

# Missing: 40 million Indian women

*How do culture and social context explain India's gendercide?*

## 1 "Oh no, it's a girl!"

- A. Before reading.** Take a look at the poster. What message does it convey? Can you guess what the text is about?
- B.** Read the text and explain what being a woman implies in India.
- C.** What is Kavya Sukumar's opinion on the subject? What is her dilemma? Pick out relevant sentences to justify your answer.
- D.** In the last paragraph, what do the terms "supply" (l. 31), "demand" (l. 31) and "dowry market" (l. 32) imply about women?
- E. Go further.** What does this text show about the gap between laws and social traditions?

Every social studies textbook I remember from my childhood contained this sentence: "Dowry<sup>1</sup> is a social evil." It was mentioned often alongside sati, the practice where a widow self-immolates on her husband's funeral pyre<sup>2</sup> as a sign of loyalty.

- 5 Sati<sup>3</sup> is more or less a thing of the past. It has been accepted as a barbaric practice that had to end.

But not dowry. The subtext of "social evil" when it came to dowry is often "social necessity."

- My sister and I went to the same school and had the same teachers, though five years apart. Both of us remember our social studies teacher attempting to justify dowry right after the lesson on "social evil." The teacher said that she would accept dowry for her son and give dowry when her daughter got married. She said it was basic economics that we were too young to understand.

- 15 Instead of being regarded as a crime and a source of shame, dowry has become a matter of pride. It is not as discreet as one would expect with an act of illegal transfer of assets. It is flashy and in your face. It is discussed over coffee at family gatherings. Sons-in-law are often introduced with the price tag they come with.

- 20 "He works in the US. We gave my daughter 4 crores<sup>4</sup>."

Sons are seen as assets. There is a strong preference for male children, which has been blamed for years of female feticide. (Side note: Fetus sex determination has been illegal in India since 1994. But the sex ratio in the age group 0 to 6 continues

- 25 to decline.)



This has left India with a very unbalanced sex ratio. There are 940 women for every 1,000 men according to 2011 census. India has 37 million more men than women, making it hard for men to find suitable brides. In certain parts of the country, wife sharing among brothers has become common.

Low supply and high demand should have tipped the scales in favor of women. Yet the dowry market has not seen any discernible drop.

- 35 As research points out, dowry has become an institutionalized and integral part of the Indian marriage. Social and economic realities do little to keep it in check.

1 dot • 2 Bücher funéraire • 3 tradition that compelled a widow to throw herself on her husband funeral pyre • 4 a crore = 10 million

Kavya Sukumar, \_\_\_\_\_, 2017

## YOUR TURN! 2 Campaigning against gendercide

The Indian government wants to raise awareness about gendercide. Prepare the campaign poster to promote gender equality and put an end to dowries!