
Female Foeticide

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Abstract

Female foeticide, the cruel practice of denying a girl even the right to be born is a term used. It is both acceptable and practicable in India to abort the female foetuses. This is due to many reasons, the largest of them is the fact that sons are considered more valuable than daughters since they can ensure safety of their family later in life, and they can perform rituals on behalf of the spirits of deceased parents and relatives. Female foeticide is a new phenomenon that was brought about due to technical development aimed at detecting any anomaly in the foetus to later be medically killed before much damage is caused on this unhealthy or malformed foetus. The consequences of the death of female foetuses in the womb would be catastrophic to the society in the long term. Either an immediate outcome would be a decrease in the sex ratio leading to heightened crime against women and bride-buying. The seriousness of the issue, causes, and effects of female foeticide are discussed in this paper.

Key words: amniocentesis, inheritance, and female foeticide.

Introduction

A violent way of crime against women is female foeticide where a girl is even denied the right to be born. Sex ratio has significantly been reduced due to the death of female foetuses during pregnancy of a mother. On the one hand, it is a paradox how Kanya Poojan (the worship of girl children) is done in the Indian civilization, but on the other, there is a barbaric murder of the girl fetus in the maternal womb and, on the other, the girl is slaughtered immediately she is born. Due to this, 40-50 million females are vanishing out of India. The devaluation of women is caused by sociocultural and religious causes. The religious and social environment of the country highly rewards male children and that is why there is a systematic

discrimination against the girls. Women have been discriminated in their lives due to the existence of the implemented patriarchy.

One of the ugliest manifestations of discrimination against women in a culture is their female foeticide that deprives women of their right to life upon birth. Female foeticide is the consequence of ultrasonic devices and scientific innovations with the help of which any abnormalities in foetus could be revealed so that an unhealthy or defected foetus could be killed at all. Even though female foeticide is relatively new practice, it dates back to the centuries old tradition of female infanticide in India. The act of intentional murder of a female child at the age below one year old during one year is referred to as female infanticide and may be done either adoptively by using toxic organic and inorganic compounds or inadvertently through active omission by the parent to provide the newborn with food. 2013). "Killing of an entirely dependent child under "one year of age" who is killed by mother, parents, or others in whose care the child is entrusted" is how Kolloor (1990) defines infanticide. In 1789 British authorities were first documented of infanticide in a group of Rajput in eastern Uttar Pradesh. In 1871, the first census to be carried out in India had 940 girls to every 1000 males. This led to the enactment of the Infanticide Act of 1870 which made it an illegal practice. But in a county where the majority of births were at homes and no vital registration was the norm, it became difficult to implement this law (Patel, Rita). Female infanticide was so rife in one clan of Rajput within the Saurashtra and Kutch regions that having killed their newborns was the norm over the past century; Desai (1988) found only five households that had not burnt their newborn infants. The deeper cause of female infanticide is the sociocultural and theological context of India which is predominantly patriarchal and tends to significantly add to the subordinate position of a woman. Another critical basis of the patriarchal system is marriage that makes women depend on men and responsible in the family. The excessive dowry demands are one of the main reasons of female infanticide. There are other explanations such as the fact that only sons can perform the final rituals, that only the male descendants or sons can inherit and the lineage is male descended, that sons will

take good care of their parents in their old age, that the male is the breadwinner, and so forth (Koradia et al, 2013).

Conversely, when a foetus is aborted or killed even before birth because its sex is that of a female, then this is referred to as female foeticide. This may be done through the ultrasound images to establish the sex of the child before delivery. The process of female foeticide will require two steps. The first procedure is ascertaining the sex of the foetus through one of the three procedures namely: ultrasound, chorionic villus sample and amniocentesis. The second is the therapeutic abortion which was introduced by the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act in 1971 in India and is readily available at no charge at government clinics and hospitals across the country (Solapurkar, 1991 quoted in Patel, Rita). Amniocentesis is a procedure that entails inserting a catheter into the fluid that encloses the foetus in a bid to extract fluid containing foetal cells. Amniocentesis can be done in the 15th to 17th week of pregnancy. A sex determination may be administered along with the analysis of the foetal cells of the amniocentesis of genetic abnormalities in the foetus. If desired, an early second trimester abortion is possible because the findings are often finished in 1-2 weeks. at the majority of Indian cities, the test is administered at clinics and hospitals. Most rural health clinics can gather amniotic fluid, and then carry the fluid to an urban center via messenger even though rural areas have limited access to this kind of technology (Kusum, 1993 quoted in Patel, R.).

The chorionic villus sampling, in comparison to the amniocentesis, is slightly more technical. The biggest advantage is that it can be performed as early as the 10th week of pregnancy which allows people to perform an abortion that is safer and earlier in case of a necessity. Ultrasound is not as popular in identifying sex because it cannot be relied on until the second trimester of pregnancy. Even then, it is not as accurate as chorionic villus sampling or amniocentesis. This examination is however readily available throughout India and in fact it is very easy to conduct. After being introduced in India in the 1970s, sex determination tests quickly gained popularity. Others have even established traveling vans that are able to carry out the operation (Burns, 1994 quoted in Patel, R.). They kept billboards with the text, Invest Rs.

[rupees] 500 now, save Rs. 50,000 later, to convince the potential parents into terminating female babies, so that they would not have to pay dowry in the future (Kusum, 1993 quoted in Patel, R.). The sex ratio between males and females has thus reduced to no less than 800 females with 1000 men. Practical abortions and female foetal abortion are socially acceptable in India. There are numerous reasons as to why females end up being victims of feticide, though, the primary one is that boys ensure the stability of their families in old age and can perform rituals in honor of the spirits of their parent and ancestors, unlike females, which are considered as a social and economic liability.

Gravity of the Issue

Females live longer than the males in such cases because they have more biological make-up which gives them an upper hand in terms of life span when they are provided with equal access to care, nourishment, health and medical treatment. An example is that, in any given industrialized country, the average is 106 women to 100 men. However, India has 93 females per 100 males (UNICEF, 1995 quoted in Singh, D.P.). In a study report about the Bombay abortion centres, 7,999 out of 8000 abortions carried on in six hospitals had fetuses of women (Gangrade, 1988 quoted in Tandon, S.L. 2006). A research says that 78,000 male unborn babies were aborted after a sex determination test was carried out between 1978 and 1982 (Kusum, 1993; Shah, 1992 quoted in Patel, R.). In another study (Ramanamma, 1980 quoted in Patel, R.), when termination was performed, the 430 foetuses out of the 450 females were terminated in a single institution and the 250 of the male foetus were not terminated even when there were signs of a genetic complication. Lancet (2006) reports that over 10 million Indian females have aborted their fetuses since 1994. Based on the publication, one million girls in India are lost every year due to prenatal sex selection. In 80 percent of India, the situation is on the rise (UNICEF, 2007). A more recent action-aid evaluation would indicate that in 2011 there were approximately 35 million missing girls in India, but the estimates presented by UNICEF are that by 2012 there are going to be 50 million less. As per the 2011 UNICEF Annual Report, India can only have 914 females per 1000 boys and it does not even reach that figure in some

cases. The 2011 Census however indicates that 943 girls per 1000 males are in India. Even today, it is rather unfair to women, though slightly better than it was in 2001 when it stood at 933. Since 1901 (972) up to 2011 (946), the sex ratio at India has been declining at a very alarming rate in the past century. Since 1961, the child sex ratio has significantly decreased, from 976 to 945 in 1991 and 919 in 2011. Female foeticide is a comparatively new problem due to the development in technology. The effects of it are most evident in the northern states of Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, and Chandigarh.

Causes

Patriarchy

The devaluation of women and want of boys in society is faulted to patriarchy. Patriarchy is a term that was initially understood as one form of a "male dominated home, but literally, it means the rule of the father or the patriarch. The sociological explanation of patriarchy considers that gender roles of males and females are largely the product of social and cultural conditioning. A father being a head of the house imparts the very first lessons of patriarchy. Other than feeling in control of sexuality of women, labour or production, reproduction and movement, males are regarded as the head of the house. In such a patriarchal society, the birth of a male child is preferred over a girl one. The latter is considered the paraya dhan whereas the former considered to be the heir of the family. The patriarchal tendencies are propagated within families. Girls are taught to be kind and caring and obedient whilst the guys taught to be aggressive and domineering. Both men and women have acquired these preconceived notions of masculinity and femininity besides being social constructs. Women should do all those menial work and serve their children and other members of their families, whereas males feel the pressure of providing livelihood and supporting their families. These gender roles disadvantage women and predispose them to violence before and after giving birth (Sarshar, Mubashshir 2010). The impact of patriarchal orientation is so great that it causes women to think in a patriarchal way as well. Even literate married women want boys since they are not

willing to spend the rest of their lives knowing they did not give birth to a male offspring.

Son's Preference

The Indian culture is also patriarchal in nature. In the sociocultural setting of society, sons carry on with the family name. It is their work to take care of their aged parents. Parents constitute an extended family along with their sons, daughter-in-laws, and grandchildren. On the other hand, daughters do not remain the part of their parents anymore but become parts of family of their husband. Some Indian proverbs such as the proverb of bringing up a girl is like watering the neighbours plant demonstrate how it is a waste of money to bring up a daughter (Jeffery, 1984 referenced in Patel, R.). Moreover, the son is supposed to perform the final rites of the parents to attain the moksha. Hence, the importance of sons in an Indian culture is not limited to this life. Moreover, women are regarded as economic liability and sons as the breadwinners in the family.

Dowry

Dowry, as it is claimed by various studies, is one of the leading reasons of female foeticide as the family of the bride gives gifts or finances to the groom family. Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 criminalized dowry-related activities in India yet the tradition has remained widespread in most weddings owed to the deficient execution of the law. The dowry the bridegroom requires could out of pocket exceed what an average Indian family earns in a year which could have drastic financial consequences especially when a mother has a daughter or two. Girls are considered a burden to their family since they are seen as emotional and economical dependants on males, incapable of earning their living, and who must leave the house of their parents upon getting a husband. This can be used to explain why "May you be blessed with a hundred sons" is a common Hindu blessing of wedding and why the birth of a girl may not always be regarded as equally happy as the birth of a son.

Women's low status

Although the Indian Constitution considers women equal to the men, they, nevertheless are in a low social position as witnessed in the bias they face in their

lives. Female foeticide happens before birth, even in the period of conception and its consequences are observed in the ratio of sex which is dwindling. They also become discriminated against during breastfeeding and during medical care, infants suffer infanticide and infant deaths during the infancy period (0 1 years). They suffer more death rates, malnutrition, polio, anaemia, iodine deficiency disease, school dropout, child labour, food and healthcare discrimination, and child mistreatment during their childhood (ages 1 to 10). Some of the problems that she experiences throughout the teenage years are malnutrition, anaemia, child marriage, child labour and school dropout, HIV/AIDs, trafficking and commercial sex work. She is sexually abused at work, paid less, and poor employment discrimination, unsafe work, and security, discriminated against as a wife and now as a widow, experiences domestic violence, dowry harassment, sati, polygamy, desertion, divorce, and lack of paid care work, unsafe delivery, premature and frequent delivery as a pregnant woman, and is an unfortunate maternal victim. The status of women is lost and crime against women increases as a consequence.

The typical is two kids:

There is another reason that is used to explain the existence of sex-selective abortions and that is, the promotion of the two child norm that is followed in the country. Huge families ceased to be in fashion once the country adopted family planning program. Ideal family size is two children and particularly among senior citizens who belong to higher socioeconomic rounds. Two-girls families are becoming increasingly concerned about what kind of little one they will give birth to because there is one son who must be obtained. This has been proven by various studies which have found out that a family that has two or more daughters is more likely to have sex-selective abortions (Ramanamma, 1980 quoted in Patel, R.). The eldest born girl is not undesired in the family, yet they have to follow the two child norm which means that they can not afford second daughter, but such an eventuality leads to female foeticide. To determine the attitudes of the masses towards the practice of sex-selective abortion, a number of polls have been done. When 54% of men and 63% of women in a study of middle-class Indians in Punjab were questioned on whether they thought

amniocentesis should be done when a couple had more than two girls but none of sons, the answers to the interrogatives were affirmative. Women responded that 73 percent said that the foetus ought to be killed in the event that the test showed that the fetus was female and men responded 60 percent that the foetus ought to be killed. The three most common reasons as to why a female baby is being aborted are: A male dominated society (23%), social stigma of having a daughter (19%), and hard to secure dowry (17%), (Singh, 1992 quoted in Patel, R.).

Inadequate application of the law

India has laws to all types of crimes. The two laws in the country that cover prenatal sex determination and abortion are Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971 and Pre Natal Diagnostic Technique (PCPNDT) Act of 2002 (formerly known as Pre Natal Diagnostic Act of 1994). These legislations seek to censor and prevent mistreatment of prenatal diagnostic techniques and practices relating female foetuses which lead to female foeticide. Implementing these rules however is a poor thing. The implementation of these laws is not going right and a political will is lacking. It is through faulty implementation as evidenced by the ever-increasing occurrence of female foeticide since no more than few people have been prosecuted under the PCPNDT Act despite the above-mentioned increase in prevalence despite the fact that the sex ratio is skewed. The enactment of the Act has not helped in reversing the declining sex ratio since there is no political will to implement the PCPNDT Act. Owing to this, the illegal abortions are being conducted in a very secretive and cost-prohibitive way.

Repercussions

There are some devastating and far-reaching socio cultural consequences to female foeticide. This has led to more crime against women due to imbalanced sex ratio. Some of the consequences of the same are as follows:

Reduction in the Child-Sex Ratio

India has 919 females per 1,000 men as stated by the 2011 census. In 1991, there were 927 females for every 1000 males. Haryana is one of the poorest states in the country

that has the lowest rate of child sex. Some of the prominent states with a distorted sex ratio include Punjab, Delhi, Chandigarh, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Gujarat. This is because illegal foetal sex determination and sex-selective abortion has risen to be an Rs. The industry of 1000 crore in India is deplorable. The long term consequences of female foeticide are not being taken into consideration. Besides the other pernicious consequences as well as causing more crimes to the society, killing of a female child before or after birth has a negative effect to the sex ratio.

The Bride Buying Practice:

Female foeticide has led to the lack of adequate girls to marry. Consequently, the act of bride purchasing has become normal. According to a recent study by the Red Cross society, due to shortage of ladies, most of the Punjab and Haryana bachelors are living beyond their marriageable age. To be able to change their uncivilized status of being single to married, eligible men in these states are seeking married men in distant states in the northeast and south. They are ready to pay a very high amount of money to marry a lady belonging to a different state say, the state of Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal or Madhya Pradesh.

An increase in crimes against women

The shortage of girls has been caused by female foeticide. In the real sense, it is a vicious cycle. The aspect of female foeticide demeans the status of women and, therefore, leads to increasing crime against women. On the other hand, female foeticide is caused by the state of poor women. In the recent few years, crimes against women such as acid assaults, incest, rape, molestation, kidnapping and trafficking have increased. Girls are kidnapped or stolen. At different prices, they are sold and resold. They become prostitutes in the end. According to the National criminality Records Bureau, during the last few decades, criminality towards women has increased manifold.

Risks to women's health:

A pregnancy through abortion causes a weakening of the health of a woman since the unborn baby is killed. At times, women are forced to undergo numerous abortions

until they conceive a male progeny. This has led to an increase in the rate of maternal deaths. Moreover, women who abort are also prone to sickness and infections. Other times they are married off at ages lower than 18 years and they cannot negotiate with their husbands and succumb to other reproductive health complications such as HIV/AIDS.

Growth in Polyandry

There would be no girls to marry when there is a lack of females. It could lead to the millennium-old tradition of polyandry whereby a woman gets married to several men, some of whom may or may not be her brothers. To stop the division of land among farmers, in the recent years, the agrarian society of the Malwa region of Punjab has found it acceptable to have fraternal polyandry (Times of India, 2005). It has not yet happened in Punjab, because the sex ratio, owing to its lopsidedness, is uneven. But, in that case, when the incidence of killings of females remains the same, polyandry would become, in the nearest future, a widespread matrimonial choice due to the shortage of girls.

Conclusion

The gruesome act of killing the daughters even when they are still in the womb of the mother should need to come to an end with these terrible consequences. Female foeticide is happening in a country where the female gender is worshipped and equated to gods. They all must know that every Indian woman is entitled to fundamental rights to life, health, education and empowerment. In order to stamp out this inhuman action, we must abandon hypocrisy and come up with tougher laws. Besides this, the society has to change the mindset by creating awareness to the common men and women, emphasising equality, or even more importantly, priority of the daughter, speaking up on crimes against women and girls, loving and respecting them, and not considering them a burden. Mothers should take the responsibility of never letting anyone kill their daughters.

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