

7. Unwanted Daughter- Economy

Wanted sons, unwanted daughters- sex determination takes digital turn The illegal practice of sex determination has shifted from clinics to online platforms and encrypted apps, evading the PC-PNDT Act and complicating enforcement. This "digital disguise" threatens to reverse India's improving Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) by sustaining the deep-rooted socio-cultural preference for sons through anonymous, accessible technology.

The Digital Shift of an Old Crime

Evolution of the Threat- The illegal practice of sex determination has migrated from physical clinics to the digital world. This shift is complicating enforcement efforts for Indian agencies.

The Core Risk- Despite the existence of the PC-PNDT Act, this new "digital disguise" threatens to reverse the gains made in the Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) and sustains the deep-seated societal preference for sons.

Key Enablers- The trade now utilizes encrypted apps, social media platforms, online forums, and even cross-border blood testing services to evade the law.

Understanding the Core Concepts

"Unwanted Daughter"

Definition- A female child born to a family that either did not desire a child at that time or specifically preferred a son due to socio-cultural biases.

Implication- This term highlights the vulnerability of the girl child, who is often neglected or discriminated against because her birth was not celebrated.

The New Modus Operandi

Clinic to Cloud- The preference for sons, once practiced in ultrasound clinics, has moved online.

Anonymity- The internet provides a shield of anonymity, creating a massive, untraceable marketplace for illegal sex selection services.

Evolving Challenges in the Digital Age

Challenge	Description
Digital Disguise	Offenders use encrypted messaging apps (like WhatsApp, Telegram) and private social media groups to offer services. This makes tracking and evidence collection extremely difficult for law enforcement.
Widespread Misinformation	Unscientific content is rampant. Videos claiming to predict gender based on myths or pseudo-science receive millions of views. This content normalizes the criminal mindset of son preference among the masses.
Evasion of Law	There is a lack of accountability from content creators and tech platforms. The ecosystem is like a hydra- removing one illegal link or video leads to the immediate emergence of many others.

Demographic Impact- The Scale of the Crisis

"Missing Females"- According to the UNFPA, an estimated 45.8 million females have gone 'missing' in India over the past 50 years. This is a direct result of pre-natal (sex-selective abortion) and post-natal (neglect/infanticide) sex selection.

National Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB)

Improvement- The NFHS (2019-20) shows a slight improvement to 929 females per 1,000 males, up from 919 in 2015-16.

Global Comparison- Despite this, India still has one of the lowest sex ratios globally (approx. 933 females per 1000 males according to UN Population Fund).

Legal and Institutional Framework

The PC-PNDT Act, 1994

Full Title- Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act.

Key Provisions

Strict Prohibition- Bans all prenatal diagnostic techniques (ultrasound, amniocentesis) for determining fetal sex.

Advertising Ban- Explicitly prohibits advertisements regarding pre-natal sex determination in any form, including internet, print, and electronic media.

Nature of Offence- Offences are cognizable, non-bailable, and non-compoundable.

Penalties- First Offence Up to 3 years imprisonment + ₹10,000 fine. Subsequent Offence Up to 5 years imprisonment + ₹50,000 fine.

Judicial Intervention

Case- Dr. Sabu Mathew George vs Union of India (2017).

Supreme Court Directives

Nodal Agency- Mandated the creation of a central nodal agency (established in 2017) to monitor online content.

Auto-Block Mechanism- Directed search engines (Google, Yahoo, Bing) to develop "auto-block" techniques for keywords related to sex selection.

Warning Messages- Ordered mandatory display of warnings stating that sex determination is illegal on relevant search pages.

The Problem Persist

Deep-Rooted Socio-Cultural Factors

Laws alone cannot dismantle centuries of patriarchy.

Economic Utility- Sons are traditionally viewed as asset creators, property inheritors, and the sole providers for parents in old age.

Financial Liability- Daughters are viewed as a "burden" due to the illegal but pervasive practice of dowry.

Religious Norms- Beliefs that only a son can perform last rites (Mukhagni) and continue the family lineage (Vansh) fuel the desire for male offspring.

Implementation & Tech Challenges

Digital Lag- The PC-PNDT Act was drafted before the internet boom. It struggles to regulate the transient and borderless nature of online content.

Enforcement Gaps- Lack of coordination between health authorities, cybercrime cells, and digital platforms slows down action.

Government Initiatives

The government uses a multi-pronged approach-

Initiative	Objective
Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP)	Launched in 2015. Focuses on preventing sex-selective elimination, ensuring survival/protection of the girl child, and promoting her education.
Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana	A small savings scheme to help parents build a fund for their daughter's education and marriage, directly countering the "financial burden" narrative.

Way Forward

To tackle this modern version of an ancient prejudice, a comprehensive strategy is needed-

Strengthen the Legal Framework

Amend the Act- The PC-PNDT Act must be updated to explicitly include "sex prediction through digital platforms".

Broaden Definitions- The definition of 'advertisement' must cover all modern online services, blogs, and social media content.

Enhance Digital Accountability

AI Surveillance- Tech companies must be mandated to use AI tools to proactively identify and block illegal content.

Enforce Auto-Block- Stricter implementation of the Supreme Court's "doctrine of auto-block".

Cyber Policing & Global Cooperation– Need for specialized cyber units to track cross-border services (like blood kits sent abroad for testing).

Behavioral Change & Education

Target Men– Campaigns must involve men, boys, and community leaders to challenge patriarchal norms.

Empowerment– Promoting women's education and economic independence is the ultimate solution. A mother's education is statistically the most significant factor in reducing son preference.

Conclusion

Eradicating illegal sex selection requires moving beyond just clinics. India needs a strategy that combines legislative agility (updating laws for the digital age), technological vigilance (cyber policing), and a sustained social revolution to change the mindset that views daughters as unwanted.

Source– <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/wanted-sons-unwanted-daughters-sex-determination-gets-an-online-twist/article70380042.ece>

