



FEMALE CHILD...WHY NOT? A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN THE KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDE OF WOMEN ABOUT FEMALE FETICIDE IN URBAN SLUMS AND RURAL SETTLEMENT OF DELHI.

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To assess the knowledge and attitude regarding gender preference and female feticide among females in urban slums and rural settlement of Delhi.

Methodology: A series of focus group discussion was undertaken. Study was carried out for about 3 months till the point of thematic saturation. Total 56 participants were interviewed with the help of predesigned, semi-structure theme. Data was analyzed in terms of proportions.

Results: Out of 127 participants, 73% said that Ultrasound is the technique for Pre Natal Sex Determination Test (PNDT). 80% said that Private hospital is the area for sex determination test. While asked reasons for son preference, 38.5% said they carries the name of the family, 27.5% said that source of income or dowry. 52% of them aware regarding PNDT Act. 90% have got the information regarding female feticide and gender preference from the media

Conclusion: All the participants of our study had knowledge about declining sex ratio and well aware about its adverse impacts, but felt in capacious as the social customs are the biggest impediment.

KEYWORDS : Female feticide, Delhi, Focus group discussion.

Introduction

The practice of female infanticide has been prevalent since ages in almost all the societies of the world. Until the 1980s, women and girls were dying either of neglect or were killed soon after they were born. Today, the horrifying reality is that, they are now eliminated while still in the womb. Female feticide is a newer monster of the technological era emerging in the society after female infanticide. So now the girl child can be easily aborted without even going through the hassle of giving birth to her. The society always finds out some reasons to justify the acts of violence against the female gender. In spite of laws favouring the survival of female like Dowry act, Domestic Violence Act and the PCPNDT act, there are still striking reasons left unattended and the practise is continued as reflected by the disproportionate sex ratio in the society.

Despite India's commitment to Millennium Development Goal of promoting gender equality and empower women, the declining child sex ratio (CSR) is a matter of grave concern. Child sex ratio is defined as females per 1000 males in the age group of 0 to 6 years. India is ranked 132 out of 148 countries on Gender Inequality Index as per the 2013 Global Human Development Report. [1] The declining sex ratio in India is a matter of grave concern. The overall sex ratio in India has increased to 940 as per 2011 census, against 933 as given by 2001 census. [2] However, the area of grave concern is that the child sex ratio plummeted to 914 from 927 in 2001. The present CSR in India is one of the worst in the world after China. So a decline in CSR can be easily visualised, and the one 914 in 2011, is the lowest since independence, in spite of the goals set by the Government of India to increase the CSR to 935 by 2011-2012 and to 950 by 2016-2017. [3]

Two laws that prohibit the sex selection of a fetus in India are the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 (MTP), as amended in 2002, and the Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994 (PNDT), as amended in 2002. The former Act prohibits abortion except only in certain qualified situations, while the latter prohibits the sex selection of a foetus with a view towards aborting it. To check misuse of the technology, the Government has also set up Inspection and Monitoring Committee at different levels to undertake field visits and monitor the implementation of PNDT Act and initiate action against unregistered institutions and those violating the law. [4-6] So with all this background it can be deduced that only literacy or

legislation or the socioeconomic development is not sufficient to curb the evil of preconception and prenatal elimination of the girl child. The present study aimed to search the social hurdles responsible for those missing girls. He situation becomes more tragic when female themselves are against the survival of their genetic race leaving behind he counterpart. Hence the present study intentionally aimed to assess knowledge and perception of women, regarding sex determination and pre-birth elimination of female child, declining child sex ratio, genetic basis of gender determination of child and legislation concerning female feticide.

Methods

A study adopting qualitative methodology of focus group discussion was conducted among women in two urban slums and a rural settlement of Delhi. The study site was chosen as these represent the areas in the ambit of the capital city which represent so called regressive mind-set about gender issues.

A total of seven FGDs were conducted, till the point of thematic saturation, where 58 married females of age group ranging from 21 to 75 took part. They were approached with the help of ASHAs and AWWs of their respective areas and were included in FGDs after explaining them the purpose of the study, by taking their verbal informed consent. FGDs were arranged at the common places in their community like anganwadi centres or the community hall. All focus groups were conducted in Hindi and lasted approximately one and half hours. Each focus group discussion was tape recorded and later transcribed manually.

The FGDs were based on the following subthemes:

- Knowledge and perception of females about female feticide and child sex ratio,
- Practise of sex determination and pre-natal elimination of female child,
- Issues responsible for female feticide,
- Knowledge about genetic basis of gender determination of a child,
- Gender preference in the society and
- Knowledge of legislation against sex determination techniques.

Results

Knowledge and perception regarding female feticide and child

sex ratio:

All of the participants knew what female feticide "*kanyabhrunhatya*" is and viewed this practice as evil and majority felt that it should be uprooted. Whereas only 84% (37) were aware that it is a criminal offense too. Few of them have heard about sex ratio or the child sex ratio but none of them were able to explain what it means. However most of them told that they have heard that girl child are decreasing in number in the society and the slogan like "*Betibachao*" or "*beti hai to kal hai*". They too felt it as the need of the time to save the girl child and evils like female feticide or female infanticide should no more be practised now. Also almost all considered that daughters are more concerned and affectionate towards parents compared to sons.

Practise of sex determination and pre-natal elimination of female child:

No participant admitted that they ever adopted any sex detection technique or female feticide during their pregnancy and never forced anyone to do so. But many people accepted that people use to do so but outside Delhi as according to them rules are much stringent in Delhi. Few of them accepted that their known one also used the ultrasound technique for sex determination in the outskirts of the capital and landed in female feticide. Few explained that sometime pregnant females are sent to some other places of their relatives to avail the facilities but not only for the sake of legislation but also as one never wants to disclose it due to social defame. On the other hand very few of them were of the view that it is a personal issue and parent should be free to do so if they want as finally they have to bear the consequences, as in their society boy is considered to be an "assets" rewarded from the titles of "*Kul ka Deepak*" or "*Putra ratan*" and at the same time a girl as a "liability" referred to as "*Parayadhan*".

Issues responsible for female feticide:

Majority considered that females themselves are the main culprit and in most of the cases the grandparents, as in a patriarchal society like ours only a boy can carry the family's name forward. Also to attain "moksh" (i.e., Salvation) the last rituals should be performed by son. While on the part of the parents it is mainly the financial, social and the emotional security in their old age for which they want to have *at least one son*. Almost all of the females said that being married they could not help their parents many a times in need, economically and physically. Even if a daughter is financially able to support the parents, after marriage her first responsibility is considered for her in-laws.

Another major reason held responsible for female feticide was "*Dahej pratha*" (Dowry system), as stated "*garib ke ghar bhagwan beti kabhi na de*" (in poor household girl should not get birth). Marriage of the daughter is considered as one of the most pious ritual in our society as "*Kanyadaan – mahadaan*" but all it need today is money. Even higher the education of the girl, proportional will be the amount of the dowry to get an equitable groom, whereas a highly qualified son is considered as a "*Blank cheque*". Even one participant admit that her daughter is residing with her only, after three years of marriage, as she is not able to fulfil the demands of dowry.

Yet many of them were of the view that if the mother is determined enough, no one could compel her to land into aborting the female fetus. Many a times pregnant lady herself wants to have a baby boy as it is considered as a matter of pride to be the mother of a boy. Majority agreed that one receives better postnatal care and affection from family after delivering a boy. One of the female told that no one from her in-laws including her husband came to visit her after hearing that she delivered a girl second time.

Knowledge about gender determination of a child:

Only two of the 58 females could explain the genetic basis of the sex determination of the child. However, majority felt it is a God's grace. Even many of them admit that usually female is held responsible for it. Sometime, even, if a woman is not able to give birth to a boy,

husband does not hesitate for second marriage just for the sake of a son. And nothing is considered wrong in it as it is the duty of a female to give a "waaris" (property owner) to the family and if she is not able to do so, husband is free to marry another woman. One of the participants admits such a case in her family.

Gender preference:

93% of them had shown preference for at least single male child. 27% admitted that they had faced discrimination during their childhood regarding not only major issues like education and independence but also in clothing and food. Many of them felt that girls are not secure so cannot be given as much freedom as a boy. That's why parents of a girl are always worried.

Another major reason was limited family size was not a constraint in old days therefore people use to have number of children till they get birth of one or two sons. But now due to financial constraints one can afford only a small family which is also a reason that one opt for female feticide.

Knowledge of legislation regarding sex determination and termination of pregnancy:

None of them heard about PC&PNDT Act. But many were aware that sex determination is a crime as they had seen such a warning in the clinics. Also they stated that abortion without any medical reason is not so easy now in a health facility and people took help of quacks to do so for terminating the unwanted pregnancies putting the life of the pregnant lady at stake. Majority were not aware of the concerned authority where complaint can be registered even if they want to do so. Some said that they will report it to the police in case they will find any such issue. But all of them were scared about the confidentiality in such a matter.

Discussion

Participants of our study had knowledge about declining number of girl population in the country and well aware that it's an evil. All were concerned about it but felt in capacious as the social customs are the biggest impediment. Results of our study are in harmony with the results from varied parts of India. Only regulatory approach of legislation is not enough even which are only sporadically implemented. [4-10]

Birth of the girl child need to be equally welcomed as of a son. Government policies of incentivising the birth of a female child and favour to the families having girl child in government policies. Laws against Dowry should be stricter and the custom should be uprooted in all the ways from the society. Youth sensitisation against dowry and other gender discriminating practises like domestic violence, sexual harassment at workplace, sexual assault is the need of the hour. The rituals and beliefs of the society need to be revised on a large. To consider a female at a lower status is so deeply entrenched in the society that the societal roles of both a girl and a boy are decided from a very tender age. Where a boy is taught that he has to take the responsibility of the clan physically and economically, a girl is taught that she has to be trained in household chores as she has to get married and her in-laws' could blame her parents for in excellence in her deeds.

The PCPNDT Act 1994 (Preconception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act) was modified in 2003 to target the medical profession - the 'supply side' of the practice of sex selection. Legally, however, female feticide is a penal offence, but the non implementation of the Act has been the biggest failing of the campaign against sex selection. [11] Advocacy workshops to sensitize medical practitioners and the grass root level workers about the legal aspects of PNDT Act and the need for strictly adhering to the law. These actions can have salutary effect on the effective implementation.

Recently many governmental programmes and policies favour her survival and empowerment of women but societal mind-set need to be change so as to enable the female to avail them. Therefore

intensive behaviour modification strategy need to be framed to protect the girl child in the society. Religious and spiritual leaders should be approached to speak against sex selection. As declining sex ratio is a serious problem with deep social ramifications, it has to be an ongoing process of educating people about the importance of not only saving the girl child but maintaining a healthy gender balance in society.

Conclusion:

After all it is not at all just a law to be enforced but far more than that. It should be the next social reform in the community. Different activities to create awareness among different stakeholders and community at large about the declining sex ratio and its negative impact on the society as a whole is all that is required.

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