

VULNERABLE DAUGHTERS IN TIMES OF CHANGE

Emerging Contexts of Discrimination in Himachal Pradesh, India

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Mattias Larsen

Akademisk avhandling för filosofie doktorsexamen i freds- och utvecklingsforskning, Institutionen för Globala Studier, Göteborgs Universitet, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Samhällsvetenskapliga fakultetsnämnden framställs till offentlig granskning fredagen den 13 Mars 2009, klockan 13.15 i sal 220, Annedalsseminariet, Campus Linné, Seminariegatan 1.



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
SCHOOL OF GLOBAL STUDIES

ABSTRACT

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This dissertation deals with the widespread problem in India of using sex selective abortions to discriminate against daughters. Girls are aborted on a massive scale simply because they are girls. A point of departure is the fact that the problem has become prevalent at a time of considerable social and economic change. Exploration and analysis of the circumstances in which parents become apprehensive about having daughters, and deliberately choose not to, is carried out through comparisons of eight case study villages in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh on the basis of interviews, focus group discussions and survey material.

Two different paths are found to lead to imbalances in the ratio of girls to boys. In the absence of other institutional alternatives for support in old age, generations have traditionally been tied to each other in a mutual dependency where it is not only that parents take care of their children, but children – more specifically sons – also take care of their parents in their old age. This unspoken agreement – this intergenerational contract – is a fundamental social institution in India. People express the fact that there has been an institutional change and articulate a sense of uncertainty about this relationship between generations as a result of social and economic change. In some villages changes have affected sons' role in the intergenerational contract but not that of daughters', whereas the opposite has happened in other villages. In terms of the first path, as the intergenerational contract has come under constraint through a change in authority within the family – intensifying the importance of each child – the relative importance of sons has increased while the room available for daughters has diminished in size. Furthermore, in the context of the second path, consisting of economic change and prosperity but in combination with an absence of empowerment of women, the appearance of and increase in the dowry problem has reinforced the perception that having daughters is a liability while having a son is still seen as a necessity.

Key words: daughter discrimination, sex-selective abortions, gender, development, intergenerational contract, dowry, context, structural change, uncertainty