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Female Foeticide: Violence in the Womb

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Abstract

Preference for a male child over a female child is thus found to be universal, but unlike other societies, Indian discriminate, dislike and in their subconscious blame a girl child for her misery and misfortune. Religion, customs and traditions too play their own role in providing legitimacy to this discrimination value attached to the son is well explained in the blessing and good wishes showered on various occasions in everyday life. A strong preference for sons have led to practice of female infanticide in the past and female foeticide in last two decades. The abortion of female foetus, infanticide and bride burning at a later stage can be considered to be the most intensified discrimination against girls and women. The only reason for decreasing women population is – killing of girl fetus before birth. Owing to the advancement of science and technology and subsequent development of ultrasound technique, it is very easy to know the sex of the fetus within few months of its formation, so that couples who do not want to have girl child abort the fetus. In other words, they get their child murdered in the womb.

The preference for son is considered as the most important factor responsible for female foeticide because son provides security in the old age to parents, carries family names and performs last rites of parents. On the other hand analyzing factors responsible for female foeticide, it was found that due to the cost of marriage and dowry, girls are becoming liabilities for their parents. The other important factors such as increase in crime against women, sense of insecurity and sense of praya dhan, property of others are some of the other factors which lead to female foeticide in rural areas. As a result of selective abortion, around 35 to 40 million girls are missing from the Indian population. In some parts of the country, the sex ratio of girls to boys has dropped to less than 800:1,000. The sex ratio has altered consistently in favour of boys since the beginning of the 20th century and the effect has been most pronounced in the states of Punjab, Haryana and Delhi. It was in these states that private sex determination clinics were first established and the practice of selective abortion became popular from the late 1970s. This clearly reflected in the juvenile sex ratio for the country as a whole, dropped from 1927 to 914 girls per 1000 boys from 2001 to 2011 censuses. Various sociological studies have shown how crime against women is linked with adverse sex ratio. Several studies have categorically pointed out that technology is facilitating 'sex-perference' leading to elimination of the girl children in children even before birth. In the present paper, an attempt has been tried to know what are the factors responsible for female foeticide.

Keywords: Female Foeticide

1. Introduction

The girl child, like the male child, is essentially part of human. But then it is a different matter that society in this country idolizes sons. Right from childhood, girls are – moulded to accept the norms of patriarchal and male dominated society and thus they grow up accepting themselves to be inferior to boys. It is unfortunate that our society to consider 'male' as the bread-winner for the family, and therefore a more valuable asset than a girl who is looked upon as a liability in the family. In the pursuit of sons, women have become, with some pressure from the families, consumers of the new ultrasound technology which allows them to choose and bear sons (Jain, 2006).

Mauryal (1984) examined various census reports and found that from the beginning of the twentieth century, there is continuously decreasing ration of women per 1000 men in our population. He further pointed out that the declining sex ratio over a period of time is frightening issue for worry and also of research. The contemporary situation and status of girl children can be understood in the context of condition of women in the past. In the earlier time suppression of women in every sphere of life was a common feature. Neither law nor religion recognized or imply equality between the male and the female. Different norms are laid down to judge the social conducts. Thus female's disability starts from that fact that she is born as a girl and hence, the practices like female infanticide came into existence in the

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past which took the shape of female foeticide through sex-determination tests to eliminate the female child even before she is born.

Several demographers have made comments on the declining child sex ratio. (0.6 age group) revealed in the 2001 census. For example, Ashish Bose has coined the term, DEMARO to denote's Daughter Eliminating Male Aspiring Rage of Ultrasound' Ashish Bose and Mahendra Premi have drawn attention to what seems obvious, namely that since migration is minimal in this age group, the adverse sex ratio points to endemic female foeticide and infanticide in these states. The statistics provided by Premi on age specific death rates in the 0-4 and 5-9 age group sex, for the years 1986-1994 for India and the states, show that except Himachal Pradesh, the three states mentioned namely, Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat and also Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, have for the period covered a much highly mortality of female compared to males (Vishwanath, 2000).

Objectives

The major objectives of the present study are as follows :-

1. To know the socio-economic background of the respondents.
2. To what extent the practice of dowry and other factors are responsible for large scale female foeticide over the years, creating dangerous situations of declining sex ratio.

Methodology

The present study was carried out in two villages of Haryana. In total 720 respondents identified from both the villages, out of which 415 were from Bhagwatipur and 305 were from Dharoli village. Out of this we finally acceded interviewing 228 respondents from Bhagwatipur and 210 respondents from Dharoli village respectively. These villages were from Rohtak and Jind Districts.

An interview schedule was constructed for the purpose of data collection after necessary modification and corrections, we confined interviews to women who experienced pregnancy and its out come in the last five years. We interviewed women who are belonging to different background and who are has gone for more than one abortion to get at least one son. These respondents were females who got married 8 to 10 years ago and having at least one child. The period of 8-10 years was necessary to find out the chances of female foeticide after the birth of first issue.

Data Analysis

The present study is divided into two parts. In first, we have analysed the socio-economic background of the respondents such as caste, age, sex, martial status, education, occupation etc. In second part, we have tried to examine the factors responsible for female foeticide.

Part 1

The socio-economic background of the respondents shows that majority of the respondents were from upper castes followed by Middle Caste [included Khati, Kumhar, Nai, Sainis, Sunar etc. 20.09% lower caste which include Chamar and Balmiki. The respondents mostly in the age group 31 to 35 years were 36.76% women in the peak productive age group of 25 to 35 years. Female respondents were divided into different occupational categories of services, labourer, agricultural labourer, housewife. Majority 57.8% respondents lived in nuclear family. Majority of the respondents i.e. 45.66% had one son in the family, 25.11% respondents had no son in the family.

To locate the factors responsible for female foeticide and female infanticide, the respondents were presented with twelve statements. The overall opinions of the respondents regarding majors factors responsible for female foeticide and female infanticide.

Item No.	Factors	Score	%age
1.	Continuity of family name through male child only.	249	56.85
2.	The last rites of the parents can be performed by sons only.	199	45.43
3.	Girls can not take up native family responsibility after marriage	176	40.18
4.	Expenses on daughter's marriage	172	39.27
5.	Girls can not provide economic security to parents	156	35.61
6.	There is a feeling of insecurity among the parents with the birth to a girl child	123	28.08
7.	Better fortune for the parents can be ensured by sons only	120	27.39
8.	It is difficult to find suitable match for girl.	117	26.71
9.	Bringing up of girl is difficult due to their biological structure which can be harmed.	116	26.48
10.	Female children are more expensive to be brought up	96	21.91
11.	Birth of female child lowers the status of mother in the family.	94	21.46
12.	Birth of female child lowers the status of family in society.	91	20.77

Since there came in multiple responses by the respondents, therefore, the total sum of respondents can not be used. Therefore, for better understanding of the opinion of the respondents we have calculated the percentage out of total respondents.

Out of the factors said to be responsible for female foeticide, the highest score (i.e. 56.85%) was accorded to the first factor i.e. the continuity family name through male only. It means that people are very much interested in the continuity of their progeny and that can be done only through the male child. The responsibility for observing the last rites of the parents got second highest score i.e. 45.45%. The respondents believe that after their death, the last rites be performed by the son since he alone can give them to take part in a funeral procession, therefore, last rites are performed only by the male members of

the family especially the son, naturally and necessarily. Therefore, son is the first and foremost choice.

The third important factor that girls cannot take up the responsibility of the family of the parents after marriage was the opinion of 40.18% respondents; the main reason for this factor bring that after marriage they have to stay at the in-laws house. Hence, preference for son understandably becomes compulsive.

When we enquired about cost of bringing up of female child, only 27.91 percent respondents mentioned this factor but regarding the cost of marriage 39.27 percent respondents pointed out that since dowry has to be provided at the time of the marriage of a daughter and therefore, the cost of maintaining a girl becomes higher and to avoid this they resort to female foeticide. Only 35.61 percent respondents felt that

girls can not provide them economic security and therefore a clear sense of insecurity falls to their share due to the birth of a girl child. In view of this fearful situation, 28.08 percent parents go for female foeticide. In villages it is the son who earn livelihood either from agriculture or by doing some other jobs which provides a sense of security to the parents. In Indian society, it is also considered bad to depend on the earning of girls and traditionally, parents did not accept even water, what to speak of meal in girl's home after her marriage. To take meal from girl's house was considered a sin for the parents even if they had to visit the house of their daughter's in-law on certain occasions.

There was a common feeling that better future of the parents could be ensured by their son only (27.39%). It is because the sons can earn livelihood for the family and can also look after the parents in their old age. Therefore, parents felt that their future was as a secure the number of sons they had. With the increase in awareness both among the parents as well as girls to have good family and with increase in the demand for dowry, it is becoming difficult to find a suitable match for a girl. This was pointed out by 26.71 percent respondents. If parents did not find a suitable match, certainly it creates problems in adjustment for the girl after marriage. The increase in the number of divorces is an indicator of the gravity of the problem to this point. Another factor which is responsible for female foeticide is due to the biological structure of the girl which can be harmed by a male (26.48 percent). Here the emphasis was on the fear of molestation or rape of the girl which goes with the prestige of the girl as well as of the family. To avoid this situation, some parents go for female foeticide.

Regarding lowering of the status of mother and also of the family by birth of girl, only 21.46 percent and 20.77 percent respondents respectively agreed to these points. Normally, it has been observed that if a family has at least one son then the birth of girl child is not considered bad or felt that it does not lower the status of the mother in the family. But if a woman fails to produce a male child then is certainly loses the status of both the mother and the family.

We can say that there are multiple factors which are responsible for female foeticide. The major factors included of continuity of the name of the family, last rites performed by the son ensure getting moksha inability of girls to perform family responsibility after marriage, the issue of providing dowry and the sense of insecurity both from the girl side and in one's old age. If a family has at least one son, then chances of female foeticide.

Krishnaswamy (1988) found similar responses regarding the motivating factors for female foeticide. He reported that having a son means the perpetuation of role comparatively a higher percentage of female respondents indicating continuity of family's name through male child only, focuses on the women's feeling of helplessness. It also points out how the woman is mortgaged to the traditional value, a daughter is taken as a 'worthless creature whereas a son is regarded a priceless asset.'

The saga Manu expressed the view that is necessary to have a son if one desires to unite with the state of eternal bliss, viz., moksha. In Indian families, the position of the eldest son is peculiar. He has the authority to offer the funeral cake (pinda) at the Sradha ceremony, lie the religious observance on the death of anniversary of the father and the ancestors (Prabhu, 1961). Houska (1981). Then, parents can support themselves in old age and if a father dies without leaving a son, his initial funeral rites can be performed by brother's son, daughter's

son and so on down a list of lineal kinship but the empirical evidences are for the son, as the most desired and preferred. The reason for female infanticide in the earlier time also did not seem to be much different from the ones found in the present study. David and Bake (1956) also reported that there is strong son preference for sons in North India and there are several strong socio-cultural reasons for this preference. Sons are economic assets, they are needed for the family. It is the sons who play power struggle over the right to land and water. Sons stay with the family after marriage and maintain the parents in old age, whereas daughters are married out and can not contribute to family economy.

39.3 percent of the respondents who said that expenses on daughter's marriage is an important factor for female foeticide and infanticide. It was reported by Wadhwa (1995) that with better education, dowry increases because a postgraduate daughter can not be married to a moneylender with little education, and on the other side, a professional groom costs much more.

Krishnaswamy (1988) also found a similar reason among the Kallar community for female infanticide. He resorted that people who claimed to have reported to infanticide responded that they do not want to see their daughter suffer due to lack of dowry. Malhotra and Sharma (1993) in their study conducted in Haryana also found that for opportunities in education, parents did not differentiate between a son or a daughter, but when it came to dowry, almost all parents showed their apprehension about the increasing cost of marriage and dowry for their daughters. Cheema (1987) in his study of antenatal sex determination and its consequences carried out in Punjab found that most of respondents preferred to go in for sex determination tests, also though majority of them wanted to have male and female issues, but preference for the male child was clearly indicated due to following properties in order of preference (a) old age security (b) patrimonial property inheritance and (c) continuation of lineage. Also parents wanted to have a son who could look after the family business during their old age and in their absence. Expensive upbringing of girls was given to be one of the factors for female foeticide by 27.34 per cent respondents as factors for female foeticide. In Tamil Nadu, the parents found it difficult to bring up girls owing to major expenses on four occasions which are ear boring, puberty rituals, marriage expenditure and birth of the first child to a daughter. Bumiller (1995) also found that even in extreme poverty boys could do without a shirt but girls has to be provided with proper clothes to cover her body. This shows that whatever be the economic status of a family, parents still consider the cost of bringing up of a girl higher as compared to boys.

In brief we can say that these days, the rejection of the unwanted girl seems to begin even before her birth. It is not far to see that prenatal sex determination test followed by quick abortions eliminate thousands of female fetuses before they can become daughters. Those few fortunate girls who are allowed to survive till birth and beyond, find that the dice is heavily loaded against them for equal access to food, health care, education, employment and simple human dignity, (NFIW Bulletin, 1990).

In a patriarchal, male-dominated society like ours, the preference for a male child is inherent in the Indian psyche as the male child is expected to perpetuate the family name and line but the daughter is considered a liability and an economic drain on the resources of the family. In orthodox families, the absence of son is often the reason for a man's remarriage (Report on the SAARC, Workshop on the Girl Child, 1988).

The birth of a son also elevates the status of women. By producing a son, Indian woman gains an identity and status that nothing else in her culture can bestow upon her (Kakkar, 1978). The gain in status, security, influence and desire to please the husband by giving him an heir, is sufficient motivation for a woman to be a mother of a male child. A son is preferred over a daughter for the deference of the family and its interest, especially in rural areas. A son serves as security to his parents in another way. In Indian society where there are few alternative sources of support in old age, the parents expect to rely primarily on sons in their old age (Paliwal, 1979).

For all the foregoing reasons, most parents prefer sons to daughters. A daughter's marriage involves immense expenses (Kapadia, 1966, Lewis, 1965) and is one of the important reasons for the indebtedness of poor families. On the other hand, sons upon marriage, bring dowries into the family. In contrast to girls, sons are a source of economic security and support for their parents. They not only help supplement the family's income but are also a major support to their parents in old age. Chaudhary (1985) conducted a pilot study amongst agricultural labour households in Birdhum district of West Bengal. It was found that in agricultural labour household aged parents were economically dependent either on daughters or sons-in-law or on a daughter's son. This is, by and large, the case all over India. This economic situation is a major factor that weights the balance in favour of the male child. The sons are valued for continuation of family name. The daughters are welcome, but after marriage they carry the name of their husband and in this process a family without a son reaches termination. Similar findings are found in studies done in India (Khan, 1977; Mahadevan, 1979; Ramu, 1988; Population Research Centre, RRIW, 1993). According to the Hindu belief, a man's soul after death will get salvation only if certain rituals are performed by his son. In this context deprivation of a son is regarded as a misfortune. Studies in Urban areas (Mahadevan 1979) support this view. In other developing countries like Korea and China, sons are needed for cultural reasons too (Fawcett; 1974). In other words, absence of a daughter does not become a matter of concern as it does in case of a son. It is necessary to have a son for economic reasons such as to provide old age security, to carry on family business, to inherit property, etc. It has been observed that a strong desire for son is certainly associated with a religious faith that points to salvation through son who lights the Pyre of his parents. The main reason behind this lies in the superstitious belief of parents that sons give them *Moksha* i.e. they make the lives of their parents happy in old age and freedom from this world after death. Owing to all these reasons the parents do not want daughters. They consider themselves immensely lucky if they have all sons. The birth of the daughters in most of the homes is still considered an unhappy event whereas the birth of son is celebrated with pomp and show. The male dominated mentality of the parents leads them to seek the help of techniques which helps in choosing the male baby. The findings of the study indicate that respondents want to have a son in order of preference for social, cultural, religious and economic reasons.

Case Study-1

Manjit is 30 years old. She is B.A. Her father is a superintendent and her mother is a housewife. She has one younger brother who is studying in school. She got married at the age of 23 to a science graduate of the same caste. Her husband is four years elder to her. She has two lovely daughters, she and her husband are fully satisfied with them.

But still they wanted a son, so that their daughters got a brother and festivals like Rakhi, could be celebrated within the family. They feel that a family would be treated as complete only if they have a son and a daughter. Keeping this fact in mind they are planning for a third child. They decided that they would abort the child if the child is a girl. They went to a doctor for the treatment to have a son. They also conducted an astrologer regarding the right time for conception.

Examination during pregnancy indicated that the child was a girl. They got it aborted. They were interested to expand their family only if the child is a son. Both become sentimental at the time of abortion. But Manjit did not feel any guilt at that time. She never feels that she had done a wrong thing. She still feels the absence of a son in the family.

Case Study-2

Sunita belongs to an upper class family in Dharoli village. She got married at the age of twenty one. After her marriage, she became totally dependent on her husband. She has one daughter and one son. After her marriage, her husband expressed his desire to have a small family so that they can provide a good education to their children and be able to maintain a good status. Her husband wanted to have one son and one daughter. She was happy, when she gave birth to a daughter. But her husband and his parents were unhappy because they wanted to have a boy child first. They did not comment but expressed their unhappiness to her. She was almost forced to go in for a second child after a gap of two years due to the pressure from her husband and mother-in-law. She admitted that she did not go in for ultrasound for sex detection and if it had been a girl they may have taken a decision to abort. She underwent two successive abortions as female fetuses were detected each time through ultrasounds. This was followed by another pregnancy where it was detected as a male foetus. Finally, a son was born. There was much rejoicing and also a party was given for 100 people. Sweets were also distributed. Sunita whose son is 3 year old now seems quite satisfied.

Sunita herself was discriminated against as a girl in her own parent's home. But she does not want to do so in the case of her own children. She feels that a son was required to look after her daughter. She would like to give equal opportunities both to her son as well as her daughter.

Case Study-3

Ramdas lives in Bhagwatipur village. He had four sons and one daughter. He had a good earning. The sons were also grooming up well. But Ramdas was always irritated with his daughter. He always criticized her. She was provided all the facilities of food, education etc., but she did not get love from her father. She was scolded even for a small mistake. Her brother also maltreated her, like her father. Seema did not have the freedom to get her clothes stitched as she liked. She was not allowed to go to her friend's homes. She was not allowed to go to school without completing the domestic work.

Her mother used to rebuke her son for their behaviour toward their sister. "Why do you behave so rudely with her? Have you alone been born from my body? Has she fallen from a tree? She has been in my stomach for nine months as you." She had full support of her mother.

Ramdas was a greedy person. He always liked to receive gifts from the in-laws of his sons. But he did not like to spend on his daughter's marriage. He had great hope that the sons would bring wealth in their marriage. But he used to say to her daughter, "A good part of my wealth will be spent in your marriage. I will have to face the difficulties of finding a groom

for you.” He used to say that a son is like wealth even if he is physically weak. His negative attitude towards the daughter stemmed from the fact that she was not of any material benefit to him.

Case Study-4

Sonu is 22 years old belongs to a middle class family from Dharoli village. During her first pregnancy everybody including family members, friends, neighbours, all were blessing her for a son, but gave birth to a daughter.

During my first pregnancy, there were some medical problems with me. At last, doctors told us that I was unable to conceive any more. My family members wanted a male child to carry on the name of the family (vansh). They suggested my husband to divorce your wife and remarry. Even I also agreed to this proposition, but my husband refused all such suggestions given by family members. My husband decided to get separate from family rather than leaving me. She pointed out that I did not face any discrimination in my parents’ family but there is definite male preference and male domination in her husband’s family.

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