FEMALE FOETICIDE: A PROBLEM OF GENDER IMBALANCE

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Abstract: Today we are living in the twenty-first century, the age of computers and modernisation, where all men and women are considered equal not only in status but also in mind, strength and capability. But alas! It remained a dream. History has been cruel to female species, which it terms as the cursed creature of the evolution. Today, a woman is very uncertain about her very existence. She is always unsure about her life because she is always at a risk of being crushed at any moment.

Key words: Female foeticide, Gender imbalance.

The most heinous crime a person could even commit is... female foeticide, the killing of female foetus. Killing a female foetus means: killing a God. Civilizations were built and civilizations were destroyed, but there is no ending to this silent murder. If it continues, definitely a time would get nearer when we would onlooker a world without women. Women are the very source of our existence. Women symbolize ‘prakriti’ signifying ‘nature’ in Indian philosophy. She creates and nurtures the creation to bloom. She also represents ‘shakti’ - the power that drives the system. We are playing against nature by altering the sex equation to fulfil our selfish motive. If there are no women then our culture, our progress, our civilization will be buried in the dust. It sees that even in the developed states like Haryana, Delhi and Punjab are showing an alarming decreasing sex ratio. In the current rather bitter disapproval of selective abortion after sex selection by amniocentesis, women's groups and others have dwelt mainly on the threat to the female species.

In the Indian society sex selective abortions is a recent phenomenon, after the prologue of ultrasound sonography in the eighties that enabled doctors to identify the sex of the foetus during the first trimester of pregnancy. In the Indian society sex selective abortions is a recent phenomenon, after the prologue of ultrasound sonography in the eighties that enabled doctors to identify the sex of the foetus during the first trimester of pregnancy.

This shows that in a society time and again devalued women or women's status, because their only fault is their gender, and baby girls are throttled, poisoned or drowned in a bucket of water. This is female infanticide. The baby girls who were never even allowed to come into this world, there is no evidence and the abortion of pregnancies post an illegal sex determination is yet another course that is adopted to prevent a baby girl from getting her due in the world. This practice, which is so unfortunately common in our country, is truly the most horrific form of gender discrimination. Indeed, gender discrimination in our society is so deep-rooted, that it begins even before a girl is born. While in the womb, she faces the danger that she might never be allowed to be born; if born, her irrelevance is asserted when her birth is not registered; immediately after, she faces the continuing danger that she might not be allowed to live till the next day.

Most of the societies have a cultural tradition of strong preference for sons. Indian society is not an exception. There is a constant devaluation of women's importance and gender discrimination is widespread throughout the society even today. India
has a long and unhappy tradition of discrimination against women and the Indian society is stuffed with examples of terrible practices against women. Everybody is fail to see the evidence which is all around the society. In Indian some parents are of the view that, bearing a woman is an added financial burden, and they are required to spend money on her education, dowry, marriage and they believe that this expenditure is worthless as it benefits another family once the daughter leaves upon her marriage. This is the major reason (especially in India) of this discrimination that parents choose sons over daughters. Additionally these parents favor a son as they believe that he will stay and take care of them in their old age. Investing in a daughter they say is like “watering your neighbour’s lawn”.

Now today with an emerging preference for small families will result in a loss of girls either before or after birth as the parents prefer male child. In the modernized society, the easily accessible procedures for sex determination during pregnancy promote female foeticide. This has a particularly strong pressure at advanced priorities that if the first birth is female, the next pregnancy has diminished chances of going to full term if the foetus is female. A female baby born under these conditions has reduced chances of survival. Thus the unborn female baby shares with the born female infant high risks of elimination, as technology reinforces traditional biases. In this globalized era, when the needs become high when we believe in consumerist society when we believe in what “you are what you have”, “you are what you wear”. Thus, the present family planning policy does not allow couples to have as many children as they desire, but social and cultural traditions and daily living conditions make it very important to have a son, especially in rural area. Strong male domination and discrimination against women have a long history and have not yet been fully eradicated in spite of great progress, especially during the second half of this century.

It often sees that giving birth to a boy enhances the mother’s status within the family as there is a strong preference for sons throughout the country (India), and if a mother is unable to produce a male heir may result in humiliation, contempt, abuse and abandonment. In-laws threaten their daughter-in-laws with dire consequences if they cannot produce a son. In abusive situation, a woman will be forced to undergo tests to identify the sex of her unborn child, and then forced into an abortion if the foetus is female.

Women and Developments in Reproductive Technology Abortion was legalized in India in 1971 (Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act) to strengthen humanitarian values (pregnancy can be aborted if it is a result of sexual assault, contraceptive failure, if the baby would be severely handicapped, or if the mother is incapable of bearing a healthy child). Amniocentesis was soon began to be used for determining the sex of the baby. Ultrasound, scanning, being a non-invasive technique, quickly gained popularity and is now available in some of the most remote rural areas.

Modern technology and ancient customs ensure that one-fourth of all the girls that are meant to be born in this thriving world do not live to see daylight. Today, there are 128 men for every 100 women. It is a matter of female foeticide.

In a study published in the British Medical Journal, The Lancet in January, an Indo-Canadian team of doctors estimated that at least 10 million female foetuses had been aborted in India over the past two decades by middle-class families to ensure that they had male heirs. In the course of a survey of more than a million homes, the researchers found that sex determination in pregnancy and selective abortion accounted for 500,000 missing girls each year. Researchers from the University of Toronto in Canada and the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER) in Chandigarh also found the sex of the previous child born affected the sex ration of the subsequent birth. Fewer girls were born to families who had not yet had a boy.

As a result of selective abortion, between 35 and 40 million girls and women are missing from Indian population. In some parts of the country, the
The sex ratio of girls to boys has dropped to less than 800:1000. The United Nations has expressed serious concern about the situation.

The sex ratio has altered consistently in favour of boys since the beginning of the 20th century and the effect has been most pronounced in the states of Punjab, Haryana and Delhi. It was in these states that private foetal sex determination clinics were first established and the practice of selective abortion became popular from the late 1970s. Worryingly, the trend is far stronger in urban rather than rural areas, and among literate rather than illiterate women, exploding the myth that growing affluence and spread of basic education alone will result in the erosion of gender bias. This deterioration in women’s position results largely form their unequal sharing in the advantages of medical and social progress. The greatest offenders in this area of the northern and the western states, with Punjab and Haryana leading the pack. Punjab, the ‘land of five rivers’ has always had the dubious distinction of having fewer girls than other states in India.

Among Indian states, historically Punjab in the North-West has had the most imbalanced sex ratios. The excessing morality of females is commonly hypothesized to be due to discrimination against females, particularly female children, relative to males, in the allocation of food and health care within the household. Punjab was the first state to start the commercial use of amniocentesis and all educated respondents indicated positively to a question “known above the test and found it useful.”

A study by De Swearer reveals that Punjab’s have a preference for removing unwanted daughters as early as possible by such means as infanticide, neglect at early ages and most recently, foeticide. Although, female foeticide could be one of the reasons for the decline in the sex ratio, researchers however feel that female foeticide cannot be advanced as a major contributory factor behind the decline in the sex ratio of the Indian population between 1981 and 1991. According to earlier researchers some of the possible hypotheses related to sex discrimination in Punjab are: (1) The neglect of female children is related to the low participation of female labour in agriculture and in income-generating activities in general; (2) The Punjabi parents’ attitudes towards girls are related to the fact that married women can do almost nothing for their natal kin.

Age-old customs and family traditions leading to ‘son preference’ are the two major reasons that drive most of the families towards committing the shameful crime of sex selective abortions.

Long back in 1971, the committee on the status of women in India was appointed by the Government of India to undertake a comprehensive examination of all the questions relating to the rights and status of women in the context of changing social and economic conditions in the country and new problems relating to the advancement of women. However, care for the girl child – the message aimed to improve the low status of women in society when compared to men gained momentum recently. The Constitution of India makes no distinction between the sexes, and its preamble guarantees, to secure to all its citizens justice, social, economic and political, liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, equality of status and of opportunity etc. But this equality has not been very evident in practice and the social and economic status of women has not been on par with that of men. Moreover the dynamics of social change and development had adversely affected a large section of women, particularly among the poor, and had created new imbalances and disparities.

Unfortunately, various schemes to counter this situation brought out by many states as well as at the central level have been ineffective in reducing the extent of this problem.

The government declared January 24 as the National Girl Child Day. The day has been chosen as it marks the assumption of office by India’s first Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. There can be no better example of the triumph of a girl child against all odds. But it is very sad that despite strenuous efforts from the government, the status of the girl child has not changed much in the country. “There is
a need to raise the consciousness of the society towards girls so that they can be respected. There is an urgent need to take appropriate measures to empower the women in all spheres of life, so that there can be equality in decision-making, without any fear of pressure. That can only lead us towards a just society, free of gender discrimination.

To prevent this practice in Indian society is a serious challenge. It must involve:

- Ensuring strict implementation of existing legislation.
- The advocacy of a scientific, rational, and humanist approach.
- The empowerment of women and a strengthening of women’s rights through campaigning against practices such as dowry.
- Inculcating a strong ethical code of conduct among medical professionals, beginning with their training as undergraduates.
- Simple methods of complaint registration, accessible to the poorest and most vulnerable women.
- Wide publication in the media of the scale and seriousness of the practice.
- NGOs should take a key role in educating the public on this matter.
- Regular assessment of indicators of status of women in society, such as sex ratio, and female mortality, literacy, and economic participation.

It is now or never otherwise it will be too late to erode the deep-seated attitudes and practices against women and girls in the country. Creating awareness about gender equality is must to stop these systematic and institutionalised practices of sex selective murder. It should be concerted effort from all the section of society.

Women have missed the world - not just as Miss Universe, Miss World, but by being robbed of their right to live as full human beings. Dowry system, landlessness and powerlessness, the reproductive technologies' hunt for female foetuses, a false sense of beauty and satisfaction - all these have made women miss the world, denying them their rightful opportunity to live complete human lives.

After all how can an unborn fight for her right …………… RIGHT TO LIVE.

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