

FEMALE FOETICIDE IN DELHI

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Abstract: Female foeticide is a stark reality in India and gross violation of human rights. The present paper highlights that female foeticide is a kind of exploitation done not only against the girl child but the mother also. And the very fact is that mothers who faced this atrocity could talk about it. The study includes cases reflecting feelings of women who went through sex-determination procedures followed by abortions. It expressed their feelings related to pregnancy, and female foeticide and coping with the situation. The paper offers suggestive interventions to bring positive change into the situation.

Keywords: female foeticide, sex determination, sex ratio, foetus, exploitation, right to life.

1. INTRODUCTION

Being in 21st century and still struggling to ensure Right to Life for innocent female fetuses has been a major paradox, India is encountering. Killing girl children in the womb itself is the stark reality in the contemporary world. What to talk about better health and education opportunities when girl children are not provided right to live.

Census 2011 brings out that the sex ratio was 918 females to every 1000 males as national average, while in 2001 it was 927 females to 1000 males. This indicates that the gender bias and female foeticide has been growing in the society. The preference for son over a daughter is well known in a patriarchal society like India but killing of the female fetus in the womb is extremely horrible practice which is still prevalent in this era.

There has been no dearth of policies and programmes initiated by the government to uplift the status of women and bring gender equality, still there seems to be no significant impact on the socio-cultural norms and practices perpetuating gender discrimination to the extent of killing female foetus. There is a need to look into the factors that drive parents to opt for killing of girl child through systematic research methods.

In this context, the present study looks into the facilitating factors to female foeticide. This study is particularly significant as it opens the window for us to look into the lives of the women who are denied the right to bring their child in this world on account of being a girl child. Though there are several studies done on the issue at hand but because it is clandestine aspects of society and due to fear of social stigma and/or legal entanglements, people refrain from talking about it. Studies addressing the intra-psychic conflicts of mothers who get abortions done and their coping strategies are very few. The present study aims to fulfill this gap.

The study was done with following objectives:

- To find the socio-economic and cultural dimensions related to female foeticide.
- To understand the perception of mothers regarding female foeticide.
- To identify the factors leading to female foeticide in Delhi.
- To find out the consequences of female foeticide.
- To identify why female foeticide has been not stopped in spite of the interventions.
- To identify the measures to bring down the incidences of female foeticide.

Operational definition:

Female Foeticide – Process of aborting perfectly healthy female foetus after about 18 weeks or more of gestation just because they are females.

2. Research Methodology

The research design is descriptive in nature. The Universe consists of all families with children in the National Capital territory of Delhi and NCR. Sample unit was a woman who aborted her child after sex-determination test. Sample size was 30 women. Sampling was purposive in nature and due to the nature of data collection, snow ball sampling was used. Identification of the respondent at times was done by the snowball sampling method as the number of such women who admit that they did female foeticide was very less. Detailed case studies were carried out as research method. Prominent case studies are presented in the paper.

Precautions and Ethical considerations during Data Collection

- The researcher tried not to disturb the respondents when they express their views whether they are for female foeticide or against it.
- The researcher provided moral support to those who seemed low while discussing their life with the researcher.
- She also had to take care about the space she is using for interaction with the women because the discussion needs confidentiality.
- The researcher respected the respondents' right to denial to participate in the study on this aspect which they consider very private or too personal to be disclosed. A few women did not open up beyond certain points and the researcher did not pursue them for the same she gave them time to be comfortable with the researcher and share things with her in a manner they would do with their intimate friends.
- The researcher informed them about the study and its purpose before delving deep into their lives and carried out interview with an informed consent.
- The researcher showed patience to listen to the respondents.
- The researcher assured the respondents that their expressed view will be kept in secret and for that she maintained the anonymity of their names while presenting the case studies.

3. FINDINGS

Educational and socio-economic status: Finding shows that educational qualification does not provide any social enlightenment with regard to standing against female foeticide. Respondents were illiterate, literate and educated but all of them succumbed to the pressure to female foeticide. Moreover, it is not only the respondents but their families, particularly their husbands were also of similar educational qualification. So, female foeticide is the problem that cuts across the educational and socio-cultural backgrounds.

Occupational status: In addition, in the study, respondents were both working and non-working women and there was no difference in their situation vis-à-vis their or their families to abort the female foetus.

Type of family: Out of 30 cases 20 respondents were living in joint family. Findings show that in-laws play very significant role in taking decisions regarding female foeticide. In the ten cases where respondents were staying in nuclear families, in-laws pressurized the couple to abort the female child, despite not staying with them.

Reasons for female foeticide: In most cases, pressure from the in-laws was the main reason for aborting the female child. Women succumbed to their pressure so as to avoid unnecessary tensions and stresses. Personal experiences of dowry demands also drove few women to opt for female foeticide. Their mentioned that current economic liabilities in their life are not allowing them to give birth to girl child and accumulate resources for her dowry. Families from the rural belt of Delhi, close to Haryana also face the community pressure to abide by the rules of Khap panchayat regarding female discrimination. Certain families went for female foeticide to avoid challenges related to family honour. Most women were already having one or two daughters, son preference became the strong force to choose female foeticide. In sporadic cases, unexpected crisis in the lives of the women also led them to take the extreme step of female foeticide.

Maintaining anonymity: Usually it was seen that the couple did not go to a known sources for testing the sex of the unborn child or for female foeticide, rather they choose an unknown source. The reason being, it is a hidden aspect of the society, not to be discussed openly for the fear of attracting social stigma. Almost every case went to a private hospital or clinic for testing followed by abortions. It was also seen that these things happened in a handful of NGOs as described in one of the above cases. But because of all this, the woman who went through this not only facing health problem like weak uterus, pain in stomach etc but mental problems also like depression. More over due to the adverse sex ratio women trafficking, exploitation, suicide cases, family disorganization etc have been increasing day by day. Is this all we called women empowerment? Where women seems to be educated, taking big decisions in their job front, managing all house hold chores, doing efforts in the upbringing of their children but when it comes to giving birth to a female then she don't know anything and it is the family who decided whom she have to give birth. Is empowerment have worth outside the house and have no meaning inside the house?

4. Cases

Sangeeta (changed name) was a domestic help. She had a girl child and lived with her husband and mother –in-law. Her mother-in-law was almost dependent on her as she was blind. She earned approx.Rs2400 per month. Her husband was an electrician but most of the time he remained at home and did not earn much. According to her on the first year of her marriage she got pregnant. As that was her first child so she did not confirm whether that was a girl or boy. And she gave birth to a girl child. At the second time she became more conscious and had a sex- determination test which was again a girl child but this time she aborted it after discussing with her mother-in-law. She herself wanted to abort the girl child as according to her it is very difficult to bring up a girl child because she needs extra care and attention. According to her, her husband is not reliable as he drinks a lot and her mother-in-law was herself a dependent one. Other than that her work demands to remain out of the home, so nobody remains at home to look after her. According to her, she is facing many problems in the upbringing of her only daughter. So she did not want another one. She aborted her girl child in a private hospital by paying Rs2000.

Ten years back Sunita (changed name) got married in U.P. Her family constitutes herself, her husband and her parents-in-law. After marriage she started working with them as a helping hand. The family income was not sufficient and they were not having any house and were living on rent basis in the village. In this financial stringent situation her savings were used up to meet contingences. According to her, everything was smooth. She had two male children. After four years of her second child, she again got pregnant. But unfortunately her husband and her parents –in-law expired in an accident. She was left alone and a very survival of her children and herself came into question. So her mother took her to Delhi and insisted her to check the fetus. As she had no other support so remained with no option. After testing she got to know that the child was a girl child. Her mother convinced her that abortion is a better option because boys do not need more attention while girls need it. Secondly her financial conditions also did not allow her to think on the issue. And she aborted her child in a nearby clinic working on AIDS Awareness run by an N.G.O. As per her narration, the doctor in the N.G.O. aborts the child after taking some money. On asking, if she had not gone through the crisis, what would have been her step, she said, she would have delivered the child.

Monika (changed name) was a well educated housewife. Twelve years back she got married in reputed family. Their financial status was also very good. Her husband was the only child of her parents –in-law and they wanted only 'grandson'. In the first five years of her marriage she delivered two female children. But from then onwards she aborted three of her children the reason behind it was, they all were females. She discussed the issue with her husband also but he was also in the favour of it. Her husband and her –in-laws wants male child to look after their property as they do not want to give it to anybody else. So every time she needed to check her fetus and get it aborted if it happens to be female. Money is not an issue for them so they do not think beyond that and she is doing it just to avoid tension in the family. Now Monika is facing health issues due to repeated abortions like overweight, swelling in legs, backache etc. On asking from where she aborted the children, she said that she went in private hospitals.

Suman (changed name) 28 years old woman is a teacher in government school. She had fond memories of her childhood-being only daughter of her parents and affectionate sister of two brothers. She was pampered a lot. At the right time, her parents got her married off to a suitable match who was a businessman and having shop in Pritampura. Courtship was like a dream come true for Suman. However, few days after, marriage broke her sweet dreams and threw her on the harsh realities of life. Her husband sold off the shop and sat idle at home. He then started finding faults in all activities initiated

by his wife. Suman's in-laws too favoured and followed their son. Atmosphere at home was quite hostile and became increasingly unbearable for her. After sometime she got pregnant and thought that now the things would fall in place. But then her in-laws started forcing her to go for sex determination test. She followed their directions so as to avoid any further clashes at home. On finding the fetus to be girl, she was forced to undergo abortion. She told to her parents that it was a miscarriage as to avoid knowing them about her sufferings. Time passed by and she conceived the second time. This time also they pressurized her for the same but this time Suman's conscience did not allow her to kill her unborn child. Her in-laws kept on abusing her but she rejected the demand of her in-laws. This step cost her heavily, her in-laws did not give her enough food, kept her alone, did allow her to spend money etc. At the time of delivery she herself had to go to hospital. She had to call her parents for the help. After the birth of the girl her parents called her in-laws but they did not show up. They declined all the efforts of patch up between the couple. Now, Suman's daughter is one year old and still not seen her father and her paternal grandparents.

Poonam (changed name) is a 41 years lady belonging to a middle class reputed family. She is having two daughters. One is 20 years old and another is 17 years old. At the time of her marriage she was 20 years old. And within one year of her marriage she got pregnant and delivered a girl child. However the girl child, if not welcomed but accepted by her in-laws. After about two and a half years she again conceived and again gave birth to a girl child. This time her significant others were seen depressed and worried –one, she had given birth to a girl child and secondly, through Caesarean section, which might hamper her health in future. Relatives started whispering that, two daughters in today's world means a lot for a middle class family. However she and her family member treated their second daughter too as God's gift. After few years, relatives and friends started persuading Poonam to take another chance for a boy child. Initially Poonam was not paying attention to these remarks but gradually she started feeling that without bearing a son, she would not get status and reputation in the community. And took a chance but fetus again found to be female again so she and her husband decided to abort the child. The social pressure continues and she again tried but again it was a girl child. She aborted that also and named it as miscarriage to avoid any rumors in this regard. At this point, doctor told her not to take risk of pregnancy again as her uterus has become too weak. The incidence was beyond her threshold of tolerance and she went into depression. Till now she keeps on having episodes of depression on account of not having a son.

The institution of family provides love, care and security where parents rear and nurture their offspring with affection and tenderness. Children feel protected and loved when with their parents. However, it is inhuman when parents kill their unborn daughters, denying their right to life. Findings of the study and cases depicted above bring out that there is much social pressure. The socio-cultural context of Indian society has also contributed significantly to gender discrimination, cruelest form of which is seen in female foeticide.

Though it is claimed that the status of women in India has changed but looking at the poor sex ratio especially in the Northern belt of India, it seems that all the talks about women empowerment and gender equality are phony. Despite much progress in areas of technology, health and development, we have failed to make a dent in the socio-cultural fabric of India that perpetuates female discrimination.

The birth of a son is regarded as essential in Hinduism and lots of efforts are to be done in order to avoid the girl child. As girl child is considered as a liability due to social and economic reasons. Sex of the child is a result of union of two chromosomes or two different chromosomes (boy) and that is a natural process, nobody can interfere in that but human being do lots of efforts in order to make this process according to what he wants. Obsession for a son is deeply entered in our society. Women are not even given the freedom to make decisions regarding reproductive choices. They are forced to bear a boy child otherwise abort the child. It causes anxiety to pregnant women as they have to resort to abortion of female fetus and the practice of second – trimester sex selective abortion are widely spread and due to which they are placed at risk undergoing unsafe abortion. What a pity full situation is this where a women have to place her at risk, where she can lose her life also, just to fulfill the wish of others.

Though Government of India had made lots of interventions to stop female foeticide by introducing various laws like MTPAC in 1971, PNDT in 1994 and schemes for girl child like Dhan Laxmi, Ladli Yojana, Widows Daughter's Marriage/ Marriage of orphan Girls, etc. perhaps bringing change in the mindset of people and targeting structural changes in the society would take more time. In the year 2014, On the occasion of International Day of the Girl Child, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described female foeticide as a 'matter of deep shame' and asked the people to pledge to

end gender-based discrimination and create an atmosphere of equality for girls. He invited people to share on 'MyGovt' website their ideas on 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao', a programme he is laying emphasis on.

Despite India's declining child sex ratio, as many as 30 states and union territories have not convicted even a single person for pre-conception and pre-natal diagnostic between 2011 and 2013, raising concerns about the poor implementation of the PCPNDT Act. The five states which have worst child sex ratio (CSR) - Daman and Diu (618 girls per 1,000 boys), Dadra and Nagar Haveli (775), Chandigarh (818), Delhi (866) and Andaman and Nicobar Islands (878) (Economic Times, 2015). In the drive against female foeticide, various state governments have filed 2152 cases, secured 306 convictions and sealed and seized 1,573 ultrasound machines for violation of the PC & PNDT Act, the Rajya Sabha was informed today. Health Minister JP Nadda said the registration of 100 medical professionals convicted under the Act has been suspended or cancelled by concerned state medical councils (Economic Times, 2016).

Despite these efforts, still the success rate has been very low and the situation has deteriorated. Decline sex ratio shows that there are certain loop holes in the implementation of these laws and schemes which need to be checked out. Certain steps must involve in preventing female foeticide.

- The advocacy of a scientific, rational and humanistic approach instead of blind religious teaching.
- Educate women and empower women through strengthening their rights.
- Ensuring strict implementation of existing legislations.
- Inculcating a strong code of conduct for medical professional beginning with their training as undergraduates.
- Ensuring the development of good health care.
- There should be simple method of complain registration against the offenders. So that the victim can do the service to protect themselves.
- Regular assessment of indicators of status of women in society, such as sex ratio, female mortality etc.
- Sex education at school level.
- Media should take huge responsibility to widely publicize about the seriousness of the practice.
- NGO's and GO's should take key roles in organizing timely programs, seminars, meetings for educating public on this matter.

5. CONCLUSION

It will take generations to change the people's mindset but the situation worldwide is so dramatic that we cannot afford to wait any longer, because other problems are also interlinked with it. It is imperative that the international community pressurizes the government and all actors responsible for this in human and demographic tragedy to enact laws and urgent measures to fight against these violence and discriminations which by denying the first basic right of all –their right to life- denies their all human rights.

Denial to a girl child of her right to live is one of the heinous violations of her right to live.

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