

Female Foeticide: Causes and Consequences



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Contemporary Indian society professes a profound faith in every individual's "right to life and dignity". The rights relating to the vulnerable & weaker sections of Indian society especially women and more specially the girl child were violated. The twin social evils of female foeticide & female infanticide were the main causes. Violence against women exists in various forms, in all societies, the world over. In 1996 the world health assembly endorsed the fact that violence against women is a Public Health problem and female foeticide is one extreme manifestation of violence against women. India is a country of 102.7 crore population, out of which 53.1 crores is of males and 49.6 crores is of females, it clearly indicating a deficit of 3.5 crore women. The sex ratio is 933 women/1000 men and child sex ratio is 927 girls for 1000 boys (census of India, 2001). The demographic profile of India clearly indicating the wide spread prevalence of this social evil i.e female foeticide. The United Nations now calls India the most dangerous place on earth for a girl.

What is female foeticide?

Female foeticide is the selective abortion/elimination of the girl child in the womb itself, done deliberately by the mother, after the detection of the child's gender through medical means. This is usually done under familial pressure from the husband or the in-laws or even the woman's parents. Unplanned pregnancy is generally the cause behind abortion. However, female foeticide is a very heinous crime. India too is patriarchal in nature like many societies around the world. A particular hierarchical system prevails in all tiers of the social order. The fanatic obsession with the male sex, though, is one of a kind. One finds instances where men are glowingly praised as the key to continue the family lineage right from the ancient scriptures. A girl is forced to undergo multiple pregnancies and (or) abortions, until she fulfills her lifelong goal of being a

breeding machine that produces male offspring as per the needs of the family. Sadly, a majority of female foeticide cases involve an enthusiastic participation of women, both old and young.

Origin of the problem

Women are killed all over the world. But a most brutal form of killing females takes place regularly in India, even before they have the opportunity to be born. Female foeticide--the selective abortion of female foetuses--is killing upwards of one million females in India annually with far-ranging and tragic consequences. In some areas, the sex ratio of females to males has dropped to less than 8000:1000. Females not only face inequality, but they are even denied the right to be born also. Why do so many families selectively abort baby daughters? Aborting female foetuses is both practical and socially acceptable in India. Female foeticide is driven by many factors, but primarily by the prospect of having to pay a dowry to the future bridegroom of a daughter. While sons offer security to their families in old age and can perform the rites for the souls of deceased parents and ancestors. Daughters are perceived as a social and economic burden. Prenatal sex detection technologies have been misused, allowing the selective abortions of female offspring to proliferate. Legally, however, female foeticide is a penal offence. Although female infanticide has long been committed in India. Foeticide is a relatively new practice in prenatal sex determination on a large scale, emerging concurrently with the advent of technological advancements. This process began in the early 1990's when ultrasound technique which, was invented to basically check the health of the baby inside the mother's womb. A tendency in Indian families to have a male child leads to the enhancement of this crime. The status of female in India actually symbolizes India's status of being a developing nation. While abortion is

legal in India, it is a crime to abort a pregnancy solely because the fetus is female.

Why female foeticide?

Every unethical act, like this one, has some age-old lame reasoning behind it, which is used as genuine justification by its staunch supporters. The root cause for female foeticide lies within the cultural norms as well as the socio-economic policies of the country where this practice prevails. The most infected are the South Asian countries like China, India, Vietnam, Korea etc. from where this social evil has mushroomed today to the western nations like the USA and Canada. Female foeticide is a burning issue - which calls to be addressed at once. However, to get to the root of this issue, it is essential to understand the causes behind it. In India, however, there isn't actually a need to investigate into the problem much. We don't need to delve into any lengthy and detailed investigation or case study. The issue lies right on top, in front of our eyes - in fact, it is a very part of our lives. Surprisingly, the reasons aren't quite as diverse for these nations as one may perceive. Therefore, the main reasons behind it are as follows:

1. Preference for the male child:

Elimination/removal of girls from the family tree even before they are born clearly indicates the vehement desire for a boy child. In the countries where female foeticide has become unbridled, the core factor is the need to continue the family line through the male born into it. Sons are seen as the main source of income. Even though women today can easily rub shoulders with men, almost in every field they set their mind to, the common misconception still remains that it is the male who will help run the house, and look after his parents. Once married, women are like cargo, ready to be shipped off to another household, while parents breathe a sigh of relief for a job well done in getting their 'daughter' settled.

2. Financial obligations :

A woman is considered a financial obligation, as money spent on bringing her up, educating her, marrying her will not be repaid - as she will go to her husband's house after marriage, and the benefits of all that 'investment' shall go to her husband's family.

3. Dowry system :

Another major cause - and arguably the most prominent one - is the age-old dowry system. Dowry is the money, goods or property a woman brings into a marriage. During marriage it is basically a payment done by the bride's family to the groom's family. Reasons for dowry include provision of "base funds" for the husband to start a new family, establish his household and to feed and protect the family. Another reason is to support the woman and her children, if the husband were to die dowry works as the security to the wife and family. However, in most cases, dowry is seen to be payment to the groom's family, for accepting the woman, and for taking responsibility for her there on. In India, the age old custom of dowry system puts a damper on the parents' spirits who are 'blessed' with a girl child.

4. Stereotype thinking:

One simple assumption that can be made is that this preference is based on the form of society and families, a couple of decades back. During that time a male was expected to work and earn, whereas a female was supposed to sit at home, cook, and manage the house and children. This made a male child desirable, as he was, then, the only source of income and respect. This system was abolished - today, females work nearly as much as men - but the thinking remained unchanged.

5. Illiteracy:

A commonly suggested reason is illiteracy. It is assumed that people are illiterate and not educated, and hence they commit this heinous crime. However, logical as it may sound, this cannot be safely established. Numbers tell us that, this practice of female foeticide is equally prevalent, if not more, in urban parts of India (which host the so called 'rich' and 'upper' class people) as in rural areas. Clinics are flocked in huge numbers in urban areas, to facilitate the 'facility' of illegal sex determination. How can one then point the finger at illiteracy?

6. Deteriorated Status of Women:

in India, males are considered as the stronger sex when it comes to the pecking order in a country, but that does not entail a curbing of rights for women. Rather than whining about the denied opportunities, women should stand up and try to grasp the chances they want for themselves. However, this Utopian scenario is not quite easily achieved in practice. Centuries

of repression has made inferior to most women. They willingly embrace the role of the meek, submissive, docile wife who works relentlessly to cater to the whims of her husband. The worst enemy of a woman is the woman herself. Female foeticide happens with the open consent of the mother. While most mother takes it as their duty to the family, there are many who take the initiative themselves.

7. Foul Medical Ethics:

The opening conversation to this hub satisfactorily covers this point., illegal sex determination and termination of pregnancies has become an everyday reality with the legalization of abortion in India. The Medical professionals are only too glad to help parents realize their dream of a healthy baby boy. Female foeticide is openly discussed amongst many in the healing fraternity and even pin boards outside certain clinics read, 'Pay Rs.500 today to save the expense of Rs. 500 000 in the future'. The initial meager sum is the cost of a pregnancy termination, while the bigger amount specified in comparison, is the expense that the family will be burdened with in the form of dowry for the girl child.

8. Industrial Growth:

Industrialization of the health sector has further strengthened the selective sex abortion quarter. With the advent of Amniocentesis and ultra sound sex determination of the foetus has become much easier than it was earlier. As opposed to CVS and amniocentesis, the ultrasound technology is cheaper and within easy reach of the lower economically backward strata of society. It is also easily accessible in a hospital/clinic nearby with mediocre credentials. Many hospitals are known to sign long term contracts with the firms involved in the production of these types of medical machinery. Often, a healthy percentage of the profit is shared with the hospital and both parties enjoy the fruits of rewarding a death sentence.

Unfortunately, the probability of accuracy of the ultrasound is not always 100 per cent until the fetus is twenty weeks old. Consequently, the child aborted by those enthusiastic parents may just be the little prince they were hoping for.

9. Religion based myths:

It is also argued, that some of this has bases in religion too. For example, according to Hindu

scriptures, it is a male who'll light the funeral pyre of his dead parents. However, in reality this does not explain the cause for this foeticide. No Hindu scripture or religious text asks to kill a female child or foetus. On the other hand, Hindu books, Rig Veda, for example, hold women in a much respected light. Many women, in these texts, were highly regarded and respected. It is unjustified and unfair to point a finger at religion as a cause for female foeticide, for it our (mis)interpretations and understandings that are at fault.

10. Deceit by the doctors by winning the trust of patients :

Another shocking fact is that doctors use the trust placed upon them for their own benefits. Knowing that the couple will abort the foetus if it is female, the doctors proclaim a female foetus even if the tests show a male foetus - to avail the extra fee they receive for abortion. Understanding these reasons behind this practice of female foeticide, it is evident that the change is needed in the thinking and mentality of the people, and also the laws of our country - to abolish and eradicate immoral and unjustified customs like dowry. These reasons have to be addressed immediately, if any change and improvement is desired -it cannot be expected that female foeticide be stopped without changing anything else. Major and instantaneous changes are required in the way our country and its people basically function. Only then one can think about bringing about a change, and making India a better and safer nation for the fairer sex.

Long Term Consequences

As Newton's Third Law of Motion states, 'For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction', the after effects of this genocide are fatal and far-reaching. Blinded by the need for an assertive gender to rule the house after the parents' demise, the majority are often ignorant of the disaster they unwittingly invite by indulging in female foeticide. The long terms consequences are as follows:

Skewed Sex Ratio:

In India, the number of girls per 1000 boys is declining with each passing decade. From 962 and 945 girls for every 1000 boys in the years 1981 and 1991 respectively, the sex ratio had reached to an all time low of 927 girls for 1000 boys in 2001. If that statistic is a

matter of concern, the current figures are touching the danger line with only 914 girls for 1000 boys in 2011. Now the question is that does this imbalance in the number of females a truly worrying matter? Yes, indeed. Sex ratio is merely a microscopic view of the number of both genders. However, when calculated for the entire population, this clearly indicates the widespread disparity. This disparity may prove critical for the country's development in political, economic and emotional spheres.

Women Trafficking:

The steep decline in the number of girls makes them scarce for the teaming number of males eligible for marriage. As a solution to this issue, illegal trafficking of women has become commonplace in many regions. Women, often young girls who've just crossed the threshold of puberty, are compelled to marry for a price fixed by the groom. They are usually bought in from neighboring areas, where the number of girls might not

be as miniscule as the host region. Child marriages become a rage and child pregnancies, a devastating consequence.

Increase in Rape and Assault: Once women become an endangered species, the instances of rape, assault and violence will become widespread. In the backdrop of fewer available females, the surviving ones will be faced with the reality of handling a society driven by a testosterone high. The legal system may offer protection, but as is the situation today, many cases might not even surface for fear of isolation and humiliation on the girl's part.

Population Decline: in the absence of mothers or wombs to bear any child, there would be fewer births, leading to a decline in the country's population. Though a control in the demographic statistics is currently the goal of many nations like India, a total wipeout of one sex is not the way to achieve this target. Science would then have to look up solutions to do away with the swarming number of men, should such a worst case scenario happen.

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