The Unwanted Girl

What is the issue?

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The 2018 economic survey has come up with a new metric called “Unwanted Girls” that seeks to highlight “Gender Bias” in the country.

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Who are the “Missing Women”?

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- ‘Missing women’ are the number of girls and women below the age of 25, who would’ve been alive today if they weren’t aborted as foetuses.
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- Girls who happened to die early due to gender based neglect in terms of nutrition and healthcare are also added up to the “missing women index”.
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- The population census enumerates everyone in a country, and the missing women number is estimated based on the sex ratio.
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- India’s missing women numbers stands at a whooping 63 million.
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- This means that, if no gender bias existed in India, we would have recorded 63 million more women in our census.
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Who are the “Unwanted Women”?

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- The 2018 Economic Survey has tried to more accurately quantify gender bias through a new number called “Unwanted Girl Index”.
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- Unwanted girls account for “live females”, who haven’t received the deserving healthcare and schooling, due to the gender related partiality.
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- These are daughters that parents gave birth to when they were really hoping for a son, and were disappointed and dejected hence.
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- The 2018 economic survey notes that India has 21 million ‘unwanted (or) less wanted girls’ (who aren’t favoured by parents) in the less than 25 age group.
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- Notably, this index does not capture the number of parents would’ve preferred not having the baby at all if they knew it was girl.
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How were the Unwanted (or) Less wanted girls detected?

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- The common pattern is that couples intend to have two children, which ideally is one son and one daughter – but having at least one son is mandatory.
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- This essentially implies that if both their 1st and 2nd child are girls, they’ll go for the 3rd kid or maybe even 4th to get a son.
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- Contrarily, if they have two sons in a row, they might regret having no daughter but yet they might not consider having more children.
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- Hence, if the matrix of families having more than 2 children looks like - “girl, girl, boy” or “girl, girl, girl, boy” (last kid is a boy), it is usually a case of gender biased attitudes.
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- Here, every girl born instead of the expected boy is counted as unwanted, which means the 2nd and all other successive girls are unwanted.
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- The aggregate data of all families in India when collated clearly captures that the “sex ratio of the last child” (SRLC) is male-skewed.
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- Hence, SRLC is thus quantifies the desire for having sons, and the number also seems lesser sensitive to economical status of the parents.
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- An important point to be noted is that this “boy oriented reproduction” does reduce the overall sex ratio as it contributes more girls (although unwanted).
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- Further pondering reveals that even Kerala and Assam (which look problem-free in the “missing women index”) have a male-skewed SRLC.
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What does it mean to be an unwanted girl?

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- If a girl is born instead of the expected boy and she nonetheless gets treated equally, then there is no problem, but unfortunately that’s not the usual case.
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- Girls get fewer resources in comparison to boys in general and moreover, parents who passionately want sons, unsurprisingly, favour them once born.
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- Also, the previously discussed reproduction pattern would inherently imply that more girls grow up in larger families.
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- Here, even if parents treat all their children equally, girls are disadvantaged by being in families with fewer resources to spend per child.
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- Boys have been found to get better immunisation and nutrition, which is also reflected in India’s stunting data that displays a visible gender gap.
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- More noticeably, when a corrective heart surgery is advocated, 70% of the recommended boys undergo surgery whereas the number is only 44% for girls.
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What is the way forward?

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- The Economic Survey has rung the alarm bells by bring out this crucial data point and it is imperative for us to chart a remedy soon.
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- While a decline in “unwanted girls” is necessary, it won’t be progress if it leads to the increase in “missing girls” (girls aborted in foetuses or who died early).
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- Hence, focus should be on bringing both numbers down – which is not possible unless the preference for the male child is brought down.
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- The way forward is to improve earnings opportunities for women, as this would lower dowry and increase their say in family decision-making.
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- Better options for people to support themselves in old age, such as a good pension system, would also make having a son less paramount to couples.
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- Other generic and cultural aspects that reinforcing patriarchy also need to be targeted to achieve a gender neutral society.
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Source: Indian Express

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