

According to a recent report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) up to 50 million girls and women are missing from India's population as a result of **systematic gender discrimination in India**. In most countries in the world, there are approximately 105 female births for every 100 males.

In India, there are less than 93 women for every 100 men in the population. The accepted reason for such a disparity is the practice of female infanticide in India, prompted by the existence of a dowry system which requires the family to pay out a great deal of money when a female child is married. For a poor family, the birth of a girl child can signal the beginning of financial ruin and extreme hardship.

However this anti-female bias is by no means limited to poor families. Much of the discrimination is to do with cultural beliefs and social norms. These norms themselves must be challenged if this practice is to stop.

Diagnostic teams with ultrasound scanners which detect the sex of a child advertise with catchlines such as spend 600 rupees now and save 50,000 rupees later.

The implication is that by avoiding a girl, a family will avoid paying a large dowry on the marriage of her daughter. According to UNICEF, the problem is getting worse as scientific methods of detecting the sex of a baby and of performing abortions are improving.

These methods are becoming increasingly available in rural areas of India, fuelling fears that the trend towards the abortion of female foetuses is on the increase