ON THE latest leg of her Indian tour, Canadian demographer Dr Carol Vlassoff released her new book, "Gender Equality and Inequality in Rural India: Blessed With a Son," on Friday to show her research findings on the severe gender bias towards sons in India. Vlassoff, also a professor of epidemiology at the University of Paris, said the book looks at the intersection of long-standing cultural norms, socio-economic context and a rising India. Gender bias affects the way women are viewed and treated in their communities, which on a larger scale determines their contribution to the global economy.

The author visited India for the first time at the age of 27. The large population of the country, as she says in her blog published in the New York Times in March, surprised her and intrigued her enough to find out the reason behind its rapid growth. Vlassoff, also a women's health specialist, said, "My book explores the intersection of long-standing cultural norms, socio-economic context and a rising India. Gender bias affects the way women are viewed and treated in their communities, which on a larger scale determines their contribution to the global economy."

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She found answers when she returned as a doctoral student in the 70s to University of Paris and undertook a research project at Gove Village in Satara from 1975 to 2008 that showed a severe gender bias towards sons.

Vlassoff said, "Most women said they wanted only three or four children, but they had an average of 5.6. The key determining factor was the number of sons they had - they were holding children until a boy was born. I completed two follow-up studies in Gove in 1987 and 2008. In 2008, sons preference was still evident. For every village girl aged 6 or younger, there were 1.4 boys."

Dr Shradha Agharkhedkar, a pediatrician at DY Patil Medical College, said, "Vlassoff, with a decade-long career at WHO, who has focused on women empowerment and highlighted the country's preference for male children which is getting in the way of economic growth and women welfare."

Apart from promoting male sterilization, Vlassoff also spoke about the promising government pilot project "Honeymoon Package" which was initiated in Satara District in 2007 to promote reproductive health and improve the sex ratio.