

Indian minister wants compulsory prenatal sex tests

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India's children's minister has called for mandatory tests to determine the sex of an unborn child to try to counter high levels of female foeticide, sparking fierce criticism Tuesday from women's activists.

Prenatal sex tests are officially illegal in India, a policy designed to stop so many unborn girls being aborted by parents desperate for a boy.

But in a speech late Monday, Women and Child Development Minister Maneka Gandhi said a more effective strategy would be to record the sex of a foetus at the outset of the pregnancy and then monitor its progress.

"How long are we going to keep making criminals out of people? How long are we going to put the onus on sonographers?"

"My view is why not change the present policy. Every pregnant woman should be compulsorily told whether it is a boy or girl," Gandhi said.

"When a woman becomes pregnant it should be registered and that way you will be able to monitor right until the end whether she gave birth or not and what happened," she said in the western city of Jaipur.

Parents and doctors can be jailed for up to five years for asking for or conducting a pre-natal sex test. But the tests are still thought to be widespread, particularly in impoverished rural areas.

A 2011 study in the British medical journal The Lancet found that up to 12 million girls had been aborted in the last three decades in India.

India had 940 females for every 1,000 males, according to the last official census published in 2011, up from 933 in 2001 in a trend that some campaigners say vindicates the current policy of banning sex tests.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has previously spoken out against the killing of unborn girls, warning that the gender imbalance will have serious consequences for the country's development, although he has not addressed the issue of sex tests.

Gandhi, who is the sister-in-law of opposition leader Sonia Gandhi, said she was "just putting out this idea" which was being discussed with her ministerial counterparts.

"We have not reached a conclusion, we are still discussing the pros and cons," she said.

In a statement on Tuesday, her office said there was no "formal proposal" being considered by her ministry after some local media quoted her as saying one was being discussed in cabinet.

'Enormous pressure'

Women's rights groups said a change of policy would result in women from rural areas coming under even more pressure from families to have an abortion.

"This is not a very productive idea, in fact it could make things worse," Ranjana Kumari, director of the Delhi-based Centre for Social Research think-tank, told AFP.

"This might work among educated women, but not for large numbers of women living in rural areas who are still under enormous pressure to live up to the social and cultural traditions to have a boy."

The All India Democratic Women's Association said Gandhi's proposal was "shocking" and appeared aimed at absolving the medical profession of responsibility for foeticide levels.

"It will fuel a proliferation of illegal facilities for getting rid of unwanted female foetuses," the organisation said in a statement.

"What is required is a continued and stringent implementation of the present act, which has clearly acted as a deterrent wherever it has been used effectively."

Since coming to power, Modi has sought to position himself as a champion of women's rights, emphasising education for girls and an end to female foeticide in a country where boys are seen as more desirable than girls.

A year ago, Modi urged a largely female audience in Haryana—the state with the lowest ratio of female to male births—to resist pressure from family and society to abort girls.

And in July he launched a Twitter campaign #SelfieWithDaughter appealing to parents to post snapshots with their daughters to tackle the skewed sex ratio.

Maneka Gandhi's was one of the more eye-catching appointments to Modi's cabinet given her family ties to the main opposition Congress party.

She is the widow of Sanjay Gandhi, whose mother Indira was

assassinated in 1984 while prime minister.

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