



Female Foeticide and Infanticide: A Socio-Cultural Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at examining the prevalence of female foeticide and infanticide in India by focusing on socio-cultural factors responsible for this gruesome violence against females. This study is mainly based on secondary sources and studied using content analysis. The data is analyzed from the perspective developed by feminist social work theory.

The main objectives of this study are – to understand the causes of female foeticide and infanticide; to examine the consequences of it; to focus on the people responsible for it; and to examine the preventive strategies or policies by the state or law enforcement agencies.

Female foeticide and infanticide have a great impact on the development of any society. Although there are laws, enactments and Acts to control these problems, implementation has become a Herculean task. Unless the general mental framework of a typical Indian male is not changed; until the government brings out a policy on stringent implementation of enactments or acts, these social problems will surely continue forever.

KEYWORDS : Foeticide, Infanticide, Socio-cultural factors

INTRODUCTION

The issues of female foeticide and female infanticide are of growing concern in contemporary society. It normally occurs when a society values male children to the point that producing a female is considered dishonorable, shameful, or an unacceptable investment to the individuals. It is one of the worst forms of violation against women, where she is denied her most basic and fundamental right i.e. "the right to live".

Female foeticide and infanticide are terrible social evils prevailing in many countries of the world at some stage of their civilization or another. The forms which it took, and the motives which led to this crime varied as much with circumstances, as with the habits and character of the people amongst whom it was found to exist (Panigrahi, 1972). This evil is the outcome of poverty, illiteracy, male domination and gender discrimination. Girl children are undesirable in many regions of the world. No doubt, if this practice continues it will disturb the social balance and it may lead it to serious problems like increase in sexual offences, sharing of women within and outside wedlock and greater insecurity to women.

Lingam, Lakshmi (1991) contended that sex determination testing in India often leads to abortion of female fetus. Pakrasi (1970) has been pointed out that the Jadejas of Gujarat had to sustain the cruel custom of female infanticide only to get rid forever of the twin difficulties organically. According to Lalita Panigrahi (1931) female foeticide in Gujarat was traced by the East India Company to Hindu customs.

OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the study are - to understand the causes of female foeticide and infanticide; to focus on the people behind female foeticide and infanticide; to examine the consequences of female foeticide and infanticide and to study the strategies or policies for preventing female foeticide and infanticide.

ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

The reasons behind female foeticide and infanticide: are almost always cultural, rather than directly religious. Some of the reasons are -

Anti-female bias : Societies that practice female infanticide always show many other signs of bias against females. Women are perceived as subservient because of their role as careers and homemakers, whilst men predominantly ensure the family's social and economic stability.

Family economics: Girl babies are often killed for financial reasons.

Potential pensions: In many societies, parents depend on their children to look after them in their old age. But in many of these cultures a girl leaves her parental family and joins her husband's family when she marries. The result is that parents with sons gain extra resources for their old age, when their sons marry, while parents with daughters lose their 'potential pensions' when their daughters marry and move away.

Dowry: It is well beyond the capacity of many families to afford, especially in rural areas. People don't want to have such financial burdens like loans, debts etc. Preference for the male child is because a male in the family is traditionally considered to be a source of money, source of respect, source of name and fame.

Socio-cultural factors: The practice is more in urban areas than in rural areas; upper class people practice it more as compared to the lower class. It is a common belief that males are the carriers of family name; family occupation. Males perform the last rites of their dead parents. Males are the bread winners and at the same time people believe that the females have no role to play in family name, occupation and last rites. This mind set, even after the society and its culture is changing, is continuing.

The people behind female foeticide and infanticide:

Male family members are the major decision-makers in the practice of female infanticide. However, their horrible role is suppressed and generally only the mother-in-law and "dais", local unqualified nurses, are portrayed as villainesses. The husband and father in-law, though not directly involved in the act, are the ultimate decision makers for the crime.

Mother-in-laws: Ultimately the mother-in-law is pictured as the culprit for the crime. However, it should not be forgotten that without the active support of the male members of the family such ghastly crime cannot take place. There are also several instances wherein husbands threatened their wives not to come home with female babies. There is a great deal of psychological pressure placed upon the women, following the fact that if they produce more female babies, the husband may opt to marry another woman.

The "Dais": In earlier days, when hospitals and medical facilities did not reach the rural areas, the daises were a source of assistance to the villagers. Some turn to Dais, who specializes in sex selection, letting the baby boys live and killing the baby girls

Elders in the family: In many cases, when the elders in the family know that yet another girl child is born, they even refuse to see the

child's face. In every family the father/male heads the family. He determines each and every act of his house; hence the committing of female infanticide cannot go unnoticed. The elder's silence reflects only their acceptance and approval of the crime

The impact of female foeticide and infanticide:

Female foeticide and infanticide practice makes a lasting impact on the mother, family and the society. The impacts which are of major concern are -

Psychological impact: The psychological impact of female foeticide and infanticide vary according to the woman, her culture and the circumstances. Short term impact may be feelings of shock, a paralyzing fear of injury or death, and a profound sense of loss of control over one's life. In the long term, there may be profound feelings of shame or guilt, depression, anxiety and grief, characterized by persistent fears, avoidance of situations that trigger memories of the violation, difficulty in remembering events, intrusive thoughts of the abuse, decreased ability to respond to life in general and difficulty in reestablishing intimate relationships. Psychological distress may in some cases be so severe that it precipitates thoughts, or even acts, of suicide, homicide or infanticide.

Sociological impact: The practices of female infanticide and foeticide disrupt the social structures of communities. Widespread gender based and sexual violence adds this disruption still further in inter-familial relationships. Bonds within families can be irreparably damaged when children have seen their families kill the newborn girl babies. This creates wrong values for the children and also the future development in the society (Ahuja, 2009).

Impact on Health: The victims often present vague complaints that are difficult to diagnose and treat. Female foeticide leads to unsafe motherhood due to complications of abortion. Due to this, in India, abortion deaths per year have increased many folds. Women who undergo sex selective abortions may end up aborting fetus after fetus, continuing the cycle until they have a son. These repetitive abortions can only damage their reproductive health.

Impact on Sex ratio: Communities with low sex ratios tend to be more dependent and leads to low female literacy rates, poor health, low employment rates, greater incidence of domestic violence and crime against women.

Impact on the Mother: The impact, both mental and physical, on the woman forced to undergo repeated abortions may be tremendous. Severe depression is common and some may even attempt suicide. The mothers go through many psychosomatic symptoms. The onset of every new pregnancy can bring on bouts of terror and anxiety about the sex of the fetus. Medically, repeated abortions can cause irregular and heavy menstruation leading to anemia. Infection of the genital tract with fever and pain in the abdomen is common. Infanticide can scar the psyche of the new mother and some women even become mentally imbalanced (Kamla, 2005).

The strategies for preventing female foeticide and infanticide:

The Government and NGOs are making many legal attempts to prevent female infanticide. The Ministry of Health & Family Welfare has adopted a multi-pronged strategy to check female foeticide, which includes legislative measures, awareness generation as well as programmes for socio-economic empowerment of women. The steps taken by the government to prevent female foeticide under the Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, 1994, PC & PNDT Act include the following: Reconstitution of statutory bodies under the Act and regular meetings of the Central Supervisory Board, State Supervisory Board and Advisory Committees to monitor effective implementation of the law; Rule 11(2) of the PC & PNDT Rules, 1996 has been amended to provide for confiscation of unregistered machines and further punishment of organizations which fail to register themselves under the Act; Dedicated PNDT cells have been set up at State/district level for enhancing in-house capacities for building credible cases for conviction against violations of the Act; Surprise field inspections of ultrasound clinics by the National Inspection and Monitoring Committee (NIMC) in states/UTs against violations under the Act; NIMC has been further empowered to oversee follow-up action by Appropriate Authorities against organizations found guilty of violations under the Act during inspections; Sensitization and training program have been conducted for law enforcers, medical practitioners, judiciary etc. for effective implementation of the Act etc. (Dube, Bhatnagar, Reena, 2005).

The issues of female infanticide, female foeticide and selective sex abortion have gained global attention. Many law making bodies from within and outside the country have come forward to stop this practice. Of the numerous steps taken to curb the matter, the prominent ones are: Cancellation of the doctor's license who partakes in fulfilling a client's demand to do away with her girl child; Heavy penalty imposed on companies like GE, which specialize in marketing medical equipments used for illegal sex determination and abortion in unlicensed clinics and hospitals; High fines and judicial action against 'parents' who knowingly try to kill their unborn baby; Widespread campaigns and seminars for young adults and potential parents to enlighten them about the ill effects of female foeticide.

CONCLUSIONS:

Female foeticide and infanticide have a great impact on the development of our society. Men continue to play a dominating role. Women are always considered inferior, unlucky and unprivileged in every aspect of living. Women are cursed, demoralized and sexually exploited, resulting in female foeticide and infanticide. The laws of the land do not reach them. Economic and dowry disparities are yet another two major factors which are linked with the current problem. In Indian society it is a tradition for the parents of the bride to give huge dowry to the groom and his family. For families with several daughters this can be a serious financial burden. Can Government of India remove these disparities by enforcing laws? If so, then this will be a stepping stone to eradicate or minimize the problem. A crystal clear national policy should be evolved for establishing a balanced sex ratio by imposing laws in all states uniformly. This will go a long way to curb the problem effectively. Spreading awareness can go a long way in saving our future sisters and mothers.

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