

Improving the Status and Equality of Women and Girls – Causes and Solutions to India's Unequal Sex Ratio

Testimony Submitted to the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations, Committee on Foreign Affairs
U.S House of Representatives

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I would like to thank Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, Representative Bera for the invitation, and the honorable members of this Committee for holding this hearing on a matter of critical importance to Indian women and women around the world. Gender-based discrimination is a global pandemic that manifests in many forms, including sexual assault, domestic violence, early marriage, honor killings and rape in conflict situations. Recently, several incidents of rape in India have captured international attention and sparked outrage – but they are merely examples of this pervasive form of gender discrimination. Gender-biased sex selection is another pernicious form of gender inequity, a harmful practice, which has led to an alarming decline in the number of girls in parts of India and other parts of the world.

I come to you today as the president of Breakthrough, a global human rights organization that seeks to make discrimination against women and girls unacceptable. Based on our work over the last twelve years, and lessons we have learned from community-level engagement across India, I would like to request that the Committee keep the following recommendation in mind:

The United States must assume a position of global leadership in confronting the underlying factors that foster gender discrimination, by 1) sustaining and strengthening investments in global health and development and 2) advocating for the equity of women and girls to be at the center of the global development agenda, in accordance with human rights instruments such as the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)'s Programme of Action, which the United States has endorsed.

Breakthrough uses multi-media tools and community engagement to change cultural norms and social practices that violate human dignity. Our experience in working with women, men and young people across India and globally has taught us valuable lessons learned: that is, the **only** way to achieve long-lasting social change on issues of gender bias, especially sex selective practices, is through working to fundamentally shift attitudes and culture at the community level and to comprehensively address the underlying issues that propagate inequity. We believe that human rights begin in our own hearts, homes, and actions.

Breakthrough is currently working to eliminate gender-biased sex selection in Haryana, which at 877 females to 1000 males has the lowest sex ratio in India.¹ This work engages multiple community stakeholders to challenge patriarchal norms and son preference, an approach that is championed by governments, UN agencies and others. Indeed, Justice Balakrishnan, Chair of India's National Human Rights Commission, at a recent conference on this issue stated: "The need of the hour is therefore to bring about a change in the mindset of the people whereby both girls and boys are treated at par."²

In order to determine the best communication and community engagement strategy, in Haryana and other states, we have conducted comprehensive research. Through community, government and multi-sectoral interviews, we have found that there are complex interrelated social, political and economic causes that lead to gender-biased sex selection. These include dowry and inheritance laws, lack of women's agency in relation to safety, security and sexuality, ineffective implementation of existing laws, and lack of women's financial independence — all crucial requirements in eroding gender-biased sex selection.

To be clear, bans on access to reproductive health are NOT an appropriate solution. Similarly, research has found that while technologies used for sex selection have compounded the problem, they are not the root cause of it. Access to voluntary family planning and safe and legal abortion remain vital to fulfilling women's human rights along with promoting access to education, political and social rights and economic empowerment. In India, a woman dies every 10 minutes because of pregnancy related causes, illustrating how acute the need is to improve reproductive and maternal health in the country.

As is well documented, gender bias in India is rooted in historical acts of discrimination, including forced sterilizations, coercive reproductive health programs and other violations of women's rights. The government of India even today needs to do more to ensure full access to voluntary, comprehensive and rights-based reproductive health care. I have been part of the global movement to ensure that historical abuses are condemned, that women's rights are universally upheld and that governments must be held accountable to their human rights obligations. In India, the largest democracy in the world, the path forward to reducing widespread gender inequity and sex selection is through comprehensive and community-based culture change solutions driven by Indian stakeholders themselves.

¹ India Census data 2011

² *Preventing gender-biased sex selection: an interagency statement*. 2011 Speech by Justice Balakrishnan, Chair NHRC, Conference on PreNatal Sex Selection in India: Issues, Concerns and Actions, 12 October 2010, IIC

Because gender discrimination is a global pandemic that requires multi-faceted interventions, the most critical contribution that this Committee can make now is to sustain U.S. investments in global health and development, which are critical to delivering vital services to women and girls to secure their human rights and who might otherwise be overlooked by their health and education systems. Current U.S. aid to India helps ensure access to education, food, water, energy and healthcare— including safe childbirth and voluntary family planning – for some of the most vulnerable women and girls in the country. All of these elements are vital parts of a comprehensive strategy to improve the status and rights of women and girls in India and around the world – and with it, reduce the underlying causes of son preference.

I would like to once again thank the Committee for having me here today and for your attention and interest in this important matter.