

Muskaan- A Community led Movement in District Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh, India

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A chariot has two wheels, if one is broken, the other is rendered useless. Similarly, men and women together constitute the wheels of our society. Even if one is rendered as weak, the societal balance will crumble. Yet, this reality does not seem to dawn upon us. To think that girls are not even being allowed to be born goes on to comment about the patriarchal nature of our society. Just as every lock has a key, this problem can also be addressed with an innovative approach engaging stakeholders at the grassroots level.

Strong male preference in families and desire for a son are responsible for this threatening situation of gender imbalance (Agrawal, 2012). Paul et al 2011 had estimated that 6.4% of the Indian women who had aborted their female foetus had availed ultrasound or amniocentesis facility during antenatal care. After abortion was legalised in 1971, the practice of sex - determination tests became widespread. The distressing reality is that despite the enactment of the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act to curb the menace of such diagnostic tests, the practice of pre – natal sex determination and consequently female foeticide remains rampant (Guilmoto, 2012; Jha et al., 2011). This practice continued undeterred due to the easy availability of the technology and its falling prices. Deolalikar and Nandi (2013) used disaggregated Census data on more than half a million Indian villages and 1,500 towns over two time periods – 1991 and 2001, to evaluate the impact of the PCPNDT Act on CSR. The results indicate that, the PCPNDT Act did improve the child sex ratio – it likely resulted in an increase of 14-26 points in the ratio even after controlling for other factors (such as adult literacy, caste and tribe status, land assets, and availability of social services). While the magnitude of the estimated effect may seem small, the calculations indicate that the PCPNDT Act may have resulted in at least an additional 106,000 surviving girls aged 0-6 years in rural India.

Two IAS officers, a couple, recognised the gravity of the problem of declining sex ratios in the districts of Hamirpur and Bilaspur in Himachal. The CSR figures were as low as 893 whereas the overall sex ratio was approximately 952. In this context, we study the case of a successful intervention to improve the sex ratio at birth (SRB) in Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh. The district administration resolved to improve the deteriorating gender balance in Hamirpur. Hamirpur is a shining example of a government led community effort that has yielded positive results. The district administration implemented the programme “Muskaan” (Smile) in Hamirpur to combat the issue of declining sex ratio at birth. ‘Muskaan’ has been instrumental in addressing the grave situation. The programme bore excellent results such that the SRB figures have improved since the year of the intervention. The programme is an example of how an innovative intervention (in lieu of Beti Bachao Beti Padhao) and sustained routine activities over the years can yield the desired results.

The district administration hoped to alleviate this through early registration of pregnancies, incentivisation of Anganwadi and Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers and families and campaigns to spread the message of equality between males and females. Winds of change have come as families in Hamirpur are now happy with either a male or a female child, villagers have highlighted that there still exists preference for a male child especially after a couple already has one or more girls in their family. Such prejudices arise from socio cultural factors, availability of modern technology and penetrate deep into our social fabric. Even though the progress has been slow, the concept of gender equality is touching more and more families.

In this case study, we elaborate on the intervention that was undertaken, the complexities in the administrative procedure and the reasons why it turned out to be a successful intervention. The teaching case will provide food for thought to administrators and policy students to discuss how complex social problems can be tackled through well planned and well implemented administrative interventions.