

Sex Selection and Feminist “Internet-works”

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This article explores sex selection and its specific intersection with son preference which, as a women’s rights and ethical issue, has come to have local and global significance. The international and global dimensions of sex selection, as argued in this article, can partially be attributed to the use of the internet by both clinics advertising their sex selection services and women’s and medical organisations opposing the practice. The article focuses upon the manner in which the internet has been used as a medium for advertising by clinics, as well as a political tool by medical and women’s organisations campaigning against the practice. It looks at the use of the internet by sex selection service providers as well as in political campaigns raising awareness about the practice of pre-sex selective methods and sex selective abortions. The internet has provided an important medium through which feminist networks have been fostered and formed in challenging sex selection, or “son selection” as some women’s organisations have called it. The internet (the worldwide web and email) has been an indispensable tool for anti-sex selection campaigns which have utilized it in raising awareness about the issue, often facilitating the formation of feminist networks.

INTRODUCTION

The use of the internet by feminist groups and organisations, or feminist “internet-works,” has become an invaluable component to political organising. Internet-based networking as a method of political organising has presented possibilities for solidarity-building across groups, organisations, communities and nations. The issue of son preference and sex selection¹ has been addressed by feminists and health activists campaigning against the discrimination against girl children, before and after birth. Anti-sex selection activism on the internet has been going on since the early 1990s at a time when there was a convergence of both the proliferation of new reproductive technologies and internet use. This article specifically focuses upon examples of the use of the internet in challenging sex selection by a web-based network, The Global Reproductive Health Forum (GRHF)/BOL, and two Indian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes

(CEHAT) and Datamation Foundation. These three examples illustrate how the internet can be used among networks of activists, in this case, in their campaigning against the practice of sex selection. In doing so, the article focuses upon a web-based analysis of the three examples and draws from the web content and email list messages in its discussion of feminist activism via the internet. The three examples also target much of their work on India, a geographical context where sex selection has had a high profile amidst skewed sex ratios, a vocal feminist movement and a public discussion resulting in recent laws to ban the practice. Thus, the formation of feminist internet-networks in opposing sex selection highlight the contribution that such methods of organising can make to campaigning, information sharing and dissemination: guiding public discourse and challenging the social and technological practice of son preference.

SEX SELECTION

The desire to have control over the sex of children has been well documented in a number of different cultural and geographic contexts (Das Gupta and Shuzhuo 1999; Sen 1990; Wong and Ho 2001; Sudha and Rajan 1999; Patel 1989; Haughton and Haughton 1998; Purewal 2003). In the context of patriarchal households and communities, male children have historically been viewed as essential economic assets, providers of social security in parents' old age and an essential component for family lineages. On the other hand, girl children are often seen as "outsiders" who will eventually become part of and loyal to their future husbands' homes (Dyson and Moore 1983; Sharma 1980). Preference for sons stems from complex social structures comprised of kinship and marriage patterns, the political economy of the household, gender relations and culture. The desire for sons is thus rooted in a systematic and structural web of social relations which puts a high value on male children while devaluing girl children. In such contexts, the age-old practice of female infanticide, or the killing of newborn female babies, was found to fit into cultural patterns which discriminated against females (Balakrishnan, 1994; Jeffery, Jeffery and Lyon 1984).

Son preference has historically contributed to the maintenance of high fertility whereby families had larger families in order to maximise the number of sons. Female infanticide was one measure used to ensure a masculine population in East and South Asia where sex ratios revealed a bias against females in favour of males through the 19th and 20th centuries. In more recent times, new reproductive technologies (NRTs) now offer the opportunity to increase the chance of having a child of the desired sex even before the birth of the child. The ultrasound scan has been one technology which has allowed couples the opportunity to "sex select" while more recent technological innovations have meant that even pre-selection has become possible.² This

"choice" to determine or predetermine the sex of children has had detrimental effects upon gender ratios in countries such as China and India where historically the girl child has been a target of sex selective practices. In China in 2000 the Census estimated 116.86 males to every 100 females at birth while in India the national Census in 2001 showed 927 females to every 1000 males, both countries showing steadily declining ratios against females from previous censuses. The replacement of female infanticide with more "modern" practices enabled by reproductive technologies has been a major factor in the continuance and increase of such trends (Das Gupta and Bhat 1997).

While the ultrasound scan and amniocentesis were the forerunners in the technological enablement of sex-selective abortions, more recent pre-selective NRTs have attempted to side-step the ethical considerations accompanying sex-selective abortions. These technologies have perhaps made the extremities of sex selection more conceivable for many, resulting in a more widespread practice of it. As such, reproductive technologies are offering choices such as determining or even predetermining the gender of future born children. A simultaneous development has been the expansion of information technologies, more specifically the internet (world-wide web and email) as a medium for both the perpetration of and opposition to sex selection. Where private companies offering such reproductive technologies have advertised their services on the internet, feminist critiques of the use of NRTs for sex selection, or son selection,³ have also circulated their expressions of opposition. India has thus been a particularly potent region for both types of activities: consumption of sex-selection services and the dissemination of feminist critiques of the practice.

Female feticide through sex selection has been publicly challenged in the Indian context. Where private scanning clinics have profited from son preference by marketing their services to communities for whom sons are viewed as essential, women's groups have been vocal in opposing the practice. The passing of the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PNDT) Act in India in 1994 came about largely because of pressure mounted by a petition filed in the Supreme Court through the partnership of women's groups, health and legal activists. Though making it illegal to conduct sex selective abortions, the PNDT Act was ineffective in practice. It was not until December 2001 that the first case of a diagnostic centre was accused of conducting sex-determination tests despite the continuation of a declining sex ration in most regions in India.⁴ This, however, came after more than a decade of activism against the practice. In the early 1980s a conglomeration of women's and health organisations in Mumbai waged a campaign against the promotion of prenatal sex-detection services and sex-selective abortion. This campaign arose out of the proliferation of diagnostic centres across India in both rural and urban areas, due to what these organisations identified as the medical profession's complicity in the practice. The Forum Against Sex Determination

and Sex Pre-Selection has subsequently continued to campaign against prenatal diagnostic techniques and sperm separation techniques. By targeting the activities of private scanning clinics, such feminist networks have crucially raised awareness about the issue of female feticide and its roots in social and cultural structures. This has particularly been the case in India where the male bias of sex ratios have been a cause for alarm.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES

New pre-selective technologies have introduced more calculated choices for those wishing to sex select. More recent scientific developments have made it possible to “produce” a boy or girl child through such techniques as the Ericsson Method, which separates the x and y chromosomes before conception to increase the chances of having either a boy or a girl. Advertisements by private clinics offering the service in the U.S. and Europe boast that the method “has an 80 percent success rate of resulting in males” but that “procedures for girl children are also available,” implying that most potential customers would be interested in the former rather than the latter.

The worldwide web has become an important space in which providers of sex-selection procedures advertise their services. These clinics are based all over the world, with a majority operating in partnership with patented firms in the U.S., and many having offices or clinics also located in East Asia and South Asia. Thus, the internet sites present the services as having a reputable (Western) standard while also appearing to be understanding of the various specific social contexts in which sex selection might be appealing. These private clinics advertise to a broad audience globally with niche markets targeted by specific advertisement campaigns.⁵ The advertisements vary in terms of their target consumer populations, reflecting the variety of cultural contexts and markets that such clinics have identified. Many of the internet sites targeting “mainstream” audiences evoke references to the “choice” discourse of NRTs in enabling couples to have some control over the gender of the foetus while also having choices around which methods to use—natural or technological (<http://www.4-gender-selection.com>).

One pre-selective method, the Selnas Method, is based on a cyclical chart of a woman’s “energy cycle” to determine when the ovum accepts or rejects “x” or “y” chromosomes and gives couples the right times for intercourse according to this cycle to produce the desired sex. The Selnas Method is advertised on the internet at www.rightbaby.com and, for a fee of several hundred pounds, one can receive one of these charts with the reassurance from the company and its team of medical experts that pre-selecting the sex of one’s child can lead to a “a happy and balanced family” which “is the dearest wish for most of us.” The ad describes the Selnas Method as “Nature’s way of gender selection” and postulates that “there have been endless un-

proven and unreliable theories on how we might conceive the desired baby, often placing severe constraints on the Mother's health or the Father's purse."

Amidst these emerging trends, the use and availability of sex-selective technologies has drawn the attention of feminists, medical practitioners and others concerned with the ethics of the use of such reproductive technologies for the purpose of sex-selective abortions or pre-selection, particularly in contexts where son preference is prevalent. Sex-ratios in India against females have been one effect of the utilisation of these services. This is one area which has been the focus of attention by numerous demographic empirical studies (Das Gupta and Bhat 1997; Murthy 1998). While the demographic outcomes of sex selection have been worthy of attention, there has been scant attention given to the social activism that has emerged in response. Activism in the form of feminist networks, often converging with critical voices from the health sector, has been an important challenge to the development of sex selection and its proliferation.

GENDER, THE INTERNET AND FEMINIST NETWORKS

Attention to the gendered impacts of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs)⁶ has to date been primarily concerned with the changes that they have introduced to employment and the organisation of work within various economic sectors (Wacjman 1991; Cooke 2000; Standing 1999).⁷ While a number of areas have been explored in studies illustrating the masculine and gendered backdrop to the ascendance of ICTs in terms of their development and impacts (van Zoonen 2002; Kirkup 1992; Benston 1992; Arun and Arun 2002), it is argued here that there has been a distinct bias towards analyses of employment and sectoral trends and not enough attention to the actual use of ICTs for social and political organising, apart from a few studies (Hamm 2001; Rodgers 1999; Rogers 2003).

Women's organisations have utilised the internet for consolidating their lists of contacts and affiliations, and the manner in which they have done so has often enabled the transformation of contacts into networks promoting feminist agendas. The organisation of workshops, hosting of online chat rooms, publicising of data and research, circulation and signing of petitions and the distribution of news reports relating to gender and feminist activity have been some of the ways that the internet has been used by women's organisations. The internet has enabled many organisations to overcome or even to sidestep geographical and political national border restrictions upon communication, making it an indispensable tool for feminist organising.

The potentials for the internet to overcome barriers of communication can be illustrated in the numerous social movements and e-democracy initiatives around the world which have utilised such technologies to mobilise, campaign and publicise their activities to a wider political community.⁸

That the internet is a more egalitarian electronic meeting ground has been espoused by some feminists who have claimed that the internet has provided a medium through which women and other subordinated groups can communicate and create collective networks (Spender 1995). Some “cyberfeminists” have gone as far as to counter the more general observations of masculinist technology and have argued that the internet actually create spaces and possibilities for counter-hegemonic feminist, even gender hybrid (Haraway 1991), discourses and practices not otherwise possible outside of cyberspace (Plant 1995). On the other hand, the limited monitoring of content and information flows on the internet has also seen the exponential increase of pornography and an unsolicited medium for sexual harassment, showing how such technologies have also enabled other less progressive possibilities. Further, ensuing debates regarding equitability of access, language and representation of voice through the internet have raised questions as to how egalitarian the internet actually is (Jordan 2001). In this respect, claims that the internet is in fact a “women’s medium” (Turkle 1995; Spender 1995) have continued alongside critical questions about disparities of proliferation and dissemination of information technology between “developed” and “developing” countries (Sardar 1996).⁹

The internet has had a tremendous impact upon the methods of political organising that have evolved since the inception of the world wide web and email. Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs), women’s organisations and other civil society groups have utilised the internet for making contact with individuals and other organisations in disseminating information about their aims and activities. The internet has facilitated political activism and action for those women who have access to networked facilities by allowing them to communicate across vast distances through a medium which is relatively cheap and effective as a communication tool (Birke and Henry 1993; Rogers 2003). There have been a plethora of web sites set up by women’s organisations, namely since the period following the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 which was the first UN world conference to actively promote the use of online information access and communication. References to science and technology in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1999) acknowledge that science and technology affect women’s lives in many different areas. The Platform for Action makes recommendations for women’s groups, NGOs, governments, development institutions and private sector organisations to take various types of steps to direct science and technology policies and development programs towards goals aiming for gender equality. OFAN (The Once and Future Action Network) is an international network which has been active in highlighting the negative impacts that technologies have upon the lives of women. It has been particularly vocal in lobbying at international conferences, focusing upon potentials for redirecting scientific innovation to promote gender equality and pointing out women’s contributions to the fields of science and technology. Initially

set up as a formal network, OFAN now operates informally, facilitating dialogue across women's groups and NGOs through their website (OFAN 2004).

The Canadian-based Womenspace is another example of how feminist networks are circulated and sustained using the web (Womenspace 2004). The web site of Womenspace focuses upon the effects and implications of ICTs for women and equality issues, promoting the visibility of women in a range of areas including gender based analysis of government ICT policies, publicising activities of various women's organisations in Canada and promoting women's electronic networks. Both OFAN and Womenspace represent the intuition of such networks, not only to promote a more gender-aware implementation of ICT activities, but also to utilize the internet as a medium for networking.

The use of the internet by NGOs, however, has been a relatively recent trend. For example, of the 83 NGOs registered for a regional intergovernmental meeting on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the Asia and Pacific region, 68 had an email address, compared to four years earlier at the 1995 conference when practically no participating NGOs had an email contact (AWORC 2000). The expansion of access to the internet by women's organisations needs, of course, to be understood within the context of the period from the mid-1990s onwards when, alongside the spread of internet and email access, there was a simultaneous increase in the NGO sector globally. The internet has since become an indispensable tool for such organisations to maintain sustained activity and to remain in contact with other feminist and women's organisations, as well as with donors. The rise of both NGOs and the internet reflect aspects of some of the decentralising processes of globalisation, at least in terms of the articulation of political identity and social activism. The internet has thus become a central feature of many networks, for which email and the world wide web have facilitated dialogues between and across various interests in building dialogues.

CHALLENGING SEX SELECTION ON THE INTERNET

There are a number of campaigns, websites and organisations utilising the internet to challenge and oppose sex selection. The websites of these campaigns provide examples of how networks can be developed in a virtual setting, connecting otherwise dispersed interest groups and individuals, here referred to as "internet-works." Internet-works, as illustrated in this section, draw upon the world wide web as both a medium for organising and a source of information. Not all organisations collaborating with these networks are overtly "feminist" in their overall approaches. However, their activism and opposition to female feticide makes this aspect of their networking activities feminist in their commitment to principles of gender equality and non-discrimination towards women and girls. In this section, three organisations

will be examined specifically in terms of their networking activities relating to sex selection. The internet-based network, Global Reproductive Health Forum (GRHF)/BOL, and two Indian organisations, the Datamation Foundation and CEHAT (Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes) have all used the internet to generate a critical discussion of female feticide. Each, however, has its own approach and has contributed to the forging of internet-works in its own way.

Bol: An E-discussion List of the Global Reproductive Forum@Harvard

The GRHF@Harvard is a project set up by the Harvard School of Public Health. The GRHF was initiated in the mid-1990s as an internet networking project to encourage discussions about gender and reproductive health. It is supported by a vast state-of-the-art web-based research library, an e-newsletter and journal, and several electronic discussion forums. (GRHF 2004)

The electronic discussion list BOL, one of GRHF's discussion forums, has been moderated by the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) library in Delhi since 2000. BOL disseminates information about a range of gender issues including research projects, funding opportunities, gender and women's studies, judicial decisions and campaign information, to name a few. One of the most topical reproductive health-related issues in the South Asian region has been the worsening sex ratio, and in this context, BOL has been instrumental in facilitating the outcry against female feticide to a national and international level. The e-discussion list has circulated newspaper articles and references to newly published resources on female feticide to those on the e-list. The collation and consolidation of such information has contributed to a significantly raised awareness of feticide which has gone far beyond the rhetorical reference to census statistics. It has supplemented the statistical evidence through local reports and commentary on individual cases and legal limitations to tackling female feticide.

One of the most notable topics discussed on BOL has been the Pre-Natal Act in India which made illegal the use of ultrasound technology for sex selection purposes in 1994. However, the continually declining sex ratio against females has made it evident that despite the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, those who have wanted to do so have still been gaining access to such technologies. BOL provided a forum in which various reports and commentaries on feticide could be publicised in a manner that engaged with populist and journalistic coverage of the phenomenon, while maintaining a commitment to activism and scholarship. Under the subject heading "Issues of Current Concern," various examples of the continuing violation of the PNDT Act were highlighted by contributors to the discussion list. In one contribution, a local newspaper article from a city in Punjab was reported in which a scanning clinic was found to be offering "mobile" services. This was being done through the use of a portable ultrasound scanner which, the article

pointed out, can be attributed to the increasing access to sex selection even in rural areas. Such a report showed how the ban on the practice of prenatal sex identification has not stopped the services from being offered and bought.¹⁰ In another series of contributions, there was an exchange amongst several e-discussion subscribers around questions set out by the moderator, with regard to how people perceive societal pressures to "produce" sons. The dialogue that ensued revealed a mixed reading of patriarchal norms in this respect, largely reflecting academic discourse on the subject. Female feticide was argued to be the result of heightening economic pressures to have sons. On the other hand, it was seen as part of a wider set of reproductive decisions in which girls are not always unwanted but conversely often desired. Several contributors made references to cases of couples already having one or two sons actually welcoming the birth of daughters.

The information that GRHF/BOL has distributed may not be unique in the sense that the articles and resources tend to be republished from original sources such as newspapers, academic journals, etc. However, the context of the virtual environment and its boundary-less distribution has meant that BOL has been successful in tapping into already-existing networks and organisations committed to issues around gender equality and reproductive health in forging new networks or alliances around female feticide.

CEHAT (Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes)

CEHAT¹¹ is a Mumbai-based health advocacy NGO which has been active in promoting public health in India. CEHAT is the research centre of a Trust whose trustees are all engaged in health activism of some form. CEHAT has been at the forefront of the nation-wide anti-sex selection movement (Figure 1) and was instrumental along with other women's and health groups in petitioning the Maharashtra government in the mid-1980s to ban sex selection tests. This was subsequently taken further to the central government which eventually led to the PNDT Act being passed in 1994.

CEHAT's campaign to ban sex selection has been primarily concerned with legislative measures to make all forms and methods of sex selection illegal. The passing of the PNDT Act in 1994 and then in the amendment of it in 2003 were landmark rulings which were the outcome of CEHAT and other organisations operating in this network of anti-sex selection activists and putting pressure upon state and national governments. CEHAT filed a public interest litigation in 2000 arguing that the PNDT Act of 1994 was neither being enforced nor abided by. The fact that the sex ratio continued to show a declining trend against females was evidence that sex selection was still being practice. Further, the original PNDT Act which had the ultrasound scan and foetal abortions in mind when it was compiled was not able to address the more recent pre-selective technologies now available in India. CEHAT was instrumental in both lobbying the government to amend the PNDT Act of 1994 to include pre-selective techniques and putting pressure upon the



Figure 1. Global Reproductive Health Forum (<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/grhf/>)

authorities to prosecute medical practitioners found guilty of providing sex selective services.

CEHAT's activities show a strong commitment to acting and engaging with local and regional structures in order to get its message across. CEHAT has made use of the internet in publicising its own activism around the subject. It has its own website (CEHAT 2004) where it gives a brief history of the campaign to ban sex selection in India and gives informative data about national, state and local level sex ratios. Existing legislation is explained in a manner which does not assume that legal frameworks necessarily mean an eradication of the practice. Rather, CEHAT's website gives a sense of a continuing campaign not only to ban but to ensure that a social message against the practice is delivered at many levels of society in order to be most effective. CEHAT's activism has in fact been an important component of the BOL e-discussion list, and CEHAT has certainly tapped into BOL's network during its campaign to amend the PNDD.

The Datamation Foundation

The Datamation Foundation is another Indian-based NGO which has aimed to publicise the need to promote more gender-sensitive IT projects. It runs a number of programs around the deployment of ICTs in addressing economic disadvantage and women's empowerment. One of its programs is the "Save the Girl Campaign" which was launched as an awareness raising project around the issue of female feticide.

The Datamation website (Datamation 2004; Figure 2) highlights the negative social impacts of female feticide and provides a space in which peo-

ple can petition against medical practitioners partaking in the practice, lobby the government, and access Indian newspaper articles on the subject. A state-wise database of clinics offering sex selection services is also offered on the site, potentially for activists to boycott or complain against. This is accompanied by a "pledge to stop female feticide" which collects advocates against female feticide and also accepts donations for distribution to women's groups and Datamation Foundation's anti-sex selection work. More importantly, however, are the Delhi-based network and India-wide network of NGOs working to challenge sex selection. Full contact details are given for each organisation to further strengthen the network. The web site also has the full written versions of the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PNDT) Act and the subsequent PNDT 2003 amendment. Mass email broadcasts on female feticide are sent to official bodies, medical practitioners and individuals from the campaign website to publicise the issue, and an online complaint tracking and recording system to be operational by partner women's groups is soon to be operated. Rather bold statements against female feticide in India are made across the web site which clearly state the organisation's view that female feticide breaches social and medical ethics.

The Datamation Foundation can be most easily understood as a social welfare organisation focusing its attention upon "women and the poor" and "marginalised communities." Its underlying aim is to raise awareness about and include women and the poor in the technological shifts going on in society. The approach of the Datamation Foundation falls solidly within the Women in Development (WID) framework which fundamentally believes that the inclusion of women in economic and planning processes will eventually trickle down the benefits to women. Experience has shown that this paradigm does little to challenge existing relations of gender and power. Indeed, more generally, there is a middle-class bias to internet use globally. The use of the internet by NGOs further emphasises this bias, revealing the limitations of the reach of networks formed via the internet. However, the violent nature of the practice of sex selection and its brutally anti-female implications allows for broad-based, diverse types of activities to co-exist within such networks forming a platform for communication. The formation of anti-sex selection internet-works has relied upon the website activities and the networking resources that such campaigns and networks as BOL, CEHAT and Datamation provide.

CONCLUSION

GRHF/BOL, CEHAT and the Datamation Foundation have taken equally oppositional stances to the practice of sex selection. All three have utilised the internet as a central organising and publicising tool in their campaigning against the practice of sex selection. The strategies which have been deployed

by the three organisations discussed here fall within the areas that Hamm (2001) identifies in her analysis of NGOs using ICTs to combat violence against women: information sharing; as an educational tool; networking and solidarity building; and providing alternative perspectives to the mainstream media. Communication about the issue of sex selection among organisations and individuals has been facilitated by the use of the internet in this respect. The cross-fertilisation of information about sex selection, local experiences, strategic approaches and broader connecting issues has been one of the overriding positive outcomes of the emergence of such internet-works. On the other hand, women's lower level of access to the internet and an increased male presence on the web generally still presents a challenge to the growth of feminist internet activism. Moreover, the middle-class base of internet access raises critical questions around the actual reach of such "internet-works": Is it merely middle-class feminists and/or activists speaking amongst themselves about an issue (sex selection) which they all clearly oppose? To what extent do such networks merely represent a consolidation of middle-class feminist networks rather than a new form and method of radical feminist activism?

As such, the application of the internet in the realm of feminist activism does not lead us to any clear indicators of social impact or change on its own. However, the use of the internet in campaigning against sex selection presents a vantage point from which the (mis)use of new reproductive technologies can be challenged. Furthermore, it is no wonder that such an interest in internet activism against sex selection has occurred in India, considering the technological diffusion that has taken place there. Becoming a world centre for the ICT industry and major exporter of highly skilled labour, India is also a fertile place for the consumption of technologies. The markedly discriminatory sex ratio against women therefore merely illustrates how technological capacity still needs to be met with socially equitable development. The campaigns analysed in this article clearly show a concerted concern with this conflict between technology and social development.

The feminist internet-works discussed here have been part of a general heightened awareness of sex selection in South Asia. Even more significantly, the types of internet-works focused upon in this article have contributed to a public critique of the anti-female sex ratio. Anti-sex selection campaigns both on the ground and on the internet have collectively guided public discourse and even lobbied the government, in the case of India, to take a firmer stance on the issue. The Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PNDT) Act of 1994 and its amendment in 2003 were the outcomes of the influence that feminist networks can have, showing how effective they can be. Indeed, the internet was an important medium through which some of the campaigning and lobbying occurred. The internet has been an indispensable tool for campaigns and organisations to respond to new challenges and practices presented by reproductive technologies and gender discriminatory practices.¹²

Feminist internet-works present possibilities for solidarity building

across not only organisations, but also communities and nations. GRHF/BOL, perhaps more than the other examples looked at here, embodies this process as a transnational network. Web-based networking as a method of political organising can indeed supersede national boundaries. Such boundaries, which may have once seemed impermeable to local level NGOs, are now continually being crossed through email messages and internet chat rooms. The implications of this upon the future of feminist organising are only beginning to unravel (Youngs 2002). However, the internet is not enough of an organising tool to combat sex selection on its own. Activism still requires individuals and groupings to challenge and speak out against sex selection on-the-ground, not just in cyberspace. Some of the most difficult barriers to overcome in advocating and promoting social change exist *within communities*, such as class, race, caste or gender inequalities. Thus, "face-to-face" or "on-the street" activism is as vital as are exchanges of information via the internet. The internet merely provides an increasingly essential component to multi-pronged efforts to challenge sex selection.

ABBREVIATIONS

APC	Association for Progressive Communication
AWORC	Asian Women's Resource Center
BOL	"Bol" in Hindi means "speak"
CEHAT	Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes
CWDS	Centre for Women's Development Studies
EZLN	Zapatista National Liberation Army
GRHF	Global Reproductive Health Forum
HRI	Human Rights Internet
ICTs	Information Communication Technologies
ILO	International Labour Organisation
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
NRTs	New reproductive technologies
OFAN	Once and Future Action Network
PNDT	Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WID	Women in Development

NOTES

1. Sex selection is a social practice which includes various techniques for choosing the sex of newborn babies. Sex selection is enabled by pre-selective reproductive techniques, foetal abortions and even the killing of newborn babies, if not of the desired sex.
2. There is another "mainstream" debate amongst feminists about the use of NRTs for sex selection. This does not merely apply to those preferring sons but also to those wishing to tailor their family's gender balance, particularly seen to be prevalent among more affluent groups. Feminist critics such as

Steinbacher and Holmes (1985); Hanmer (1985); Mies (1987) and Wacjman (1994) all argue that the development of reproductive technologies has been yet another means by which the systematized control over women and their bodies has been perpetrated. Thus, even sex selection for girls would fall within this and be equally problematic.

3. See C. Fair (1996) whose study of feticide amongst Vancouver Sikhs focuses upon the activist lobby presented by South Asian women's groups. One organisation in particular, Mahila, circulated leaflets in Canada about "son selection" drawing attention to its roots in patriarchal attitudes.
4. In 2003 the PNDDT Act was amended to include pre-selective techniques and to include further regulatory measures to crack down on sex selection.
5. An example of a company based in the United States specifically targeting the South Asian diaspora is given by C. Fair (1996). The clinic offers prenatal scanning and panders to the preference to have sons. This particular firm has clinics in Canada and the United Kingdom and has benefited from the internet for advertising as earlier newspaper advertisements resulted in a large-scale politicized campaign in the Vancouver area against the company and newspaper for the adverts. The internet has proven to be an illusory tool against such opposition.
6. ICTs refer to all communications technologies, including the telephone, mobile phones, television/video, fax, world wide web, etc. The internet more specifically refers to the world wide web and email and quite significantly represents a convergence of all these various technologies. Here therein the internet (worldwide web and email) will be focused upon in this article.
7. For an interesting case study of some of the contradictory impacts of IT on the telecommunications industry see Sim and Yong 1995.
8. One of the most widely acknowledged examples of this is the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas Mexico which utilised the internet extensively in its organisational practices.
9. The growing divide between those with access and those without access to the internet is recognised by international organisations such as the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) and ILO (International Labour Organisation). This recognition can also be seen in the establishment of organisations directly addressing this gap such as The Association for Progressive Communication (APC) and Human Rights Internet (HRI).
10. See Note 4 above. Petitions led by organisations such as Jagori and CEHAT were central to the amendment of the original PNDDT Act in 2003.
11. CEHAT also means "health" in Hindi.
12. An illustration of a response by a feminist "internet-work" to such developments is a 2001 press statement made by a conglomeration of 11 Delhi women's organisations/NGOs. The statement also appeared on the BOL list and appeared as follows: "We, the undersigned women's organisations, health activists, lawyers and concerned individuals are writing to express our deep concern about the advertisement "Gender selection is now a reality!" from Gen-select appeared in Times of India. We were shocked to see this advertisement in Times of India on 14th and 16th November, 2001 twice in a span of a week. While it is not surprising for a private company to promote such an advertisement for their commercial and monetary gains, it is unacceptable that a leading newspaper like Times of India is carrying this

advertisement not once but twice. You are no doubt aware that sex determination by any means is a violation of the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act and has been strongly opposed by health activists, lawyers, women's groups and concerned individuals. Giving the option to couples to choose their future child's sex based on their preference, further promotes to sex/gender discrimination...." (Excerpt from Press Release, 21 November 2001, BOL moderated list).

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