FEMALE FOETICIDE AND GENDER INEQUALITY IN INDIA

ARITRA GHOSH
UGC Project Fellow & Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Sociology
University of Kalyani, Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal

RIMI SARKAR
Project Scholar, Department of Sociology, University of Kalyani, Nadia &
Guest Lecturer, Chapra Bangaljhi Mahavidyalaya, Chapra, Nadia, W.B.

ABSTRACT

Women who constitute half a human population have been discriminated, harassed and exploited irrespective of the country to which they belong, unmindful of the religion which they profess and oblivious of the timeframe in which they live. Everywhere women are confronted with many challenges. Female foeticide is perhaps one of the worst forms of violence against women where a woman is denied her most basic and fundamental right i.e. “the right to life”.

Killing of female child has been a phenomenal characteristic of Indian society under the rule of patriarchy since ancient days. The practice first dubbed as female infanticide came into vogue due to the lack of scientific discovery and unavailability of modern and progressive technology and sophisticated sex determining instruments. With sufficient availability and...
extensive supply of such sophisticated sex determination techniques in the health institutions and clinics, there have been hundreds of incidences of female foeticide surfacing and hence assuming an alarming proportion across the country at present. It seems that the sex determination test leading to identification of the sex of unborn child has made the practice of killing the female child unnoticed and easier than before. The practice that commenced in India under the influence of the deeply rooted patriarchy, that is, to prove the strength of man over woman, has also been influenced by poverty and dowry. The practice of the phenomenon of female foeticide in India has immensely contributed to gender inequality.

The child sex ratio has dropped from 945 girls (0 – 6 yrs) per 1000 boys (0 – 6 yrs) in 1991 to 927 girls per 1000 boys in 2001 to 914 girls per 1000 boys in 2011. Female foeticide in 21st century India is a biggest challenge against the laws of the land in general and women's empowerment in particular. Eradication of this practice is the urgent need of the hour and thus becomes a genuine concern of each one of us.

This paper portrays the condition of female foeticide and mention how it related to other major issues i.e. child sex ratio and gender inequality.

KEY WORDS: Female foeticide; female infanticide; child sex ratio; gender inequality

INTRODUCTION

Sex-based discrimination has been studied extensively in the context of son preference in South and Southeast Asia (Dreze and Sen 1989, Gupta 1987, Qian 2008). Differential care given to boys over girls and sex-selective abortions has resulted in an estimated 30 to 70 million "missing" women in India and China alone. While one might expect economic growth to erode such discrimination, son preference (as evidenced by skewed sex ratios) has been persistent despite high growth rates in these countries (Gupta et al. 1998).
Women who constitute half a human population have been discriminated, harassed and exploited irrespective of the country to which they belong, unmindful of the religion which they profess and oblivious of the timeframe in which they live.1 Everywhere women are confronted with many challenges. Female foeticide is perhaps one of the worst forms of violence against women where a woman is denied her most basic and fundamental right i.e “the right to life”. The phenomenon of female foeticide in India is not new, where female embryos or foetuses are selectively eliminated after pre-natal sex determination, thus eliminating girl child even before they are born. In some parts of the country, the sex ratio of girls to boys has dropped to less than 800:1000. The long standing tradition of son preference, coupled with medical technology now gives to the status conscious Indian families, the choice between payment of large dowry for their daughters and elimination of daughters. The traditional method of getting rid of the unwanted girl child was female infanticide, where the female baby was done away with after birth in various ways. With the advancement of medical technology sophisticated techniques can now be used or rather misused, to get rid of her before birth. Through ultrasound scans and amniocentesis, the sex of the foetus can be determined during the pregnancy of the woman and then the foetus is aborted if found to be female.

In Indian society, female foeticide has emerged as a burning social problem during the last few years. The girl child in India is treated right from her birth as an additional burden an extra mouth to feed, a liability and another man’s property. The birth of a son is regarded as essential in Hinduism and many prayers and plentiful offerings are made in temples in the hope of having a male child. “Women have equal rights with men upon earth; in religion and society they are a very important element. Divine Justice demands that the rights of both sexes should be equally respected since neither is superior to the other in the eyes of Heaven.” The sex ratio has altered consistently in favour of boys since the 20th century to still continue (see Table), and the effect has been most pronounced in the states
of Punjab, Haryana and Delhi. It was in these states that private foetal sex determination clinics were first established and the practice of selective abortion became popular from the late 1970s. Worryingly, the trend is far stronger in urban rather than rural areas, and among literate rather than illiterate women.

**SEX RATIO (FEMALES PER 1000 MALES) AND CHILD SEX RATIO (GIRLS PER 1000 BOYS IN THE AGE 0 – 6 YRS), INDIA, 1961 – 2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sex Ratio</th>
<th>Child Sex Ratio (0 – 6 Yrs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>941</td>
<td>976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>930</td>
<td>964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>934</td>
<td>962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>929</td>
<td>945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>933</td>
<td>927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>940</td>
<td>914</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source - www.academia.edu/.../Tables_on_Sex_Ratios_in_India_and_World*

No doubt, if this practice continues it will disturb the social balance and it may lead to serious problems like increase in sexual offences, sharing of women within and outside wedlock and greater insecurity to women.

**FEMALE FOETICIDE AND FEMALE INFANTICIDE THROUGH SEX DETERMINATION IN INDIA**

Female foeticide is aborting the female baby in the mother’s womb. Whereas female infanticide is killing a baby girl after she is being born. The practice of killing the female child after her birth has been prevailing in our society for many years. But foeticide is the legacy and contribution of the progress made by the medical science. Amniocentesis was introduced in 1975 to detect foetal abnormalities but it soon began to be used for determining the sex of the baby. Ultrasound scanning, being a non-invasive technique, quickly gained popularity and is now available in some of the most remote rural areas.
Both techniques are now being used for sex determination with the intention of abortion if the foetus turns out to be female.

With the advent of privatization and commercialization, the use of pre-natal diagnostic technologies is growing into a thriving business in India. This is primarily for the purpose of sex determination selective abortion of the female foetus. The misuse of technology simply reinforces the secondary status given to girl children in such a way that they are culled out even before they are born. Compared to infanticide, foeticide is probably a more acceptable means of disposing off the unwanted girl children. Infanticide can be an overtly barbaric and inhuman practice while foeticide that is carried out by skilled professionals is a medical practice that uses scientific techniques and skills and reduces the guilt factor associated with the entire exercise.

The provisional census 2011 and the recent news reports data indicate a grim demographic picture of declining female to male ratios. Surprisingly the most affected states are progressive states like Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Gujarat. What are the main causes of declining sex ratio in Indian society? It is due to female foeticide and female infanticide. Foeticide is a violation of an unborn child. It also has implication on the health of the mother. At the wider level, it affects status of women and has serious ecological and demographical ramification. It is a serious problem that affects the life and health of society.

CHILD SEX RATIO AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN INDIA

The decline in India's sex ratio during the 20th century has been the subject of much discussion in recent years. Sex-selective abortion of the female foetus following a prenatal diagnostic test is widely believed to be the major contributor to this phenomenon. This fact
sheet explores factors that are known to influence the sex ratio of a population. It argues that the way forward would be through addressing the root causes of sex determination, namely gender discrimination manifested through son-preference and daughter-neglect.

UNDERSTANDING SEX RATIOS

⇒ According to the conventional definition, sex ratio = (number of males/number of females) per 100 population. However, in India, we usually define sex ratio as (number of females/number of males) per 1,000 populations, at a specific point in time.
⇒ Population sex ratio is the ratio of females per 1,000 males in the entire population.
⇒ The child sex ratio is the ratio of females per 1,000 males in the 0-6 age-group.
⇒ Sex ratio at birth is the ratio of female live births per 1,000 male live births. The fact that more boys are born than girls has been known at least since the 17th century (1). A sex ratio at birth that lies between 934 and 952 females per 1,000 male births is considered to be within the normal range, based on observation over several decades for many countries (2). The sex ratio at birth is the most relevant indicator for examining the magnitude of sex-selective abortions.

The census of 2011 has brought much disquiet because the child sex ratio (0-6 years) declined yet again, from 927 girls per 1,000 boys in 2001 to 914 girls per 1,000 boys in 2011. This decline has been interpreted as the direct result of more sex-selective abortions of female foetuses taking place. However, it is important to note that in India, unlike most countries of the world, more girls than boys have been dying during childhood and this contributes to a decline in the child sex ratio.

Several other hypotheses have been put forward and examined to explain the reasons for a decline in the male sex ratio at birth. These include psychological stress in the mother,
especially in the first trimester of pregnancy; exposure to occupational and reproductive hazards by men; economic collapse; and conflicts or war.

- **In India, Under-Enumeration Of Female Births Has Been An Important Factor** - In India, the female-to-male ratio at birth had shown a decrease much before the advent of modern technologies of sex determination. SRB (sex ratio at birth) decreased from 934.6 females per 1,000 males during 1901-10, to 909 females per 1,000 males in 1940-46 in all the major provinces of British India except Bombay and Assam. This was because of deterioration in the completeness of vital registration data in British India.

- **Increase In Male Births Is An Important Factor Contributing To The Decrease In Female Sex Ratio At Birth** - India's demographic transition has given rise to a number of changes all of which have the effect of increasing the number of male births.

- **Declining Stillbirth And Miscarriage Rates** - Biologically more male foetal losses are likely through miscarriage or stillbirth. Advances in healthcare which bring about a decline in these rates will contribute to a slight increase in the proportion of male births. This is corroborated by data from NFHS-1 and NFHS-2. These show that the sex ratio at birth has a higher proportion of males for women who have had trained attendance at delivery.

- **Limiting Family Size** - Evidence from many studies based on large data sets shows that, biologically, there are more males than females among first births. The proportion of male births declines with each subsequent birth (13-14). This means that when couples limit their family size, and therefore fewer children of higher order are born, the proportion of male births will increase.

- **Family Formation Strategies** - In societies with a high preference for sons, the adoption of a small family norm often leads to couples stopping childbearing as soon as they beget one or two male children. Because there are relatively more male first
and second births, the proportion of male births in the population may increase to some extent as a result of this.

FEMALE FOETICIDE AND GENDER INEQUALITY

Killing of female child has been a phenomenal characteristic of Indian society under the rule of patriarchy since ancient days. The practice first dubbed as female infanticide came into vogue due to the lack of scientific discovery and unavailability of modern and progressive technology and sophisticated sex determining instruments. With sufficient availability and extensive supply of such sophisticated sex determination techniques in the health institutions and clinics, there have been hundreds of incidences of female foeticide surfacing and hence assuming an alarming proportion across the country at present. It seems that the sex determination test leading to identification of the sex of unborn child has made the practice of killing the female child unnoticed and easier than before. The practice that commenced in India under the influence of the deeply rooted patriarchy, that is, to prove the strength of man over woman, has also been influenced by poverty and dowry. The practice of the phenomenon of female foeticide in India has immensely contributed to gender inequality. The belief that the higher incidence of female foeticide was committed among the rural people, the poor, the uneducated and those unable to pay the dowry has been proved wrong at the present juncture of time. The practice of female foeticide now is seen increasingly disseminating from the country's rural, poor and uneducated to the urban, affluent and educated classes as well. It seems to be showing a moving trend and rather getting further escalated even with the improvement in the living standard of the average of India's population, growth in per capita income, rise in the rational thinking and development in the educational and cultural level of the society. From past to the present society, enormous efforts had been undertaken by the social thinkers, reformers and philanthropists to put an end to the practice of killing of the female
child, either in the form of female infanticide or female foeticide. In spite of all their efforts, the practice has been continued and posing a big threat to the mankind by creating unendurable imbalance in male female population of the country. The laws are not adequate and effective to curb the menace created by the practice of female foeticide. Even the law enforcing agencies are seen as ineffective and weak as that of the law itself to check the growing practice of female foeticide in the country. With judiciary's professed commitment to eradicate female foeticide by punishing all those responsible for the terrible crime the rise of this crime has remained unabated. Selective abortions of the female foetuses have become a common trend and led to disturb the male-female ratio in the country over a period of time. Female foeticide in 21st century India is a biggest challenge against the laws of the land in general and women's empowerment in particular. Eradication of this practice is the urgent need of the hour and thus becomes a genuine concern of each one of us.

CONCLUSION

Days are not so far, when there may be emergence of the situation where brides will not be available for the marriage of the sons to maintain lineage and continue the human race of even those people who believe on long standing tradition of son preference, that “only sons can offer Pyre Pindadana, Mukhagni and not the daughters”. Therefore it is felt that the mindsets of the people should be changed right from now towards the importance of the girl child in the family in both rural and urban area. There is an urgent need to alter the demographic composition of India’s population and to tackle this brutal form of violence against women. The enactment of any law is not sufficient; laws must be adhered to and applied rigorously, before any change in the status of women can take place. In spite of the Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act many incidences of female foeticide are taking place in India. There is still supreme controversy as to who will
serve as the watchdog to control the misuse of the practice of female foeticide. Promoting gender balanced society involves targeting behavioural changes in society which in turn involves a long term community based intervention, awareness programmes, programmes to promote girl children’s right, addressing myths related to sons/daughters and concerted efforts to change the mindset of people.

Apart from the above, a feeling has to be inculcated in the minds of the people that she is the daughter, she is the sister, she is the mother and she is the life partner of a man.

REFERENCES


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