men to other work could mean that women had to perform a larger proportion of the

household's agricultural labour. In Punjab, of course, there has been a definite withdrawal of women from agricultural work and their restriction to housework and home-based enterprises.

The general sense of the difficulty faced by men in getting employment and securing livelihoods has been congruent with the aversion to daughters, who are considered a further drain on family resources in this situation. Expenses on their dowry, marriage, education, and upbringing become all the more unbearable, and combine with the social worries that they inherently carry. Economic aspirations reify the idea that sons are necessary for this rather than daughters. Informants, even in Fatehgarh Sahib where the steps to ensure the birth of a son went farthest, acknowledged that sons may not get work, that the work may not match the aspirations of the sons and the family, and that the support provided by sons may not be in keeping with their earnings or expectations. Yet there is some probability of a son earning and supporting his parents while the latter cannot hope or desire this from a daughter.

I work when I get work, but sometimes when I am fired or when I cannot find a job I stay unemployed for four to five months. I do not have enough land to hire labourers to work in my fields, and so the family works on the farms. (Ashok, whose drinking, which he does not talk of, had impoverished his family.)
(Jat truck driver, rural Rohtak)

4.7.2 Migration

The development of the road and power infrastructure in these districts, excluding Morena, has increased the possibilities of local, rural, non-agricultural employment as well as increased the likelihood of men commuting to a nearby town, particularly in Rohtak and Dholpur. However, with the agrarian crisis and insufficient employment available locally, both white collar and manual, distress labour migrants have increased in numbers, as have short-term and long-term migrants into and out of the study districts. In Morena, Dholpur, and Rohtak, there is a history of men joining the army, the wife and children remaining with the man's parents, and he joining them on his annual leave and on retirement. The growth in white-collar male migration with longer periods of absence and with increased distances of migration is most apparent in Kangra. In all the districts, there were examples of such migration, where either the man alone was absent or was joined by his children and/or wife. Women's migration largely meant accompanying husband or parents, though they could also be engaged in independent, paid work post-migration, as seen among the migrants from other districts and states.

Despite all that has been said earlier, it was remarked that daughters, even after marriage, were valued for the emotional and physical care that they provided parents, especially mothers. Return trips to the natal home of married daughters at festivals, rituals, and times of sickness are known to be critical to the well-being not only of daughters, but also their mothers. This was one factor in mothers' desire for daughters, overriding the factors that made for daughter-aversion. That more women did not speak of this longing for daughters or feel it, however, has to be noted. People expressed the view that daughters were married as close as possible to the natal home, and some also suggested even closer than what would have been considered normatively correct in the past. The survey data indicate that there may be truth to this claim. However, one may wonder about the implications of the migration of married women, when they move alone or accompany their husbands to distant places of work. This matter

requires further investigation: to what extent has migration meant an 'increase' in the time between visits and the distance between natal and conjugal homes for married daughters? Long-distance migration makes it difficult to draw on the productive or care labour and emotional support of daughters, detracting from their worth. Informants suggested that, in fact, this labour was not so easily available or tapped. Further, patrivirilocal norms mean that when migrants visit the 'native' place, the husband's family is expected to get priority. At the same time, this migration can mean more material support from sons or its opposite—a decline in remittances over time, an attenuation of emotional bonds due to distance, and increased expenses at the place of work.

A Scheduled Caste respondent in Fatehgarh Saheb who has six daughters did not breastfeed them for long because she needed to return to her factory job. She said that if she had a son, she would have taken time off from work and looked after him properly.

In the case of a Jat Sikh woman in Fatehgarh Saheb with two daughters followed by a son, the second daughter in particular got no breast milk, while the son was fed for four to five years. The son was pampered by the family and his physical care was of paramount importance, making him a spoilt child.

On being asked why she did not give her weak young daughter milk to strengthen her, the woman said, 'We have no money. Why should we borrow money from others to feed these girls? After all, they have to be married and sent away! Had it been a son, I would have given him milk even if I had to borrow money. What is the use of borrowing money for feeding these girls? They will grow up sooner if they are given milk. Then one has to hurry up with the marriage preparations too.' (Thakur, rural Dholpur).

Reena and Beena Balmiki have their food only after everyone else in the family has finished eating. They said that their mother wants them to get used to the habit of eating last, as after marriage they might have to face a situation where they would have to eat last. It was observed that everyone in the family had curd but for these two girls. When they were asked why this was so, they said that Beena did not take curd and that Reena had saved her share for dinner. (Palampur, Kangra)

4.8 Access to Health Care and Nutrition

Ultrasound scans of pregnant women and sex selective abortion are the medical facilities most easily available to women, but in Morena and Dholpur even these are put aside in favour of deliberate and benign neglect of the girl infant and child. Practices around food, nutrition, and medical care have combined to affect child sex ratios with what appears as an influence independent of the other aspects we have discussed so far. Discrimination against girls and women is often blatant, and also frequently disguised. Boys are said to be weaker and hence in need of more nutrition; men supposedly need replenishment as their bodies labour to feed the family. In one case, a poor employed woman took less time off from work to care for and feed a baby girl than a baby boy. Except among urban, middle-class households where the family eats together, women and girls are secondary in food intake and nutrition by the mere fact that they eat last. The ICDS programme of the government was meant to improve the nutrition levels of mother and child. In the study districts, if the programme is running at all, it is found operating in Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Punjab, where neglect of and discrimination against the girl once born is least, though not absent. At the same time, in 1995–96, 89 per cent children in Himachal Pradesh suffered mild to moderate malnutrition.

Access to health facilities depends on a combination of factors: the presence of, proximity to, and cost of facilities, the availability of household funds, gender-differentiated decisions regarding priorities in household expenditure, and the physiological needs of boys and girls, men and women. In all the states, there is a clear absence of public health facilities, most pronouncedly in the rural sites, thus increasing costs to the patient in using the latter and also increasing dependence on private medical care. While access to the formal health care system is better in many parts of Punjab, here too there has been a deterioration of the public health delivery system, with a decline in government expenditure. However, the absence is

most marked in Morena and Dholpur. In all the villages where they existed, primary health centres were often closed, except when official vaccination or family planning programmes were on. For the rural residents of these districts, even cheap facilities can mean an expense not easily accepted, such as fares to commute to another village or nearby town and the loss of a day's work/wages in visiting these places.

Thus, decisions have to be made as to whom the money should be spent on, and in this decision girls and women are given short shrift. Assertions were heard that girls are strong and will survive, but boys are weak and hence need extra care. 'Girls have to learn early to survive.' Women and girls were given medical attention only if the illness continued or worsened. In all the sites, senior kin and the husband seemed more easily to suggest that this expense was unwarranted. There was evidence of conflict between husband and wife, and between mother and senior kin/in-laws, over the treatment of a daughter and the care of a sick female child. Of course, particularly in urban Kangra, Sirhind, and Rohtak, households tended to be nuclear, so the immediate medical decisions often fell on the couple, with the purse strings usually in the hands of the husband.

Socio-cultural and economic trends are making a greater investment in daughters socially necessary but burdensome and economically irrational. In this environment, and given the official emphasis on family planning, individuals and families have adopted the ultrasound test and sex selective abortion, made easily available by private medical practitioners and marketers, to avoid having daughters. Other earlier modes of discrimination in nutrition, medical attention, and care are found in places less obvious or noticeable, being very much a part of common sense practice, and in other cases being blatant, but justified through local notions of physiology and value. Even though sons are no guarantee of a good future, the burden of daughters has become increasingly unbearable, and hence avoidable.

Rajpur has a primary health care centre. But whenever I went to that place, I found it locked. When I talked to the villagers about the ANM, other than one person, everyone else said that the nurse rarely comes. I asked them to inform me if and when the nurse comes, so that I could go to meet her. But we have not met till now. The ANM keeps a record of the children... Therefore, whenever a check-up is held, some paperwork has to be completed. When I filled the form myself, I found that no work on health-related issues had been done. The children had not received all the vaccinations. There is no child in the village who has been fully vaccinated.
(field investigator, rural Morena)

4.9 Why has the Shortage of Women not led to a Decline in Dowry?

We turn finally to a conundrum posed by various scholars, particularly some economists. It was propounded that with the demographic imbalance, the scarcity of women and the spousal squeeze would lead to a decline in dowry and to an increase in women's value. Most ethnographic evidence belies these two optimistic projections. In a differentiated marriage market, parents try to push their daughters and themselves to the higher levels of this market. Even in states like Haryana, which has a severe spousal shortage, 'suitable boys' continue to command large dowries. Thus, the effect on dowry is differentiated; men who are facing difficulty in finding brides are forced to compromise with dowry norms, and in extreme cases even forgo dowry completely. In cases where men are 'importing' brides from poor, far-off states, they take care of the entire marriage expenditure and expect no dowry. At the same time, men who are at the top of the socio-economic hierarchy in terms of preferred credentials for marriage are able to command dowries even in regions with a female deficit.

The devaluation of daughters/women cannot be offset by the shortage of wives—for they are considered ‘degraded goods’. Although a few women may be able to command the best grooms, they and their parents still end up paying a price in the form of a hefty dowry and forever subordinating their families to ‘superior’ in-laws. Differentiated and gendered opportunities in the modern economy continue to add value to sons, even to undutiful sons, as seen clearly in the case of Punjab. Here, despite serious levels of disaffection, a family consisting of a single son is considered more desirable than one with a daughter or daughters. As pointed out earlier, the slow change in gender roles and expectations continues to place the responsibility of providing old-age support for the parents on the son. This expectation is one major reason for higher and continued investments in son(s) aimed at making them economically and socially successful.

Another expectation was that the scarcity of women could lead to an increase in violence against them. This is reflected in the greater concern of parents over the security and safety of girls and young women. There is some evidence of younger (school-going) girls, who are less able to defend themselves, being targets of molestation and rape. Additional evidence is in the form of the tightening of the noose around young couples who dare to choose their own marriage partners. Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh have seen an increase in violence against women in the form of ‘honour crimes’. In most of the fieldwork sites, there is a rigid control over women’s mobility and their interaction with the opposite sex. While this is not new, the fact is that higher literacy, education, and higher age at marriage appear to have done little to increase women’s autonomy, especially in areas of female deficit.

Higher levels of marriage-related violence in some sites like Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh (also characterised in parts by low sex ratios) also point to two developments that impinge on women’s lives: first, the absolute shortage of women; and second, the assertion by young people in matters of marriage. The compulsory and arranged nature of marriage has rarely been discussed as a factor that puts pressure both on parents (whose responsibility it is to marry off children) and young people (who are denied freedom in choosing spouses). Compulsory marriage keeps the institution of dowry afloat, completing the vicious circle of a girl being viewed as a burden.

CONCLUSION

5.1 Main Findings

This study has explored the structural dynamic within families that are living in some of the lowest child sex ratio districts in the country. In spite of all the differences between these districts—and they are significant—the family has emerged as a hugely important site of deliberation in all of them. Since the 1980s and the 1990s especially, a major focus of planning, negotiation and tension, if not conflict, has become fixed on the birth of children.

Whatever the past histories of these sites in terms of son preference and daughter neglect, we have argued that a new level has been reached, one characterized by a differentially desired decline in the number of sons and daughters. In other words, while it is patently true the world over that families are having fewer children and therefore that having or not having children belongs among the choices of late modernity, this study demonstrates a deeply gendered version of this ‘choice’. The growing prevalence of the small family veers from one to three children, with important variations within and between our sites, a matter we have already discussed at some length. To begin with, it must be recognized that an intrinsic aspect of the shift is that families increasingly do not want extra sons either. It is also the case that more and more families are having one boy and one girl, when compared to the era of larger families. But we have also found that this is being complemented by ‘choices’ that are heightening masculinisation and deepening an aversion towards daughters—significant numbers are having one son, two sons, two sons and daughter, but hardly anyone has only daughters. Family planning is therefore planning for one or two sons, and secondarily allowing for the birth of at most one daughter.

We have also argued that only a combination of factors, some more unexpected than others, can explain why members of families feel compelled to make these kinds of decisions. There is no denying the enabling role being played by the recent technologies of sex determination testing through ultrasound. It is this technology that is closing the gap between desired and revealed preferences, and is a critical ingredient in the spread of the practice of sex selection. At the same time, technology does not act independently of social context. After all, many of the southern states of India have equally long if not longer histories of the medicalisation of child birth and the normalization of ultra sound in the course of a pregnancy, but have not for that reason become leaders in sex selection practices.

While the broad region under study ranges from high poverty to considerable prosperity, we also feel that the prosperity of these sites needs to be more carefully calibrated. It is not accidental that this region is less urbanized than other parts of India, with much of its prosperity the result of the earlier green revolution in agriculture.

The search for a 'good' job -- permanent, preferably government jobs or service sector employment-- takes aspiring young men elsewhere, and local levels of unemployment are on the rise. Agriculture is no longer fetching sufficient returns, and even amongst better off groups a mismatch between aspirations and standards of living is palpable. The poor and Scheduled Castes, especially but not only in the urban towns we have studied, are caught in the grip of limited possibilities of upward mobility and marginalisation.

At the same time, rapid social changes are visible, most directly in the realms of education and marriage. In the space of one generation, in sites where little or no schooling was available or availed of, both boys and girls are going to school. Even more remarkable, in urban areas predominantly, college education is being accessed. While this is only true for a minority in the poorer sites, with a distinct gender gap, the better off sites have witnessed a situation where proportionately more girls than boys are studying beyond high school. This unusual development goes hand in hand with rising ages of marriage. Even in those sites where older women had married by the age of 15, there has been a rise of 2-3 years. Indeed, the worst child sex ratios are prevalent in sites with the highest ages of marriage and high levels of education.

These unintended consequences of contemporary social processes, when combined with parental fears of the unattached sexuality of adult daughters in a context of a highly competitive and differentiated marriage market, are compounding the sense of burden represented by the birth of a daughter. She now requires many more years at home with higher investments in nutrition, health and education. Parental responsibility continues to rest on ensuring a 'good' marriage, which takes her away from them, even though this does not necessarily represent the end of their responsibilities. Sons, on the other hand, embody a range of ritual and economic roles. If the current climate of economic volatility and masculine anomie makes them often fall short of expectations, nonetheless, at least one is essential for the future of the family. It is this conjuncture that is producing a falling child sex ratio.

5.2 A Turn Around?

The movement towards equalizing the life chances of daughters and towards greater gender equality often takes the form of one-step-forwards-two-steps-back. Most of our findings indicate a worsening of patterns, as rural and urban sites converge and poorer groups 'catch up'. Any improvement in economic circumstances seems to allow for greater access to technology which enables people a greater role in planning and achieving the desired family. Where then can one look for signs of positive change?

Some of our data, especially from the Rohtak, Kangra and Fatehgarh Sahib sites, reveals signs of a possible turn around in the fortunes of girl children. These signs come not from explicitly positive developments but are to be read from the tensions ensuing from relative evaluations of the worth of boys and girls, men and women. Kangra and Fatehgarh Sahib, the economically advanced sites, show conflict in the family over the relative 'performance' of boys and girls. As girls in Kangra and even in Rohtak proceed to do better than boys in schooling and as their job prospects in urban areas improve, the conflict over parental investment in children appears to be heightening, reflecting pulls in different directions. On the one hand, the continuing expectation of familial and

old age support from sons forces parents to go to great lengths to ensure their success, investing in better nutrition, healthcare and more expensive schooling for them. On the other hand, the beginnings of a realization that such support may not always be forthcoming, is opening the window towards a more friendly treatment of the daughter. However, friendliness towards daughters should not merely be the outcome of disaffection with sons but a positive valuation of their own worth.

In Rohtak and Fatehgarh Sahib, we saw that fertility and sex determination decisions were contentious between husbands and wives; often it was wives who were adamant on aborting female foetuses, making superhuman efforts at achieving at least one male child. This, of course, has to be viewed within the context of 'compulsory emotions' that women have been socialized into, in which males are much more highly valued than females. One also has to recognize that women are the ones to suffer the negative consequences of not producing male children— from taunts, to low authority in the family, to not receiving support in old age from their marital families as their daughters marry and move away.

Advocacy among communities and families has thus to address issues of support in a changing but yet unacknowledged context where many more daughters are beginning to provide support to parents, both before and after their own marriage. In some cases, daughters' contributions to household income are becoming substantial with some amount being ploughed back into their dowries. At the same time, discussion has to begin on institutional and state support for old age which ensures less dependence on grown children.

From the data on sex ratios at birth (Table 1.8) and our 2005 field data, there appears to be some indication that post- 2001 families in Rohtak and Fatehgarh Sahib are showing a greater acceptance of the first girl child than was true in the 1990s, even though second and third births remain harshly skewed against girl children. Also important is the fact that data on health and nutrition from Kangra, Fatehgarh Sahib, and Rohtak point towards lesser discrimination against surviving girl children. Qualitative data from these two sites also reveal a desire among mothers to ensure better futures for their daughters. There also appears to be greater 'empowerment' of women with paid employment. Their role in household decision-making was perceived by communities as being influential; in such cases, couples were likely to make decisions on fertility and sex distribution of children jointly. To what extent some of this flux in material factors, calculations over the relative returns from children of different sexes, changing parental goals vis-à-vis children, and greater assertion by young individuals, is translating into a change in values and subsequently, into improved sex ratios will only be confirmed by the forthcoming 2011 Census.

5.3. Government Policies and the Girl Child

Both at the central and state levels, various schemes have been launched in recent years in an effort to improve the status of women and girls. A uniform finding across all the sites, in all the five districts, is that no government schemes of any kind were being implemented or were known about. Considering that we were close to the district centres of the worst child sex ratio districts of the region, this is in itself a major problem with the existing schemes.

At the same time, the government has been advertising various schemes and it is worth briefly reviewing them in and of themselves.

There are older ongoing programmes of the government such as the Integrated Child Development Scheme or ICDS which are structured around *anganwadi* centres for pre-school care of children. The only sites which had relatively well functioning *anganwadi* centres were in Rohtak. Among the many duties of the *anganwadi* worker (who is very poorly paid) is the maintenance of a roster of the children under her care. It was found that there is now considerable pressure to ‘doctor’ their records in order to show good results especially where the sex ratio balance between boys and girls is concerned.

There are newer schemes announced by the Department of Women and Child Development ‘to raise the value of girls in families, stem infanticide, sex selective abortion, neglect and ensure their survival’. A common feature of these schemes is that they target only those who are below the poverty line. The most recent of these to be launched in the context of the Eleventh Five Year Plan is the Ladli Scheme involving a conditional cash transfer to the girl child. Cash incentives are to be given to poor families with a girl child for registration of birth, immunization, enrolment in school and delaying marriage till the age of 18. An insurance cover of 1 lakh rupees at birth together with incentives that add up to 2 lakh rupees by the time she is 18 have been announced. This scheme is being launched as a pilot project in seven states including Haryana and Punjab.

Of course, it remains to be seen what impact such a scheme will have and how it will be implemented. Parents—and that too very poor parents—are being asked to wait for 18 years to experience the cash benefit of having a girl child. The question is whether this mode of directly attempting to undercut the sense of burden experienced by families in the face of having a daughter will indeed make a difference to her future.

Other schemes have been announced but do not figure on the website of the government. One of these is a monitoring of pregnancies in select districts with very low child sex ratios. That is to say, women who become pregnant are to be monitored all the way to the completion of their pregnancy. This is particularly problematic, and not just as an invasion of privacy. There is the obvious problem that abortion decisions bearing no connection to sex selection are thereby curtailed. The arm of the state is now attempting to turn into a surveillance of populations and mothers in particular to enforce the birth of daughters. The Minister of Women and Child Development has also publicly announced that rather than abort their female foetuses, women should bring them to birth and then hand them over to the state for care if they can’t bring them up themselves. There is no acknowledgement of the abysmal condition of state run institutions that would have to be used. As a matter of principle, moreover, the state is approaching the problem simply as one of an imbalance or shortage of women. Ensuring the birth of girls or the supply of sufficient women to society treats women as a necessary stock of society required for its stable reproduction. It is profoundly unclear how the future of these women is being envisaged. Nor is there any attempt to redress the causes of the gender imbalance.

All the states in this study have announced certain schemes usually in tandem with those emanating from the Centre. One of the better schemes here is the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya Scheme in Madhya Pradesh, which provides hostel facilities to an existing upper primary school.

Among the more recently launched cash incentive schemes which are similar to the Ladli Scheme already discussed, the state versions of this scheme invariably bring in further conditionalities. In MP the scheme is limited to families which have only two children and where the parents have adopted family planning (i.e. sterilisation). In Himachal Pradesh, a payment of Rs 25,000 has been announced to parents who go in for sterilisation after the birth of the first girl, and Rs 20,000 after the second girl. Similar schemes have been announced in the other states. In other words, there is an obvious effort to combine population control with an attempt to stem sex selective abortions, reinforcing the dispositional link between family planning and elimination of girls. Girls with brothers or who are in larger families are by definition ruled out, even though discrimination may be greater here especially in poorer families. Moreover, families with one or two girls will be from well to do classes who may in any case care for their daughters.

In Punjab, the state government has gone further in providing cash ‘prizes’ to informants to help ‘nab centres indulging in sex -determination’, ‘arrange decoy patients’, engage private advocates and support the appropriate authorities in undertaking surprise inspections of ultrasound and genetic centres.

Going by these schemes, there seems to be little recognition of the more medium or long-term kinds of interventions that are required to counter the current factors at work among families that are producing negative results at an aggregate level. Rather than see what is happening in society to exacerbate gender discrimination, the state, and various agencies including the UNFPA are focussing on the production of a “small, stable, and balanced population”.

5.4 Interventions

Both the Indian state and a range of organisations have been exercised over the problem of “missing girls” in the population. Some responses have been more sensationalist than others, with slogans of ‘female genocide’ and ‘girls as an endangered species’ becoming popular.

The previous section has touched upon some of the major policy interventions announced by the central and state governments. This concluding section suggests the kinds of issues that the study throws up and that must be addressed.

- *Expansion of public health facilities in terms of locations and possible treatments, and reorientation of public health programmes:* It is amply clear from most of the sites that public health facilities are crumbling and that popular conceptions of good health care means paying for it in privatised forms. While the implications of this are obvious in the poorer sites, where child mortality is both high and skewed, more subtle forms of discrimination are evident amongst the non-poor in the face of rising costs of health

care. Equally problematic is the tendency to submerge basic health under family planning in government primary health care facilities; the two must be delinked.

- *Expansion and improvement of public education:* Even though this study demonstrates the growing prevalence of schooling for both boys and girls, there is a caste and gender dimension to the kind of schooling being accessed. The quality of government schooling has deteriorated in tandem with the rise in the status and cost of private schooling, so much so that it is the poor and the non-upper castes who remain dependent on government schools. With schooling increasingly a necessity, and obviously something to be endorsed, the costs associated with it are, however, contributing to the burden of daughters. There is an urgent need to reorient public schooling such that it no longer exacerbates inequalities in fundamental ways across class, caste, and gender.
- Another distinct aspect of this study relates to the low levels of women's work and the lack of value attached to much of the labour women are doing. Only certain kinds of jobs count. Moreover, in a situation where agriculture is fetching limited returns, women's occupations in agricultural or related activities remains largely invisible, even in their own eyes. Given the importance of paid employment in enhancing women's bargaining power within family and society, one way of providing women with access to public employment would be by introducing reservations in jobs at various, particularly middle and higher, levels of status and pay.
- In the previous chapters we have seen the compulsory nature of marriage for women—and for men. Much of the differential construction of daughters and sons rests on the daughter's ultimate destination in another family while the son is supposed to provide support and care. Many aspects of the marriage relation have been the subject of long-standing campaigns, the growth of dowry and the expenses associated with marriage being one of them. Perhaps the context of the declining child sex ratio is an occasion to open up the social moorings of marriage more directly. It is, after all, its compulsory quality coupled with its control by parents and the local community, that is turning otherwise potentially emancipatory gains—more education, legal improvements in inheritance rights for daughters, higher ages of marriage, popular cultures that encourage love and some expression of sexual desire—into a kind of backlash against the woman herself. We believe that more needs to be done to question existing marriage norms. One aspect, especially, namely the practice whereby parents reside with their sons, should be the subject of campaigns, and living with daughters should be popularised as an equal option.
- The issue of the support of parents and care in old age is another major issue that needs to be addressed. The family in general and the son in particular cannot be the sole source of such support, and social institutions are required to respond to this growing need. It should be possible for adults to plan for their care in old age beyond their families, whether through the market or the state. Even beyond gender discrimination, intergenerational conflicts over property are increasing sources of violence as well. The state needs to consider schemes for the elderly, including living pensions and other forms of social provision and care.

- *Making transparent the nexus between local medical and para-medical personnel, government health care officials, and private radiologists and gynaecologists:* A particularly disturbing discovery in the course of this study was the extent to which a nexus exists between ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Midwives) and other local- level personnel and clinical establishments was in evidence, making recourse to sex determination testing that much easier. Moreover, already at an early stage in the study, information about specific clinics and doctors (whether in the same locality or elsewhere) for conducting such tests and getting abortions done was part of local knowledge. It is, therefore, difficult to understand why there has been so little investigation of such establishments, with media- instigated sting operations being resorted to as an extreme measure only very recently in certain places, though not in the study sites. Indeed, given the power of the medical establishment, even a few arrests of personnel running well- known centres would have a major impact on current practice. Considerable legitimacy rests on the fact that professional medical personnel are making the necessary technology available to people. Even allowing for the kind of pressure that families may be placing on more resistant radiologists and doctors, it is important not to diminish the power wielded by this professional group in society.

Clearly, with the exception of the need to target culpable medical facilities, many of the suggested interventions are directed towards the medium and the long term. However, it is only such interventions that can counter the processes that are leading families to experience their daughters as an unwanted burden.

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