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'Unwanted' Indian girls get new start in name ceremony



Girls are often seen as a burden by their families, particularly in poor rural areas

More than 200 Indian girls whose names mean "unwanted" in Hindi have been given a fresh start at a mass renaming ceremony in Maharashtra state.

They had been called Nakusha by parents who would have preferred sons.

Hundreds of people committed to fighting gender discrimination attended the ceremony in rural Satara district.

Statistics show a continuing preference for boys in India. The gender imbalance has widened every decade since independence in 1947.

According to the 2011 census, there were 914 girls for every 1,000 boys under the age of six, compared with 927 for every 1,000 boys in the 2001 census.

Female foeticide remains common in India, although sex-selective abortion based on ultrasound scans is illegal. Sons are still seen by many as wage-earners for the future.

'Very tough'

Satara, where the ceremony took place, has one of the country's lowest female populations, with 880 females to every 1,000 males, says the BBC's Zubair Ahmed.

The local government said it wanted to combat negative attitudes towards girls, who are often seen as a burden by their families because of the dowry that has to be paid when they marry

The 285 girls at the ceremony ranged in age from one to 20. One 15-year-old chose the new name "Ashmita," meaning "very tough" in Hindi.

A 16-year-old, the youngest of six sisters, said she had chosen her new name with the help of a school friend.

"It'll take time for people to get used to my new name."

"I know people will still call me Nakusha. I want to give them happiness by saying my new

name is Kiran."