Bridging the Gender Gap

What is the issue?

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- Governments in recent decades have been striving hard to bridge India's centuries old gender gap through multiple innovative schemes.
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- While there has been considerable progress, much remains to be done on the gender front, which calls for a prudent analysis of policy.
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What is the status of "Gender Parity" in India?

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- There are 63 million 'Missing Women' (not alive due to foeticide/infanticide) and 21 million 'Unwanted Girls' (explained below) in India.
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- Economic Survey 2017-18 acknowledges that "Missing Women" is one of the most pressing problems faced by our country.
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- Although the Survey finds improvement in a number of women empowerment indicators, it also shows how the skewed sex ratio has led to gender inequality.
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- Not surprisingly, India ranks a poor 87^{th} in the "Global Gender Parity Report", which is published by "World Economic Forum" (WEF).
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- On "Women's Day", PM Modi had proclaimed female foeticide shameful and announced the expansion of "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao" scheme.
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- In this context, it is important to reflect on the experience of the past 30 years of women centric policies and the progress made.
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Are education campaigns paying off?

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- The government has lately taken to information campaigns to usher in a behavioural change among the masses to bridge the gender divide.
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- **Male Preference -** Statistics seem to imply that educational campaigns alone do little to reduce the deeply entrenched social idea of male Meta preference.
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- In fact, it is the more aware masses that are likely to engage in illegal sex selective abortions, to the extent that they are able to afford it.
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- Further, “Health Index” released by the NITI Aayog shows that in recent years, the girl-to-boy sex ratio at birth has dropped in 17 out of 21 large States.
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- Significantly, only in Bihar, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh has the sex ratio improved, implying the issue needs stronger initiatives than mere awareness.
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- **Job Awareness -** Rigorous research has not been conducted to measure the impact of information campaigns on improving the sex ratio.
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- But some randomised evaluation conducted by researchers affiliated to J-PAL has indicated some positive results regarding information campaigns.
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- The study confirmed that spread of job related information improved female employment and reduced discrimination against girls.
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- Additionally, such campaigns were also found to have encouraged parents to invest in their daughter’s education and significantly delay their marriage.
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- **Health Awareness -** Another J-PAL study found that HIV related awareness campaigns proved highly helpful in improving health metrics.
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- These studies suggest the merit in including risk information regarding behavioural actions in campaigns that target improvements in sex ratio.
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What has been the impact of “Cash Transfer Schemes”?

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- Another common approach that governments take to encourage behaviour change and improve gender parity is “direct cash transfers schemes”.
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- Multiple State governments have implemented conditional and unconditional cash transfer schemes to motivate families to educate girls.
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- The impact of cash transfer schemes on “sex ratio” isn’t clearly understood, but such initiatives have definitely helped in bettering girl child education.
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- The spill over effects of such schemes is felt in aspects like women’s health, reduction in gender discrimination, and delay in marriages and child bearing.
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- While many of these aspects are behavioural changes, reduction in fertility rates (fewer children), and male preference are also likely in the long run.
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- Nonetheless, more rigorous evaluation is needed to establish and verify if the prediction are getting reflected on the ground.
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What are the emerging trends in family planning?

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- The multiple pro-girl initiatives and financial support, government seems to have managed to ensure that women aren’t perceived as a burden.
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- But despite these, male preference however continues, as having a son was still valued far higher than that of a daughter.
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- Interestingly, it has been predicted that, if family size reduction is promoted alongside, then pro-girl initiatives will have little impact in bettering sex ratio.
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- Few rigorous studies have been conducted to assess long-term impacts of government programmes that aim to address skewed sex ratio.
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- More evidence should be generated in order to evolve policies that can sustainably improve the sex ratio and bring back India’s missing women.

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Quick Facts:

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Missing Women:

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- This is a measure of women/girls who don’t exist currently, but would’ve lived had it not been for the male preference in our society.
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- These women/girls were either aborted during pregnancy or were killed as infants (infanticide), or died due to improper care after birth.
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- Their number presently accounts to about 63 million in India and this was estimated by projections from the expected natural sex ratio at birth.
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Unwanted Girls:

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- Girls who were given birth by parents ‘who were actually expecting a boy instead’ are classified as unwanted girls.
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- These girls are identified by studying the deviance in the gender of the last child born (which is predominantly a boy in India).
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- This is because parents tend to prefer having a particular number of sons, the birth of whom marks the end of their need to reproduce.
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- They keep attempting for babies until the desired number of males are attained, thereby any girl born in this quest for a boy is classified unwanted.
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- The problem is that unwanted girls invariably face the risk of poorer care and larger family size, which curtails their overall life opportunities.
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Source: Business Line

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