

## Violence against the girl



**Estimates say that over the last two decades, around 2.5 lakh girls were killed in India each year because of their sex. Why does society accept this and why are governments turning a blind eye? Tell us about an instance of discrimination you have faced because of your gender. Email [school@thehindu.co.in](mailto:school@thehindu.co.in) (Subject: Gender) Selected entries will be featured on this page next week.**

Over the next few weeks, there will be many tussles between our mostly male politicians over India's security. But almost no one will ask if a country can be secure when half its citizens live in deepening insecurity, threatened not by terrorists or enemy soldiers but by the society into which they are born. We seem to forget that India's security must encompass the security of 48 per cent of its citizens — women — and urgently address the endemic threats they face, ranging from entrenched discrimination to violence.

This starts with the mass murder of female foetuses. In its 2012 report on "Gender Equality and Development," the World Bank estimated that over the last two decades, around 2.5 lakh girls were killed in India each year because of their sex.

These figures put us to shame as a society. This systematic massacre could not happen unless society accepted it and governments turned a blind eye to it. Sections 312 to 317 of the Indian Penal Code list the punishments for causing miscarriage, injuring unborn children, preventing a child from being born or causing it to die after birth, and abandoning a child under 12 years. Over the last 20 years, how many prosecutions have there been under these provisions of the law? There should have been 10 million.

### **Entrenched bias**

The extent of the violence against the girl as foetus and infant shows how deep the bias in India is against women and why women will be secure only if we as a nation introspect and change. Not only is this not happening, but the 2011 census shows that the sex ratio in the age-group 0-6 had fallen in 27 States and Union Territories from 2001.

Millions of girls who are allowed to live are fed and educated less than their brothers.

The more educated mothers are, the lower the chance of their children being either stunted or wasted. By starving millions of girls so that their brothers can eat marginally better, and by taking them out of school, we have condemned each new generation — boys and girls — to a fresh cycle of malnutrition.

The treatment of little girls moulds the psyche of their brothers, who internalise the view that their needs — as males — have preference over those of their sisters. What we have come to thereby is the socialisation of violence against women.

There are no estimates of the extent of physical violence against the girl child but it would be reasonable to assume that it is extensive.

In 2007, the Ministry of Women and Child Development published a “National Study on Child Abuse,” which reported that 53 per cent of the children interviewed had suffered one or more forms of sexual abuse. It is clearly far more widespread than we admit. What should be of the gravest concern was that in most cases the children reported that the attack was by someone they knew, often a close relative.

Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) confirms that this pattern continues as the girl becomes a woman. This is a logical outcome of a nurturing process in which boys grow up believing, from what they see in their families, that women exist only to satisfy the needs of men.

### **Society still resists change.**

We also perhaps do not realise how other problems have a compounding effect. We are, for instance, the world leaders in open defecation. Open defecation is also an open invitation to rape. Complaints to the NHRC show how many women are abducted or raped when they go out into the fields at night. In many States, teenage village girls either refuse to go to school or are taken out by their parents because the building has no toilet and their right to education suffers.

It is sad, but to be expected, that women have also been indoctrinated to believe that their security depends on good behaviour, as mandated by men.

Women in India are insecure and remain at risk because in this patriarchal society they are children of a lesser god.

For women to be secure, the country must change — there should be more women in Parliament and in positions of political and executive authority. Every election brings with it hope of renewal, but India will not be transformed, it cannot be secure, developed or respected if the democracy in which it takes pride does not bring about urgent and fundamental change in the lives of its women.