

Invisible Lives: The Crisis of Female Foeticide and Infanticide in India

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Abstract

Due to societal and patriarchal norms, having a male off-spring is a preference in many Indian societies. Female foeticide, infanticide, and sex-selective practices are stark reminders of the persistent gender inequalities in our society. Abuse of the ultra-sound and Amniocentesis techniques have contributed to the prevalence of such unethical and unlawful practices. Despite legal prohibitions, these practices continue to thrive in both urban and rural settings, driven by socio-cultural norms that favour sons over daughters. Addressing this issue requires a multi-dimensional strategy, combining legal enforcement with education, empowerment, and attitudinal change.

Keywords: Foeticide, Infanticide, Amniocentesis, Sex-determination, PCPNDT Act

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I. Introduction

Selective abortion of female foetus after prenatal sex determination is referred to as female foeticide. On the other hand, killing of a female girl child after birth purposefully is known as female infanticide. Abortion of foetus based on gender is a recent phenomenon. With the availability of cutting-edge technologies like Ultrasonography, Amniocentesis etc., which help in the detection of the genetic and chromosomal abnormalities, there is a steep rise in the demand for revelation of the gender of the foetus. In fact, in many urban and rural areas, clandestine sex determination continues, often disguised as routine medical procedures. In India, traditional customs, rituals and beliefs have always preferred sons over daughters. But no moral or ethical principle supports such a procedure for gender identification. Hence, the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act, 1994 was passed to stop these unlawful practices. Even then sex determination before birth and consequently foeticide can be found irrespective of place of residence, caste, educational status and economic condition. It is no surprise that all these have directly resulted in alarming conditions of imbalance in the male-female sex ratio. The deficit in the number of females as compared to males is distinct in many parts of India, including prosperous urban and rural areas. The preference of male off-spring over females at birth, during childhood and in the reproductive phase has raised serious discussions and deliberations for their far-reaching ill effects. In his article, Amartya Sen (1990) has revealed that sex ratio is significantly lower in Asia. The concept of "missing women" as articulated by Sen, refers to the observed deficit in the number of women within a population compared to the expected number in the absence of gender discrimination. He argued that this difference is not due to natural demographic occurrence but rather a consequence of socio-demographic and financial factors that is responsible for killing of girl child and sex-selective practices. The term "missing" powerfully conveys the idea that these women are not simply absent from population statistics but have been lost due to preventable causes rooted in gender bias. This phenomenon underscores a fundamental issue of gender injustice, extending beyond mere demographic statistics to reveal a systemic devaluation of female lives in certain societies, resulting in premature deaths or the prevention of female births. The sheer magnitude of the estimated numbers serves as a stark reminder of the gravity of this problem. Female foeticides and female infanticide rise above castes, creed, region and communities. Though a series of government circulars banned the sex determination tests during 1977, yet a study by Kulkarni (1986) observed that 84 percent of the gynaecologists have admitted that they have performed amniocentesis for detection of gender of the foetus. Gangrade (1988) mentioned that almost ten thousand cases of murder of female foetus were reported from the city of Ahmedabad alone (Tandon and Sharma, 2006). It is thus evident that despite measures adopted through legal and social reforms, deep-rooted patriarchal norms, economic factors, and weak enforcement of laws perpetuate female foeticide, infanticide, and gender discrimination in India.

Historical And Cultural Context

Favouring male sons and abandonment of daughters are entrenched in ancient cultural, religious, social customs and economic traditions. These customs have formed family structures and gender roles for centuries

and continued bias towards females. Also, historically even during the colonial and post-independence period, certain Indian communities have continued this inhuman practice of infanticide. Some of the traditional factors which has contributed to this gender bias and subsequently killing of female foetus and female child are discussed below.

Religious and Ritual Importance of Sons

According to Hindu traditions, funeral related rituals of parents are carried out by sons and hence sons are considered as their only source of salvation. According to Jayachandran (2023), opinion data in the year 2022 revealed that majority (63%) of Indians favour sons to take over the responsibilities of parents and only 1% of them prefer daughters to do so.

Patrilocality and Patrilineality

In India, traditionally women have to relocate to their husband's family home after wedding and sons are expected to take care of his own parents. Thus, sons are believed as long-term providers while daughters are perceived as "Paraya Dhan" as they would eventually move to another family after marriage. In case of inheritance of property, a son is regarded as a worthy heir and thus carry the lineage and family name. Hence, male heirs are important to a family for both economic and social reasons.

Economic Factors and the Dowry System

The custom of dowry, in which a girl's family has to provide a significant amount of money and also gifts to the groom, is another important cause of concern. In dowry system, a bride's family provides substantial gifts or money to the groom's family and this is a financial burden for the bride's family. In contrast, having sons can bring cash and assets as dowry when they marry. Sons are also expected to provide financial support to parents in old age, while daughters, once married, are unlikely to contribute materially to their natal families. The fear of not being able to afford a suitable dowry often leads families to avoid having daughters.

Social Status and Security

Watts (2024) mentions that a widowed mother is dependent on sons for both security and financial needs. In fact, Jayachandran (2015) mentions that there is a common saying in India which represents the notion of investing in a daughter as equivalent to watering the garden of a neighbour than watering own garden. Due to the practice of dowry in certain societies of India, it is considered as a loss for the household to raise a girl and then eventually pay a hefty amount of money for her wedding to the groom's side. This clearly demonstrates the attitude of a household which considers sons as the only source of their social status and security as a son would bring dowry at the time of his marriage.

Gender Roles and Labour Market Dynamics

Most of the job market has been vastly dominated by men and are found to earn more than women for the same sort of responsibilities. This also reinforces the idea that a male child would bring higher wealth and financial stability than a female child. In fact, role of a woman has been associated with household chores and care-giver roles which do not contribute to the earnings of the household.

Misuse of Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques

The main aim of the PCPNDT Act is to prohibit sex selection during the pregnancy and before the birth of the child in our country. It is also to regulate the use of pre-natal diagnostic techniques for legitimate medical purposes (e.g., detecting genetic or metabolic disorders, chromosomal abnormalities, etc.) and thus prevent female feticide and imbalanced sex ratio.

Small Family Norms

With increasing awareness and acceptance of smaller families, couples who desire at least one son may resort to sex-selective abortion if they conceive a daughter first. Kothari (2007) studies the implications of the two-child policy on the killing of and the status of women in the state of Rajasthan. The study finds evidence of missing women and these killings of female foetus and female infants caused by abortion of foetus due to the gender discrimination.

Lack of Awareness and Education

Lower levels of education among women can perpetuate traditional beliefs and make them more susceptible to pressure regarding family size and the sex of their children. Deeply ingrained cultural biases and traditions often overshadow the understanding of gender equality and the value of daughters.

Consequences of Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination, particularly through sex-selective practices, has led to demographic imbalances in many Indian states. Regions like Haryana, Punjab, and Rajasthan exhibit skewed sex ratios due to strong male child preference and patriarchal norms. Sekhar and Hatti (2010) analyse the scenario of sex preference and its consequences in the form of gender bias, oppression against women, killing of wives, etc. This leads to a shortage of women, resulting in social problems like increased violence against women, human trafficking for marriage, and difficulties in finding marital partners for men. India's child sex ratio (0-6 years) has shown a concerning decline in some regions. Gupta (2007) mentions about Jat boys travelling 3000 kms from Haryana and even travelling to as far as Kerala to search for a bride because of the scarcity of girls in Haryana. An imbalanced sex ratio can disrupt social harmony and create demographic instability. Moreover, there are consequences of such consequences on women too. Women who are coerced into sex-selective abortions or who commit infanticide face, severe psychological trauma and guilt. Definitely, a lower female population can impact the female labour force participation and overall economic productivity.

II. Conclusion And Remedial Measures

Although laws are enacted to stop sex determination; national policies and schemes are implemented for empowerment of women by improving their educational and economic status; the situation on female foeticide and female infanticide remains unchanged. One line solution to this type of deep-rooted problem is beyond imagination. An attempt can be made to uplift the moral and ethical values right from the childhood. Though moral lessons and ethics are included in syllabus and curriculum and they are taught and discussed in schools and colleges, but crisis of moral and ethical values are distinctly visible in every sphere of activities of our life. To tackle the deep-rooted problem of female foeticide, infanticide, and illegal sex determination, a multi-pronged approach is essential, combining awareness, legal enforcement, community participation, and systemic reforms.

Strengthen Legal Enforcement

Enforcement under the PCPNDT Act needs to be strictly maintained with regular inspections and audits of ultrasound clinics. Penalties and conviction rates for medical professionals and others involved in illegal sex determination should be maximised. Also, tools and technology (like tracking of ultrasound machine usage and digital Form F submission) can be better implemented to monitor and reduce violations.

Educating and Sensitizing Society

Launching of targeted awareness campaigns for pregnant women, families, and rural communities about the value of the girl child, the legal penalties for sex-selective practices, the social consequences of imbalanced sex ratio at different levels. Also, gender sensitivity education is essential in school curricula and community workshops.

Engaging more Healthcare Professionals

Higher emphasis is needed to train and sensitize doctors, nurses, and radiologists on ethical practices and their legal responsibilities. Also, ethical committees have to be set up in hospitals and diagnostic centres. Introduction of incentives and recognition for clinics that maintain ethical standards would definitely help in achieving the objective of protecting girl child.

Empowering Women and Promotion of Gender Equality

Increased awareness about the scope and benefits of support schemes Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana etc. among the rural masses is necessary. Intervention is needed regarding improvement in the access to maternal healthcare, nutrition, and reproductive rights at every corner of the country and promotion of female role models and success stories in public campaigns are other important steps which can be taken to empower women and promote gender equality.

Regulate Family Balancing Mentality

Since only promoting small family norms is not enough, families need to be guided about the unsustainability and harmful consequences of eliminating girl child and producing more male heirs. Gender-neutral parenting values in connection with small family norms should be promoted.

Utilize Media and Technology

It is no surprise that TV, social media, regional cinema play key roles in spreading positive message about the importance of daughters. Similarly, leveraging mobile-based platforms for anonymous reporting of violations and providing support services to women etc. can help in reducing these crimes against women.

Female feticide and sex determination are not just legal violations, but moral and social failures. Combating them requires a collective societal transformation, where laws are upheld, women are empowered, and every child regardless of its gender is celebrated and protected.

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