

## FEMALE FOETICIDE ON RISE IN INDIA: CAUSES, EFFECTS AND THE ROLE OF MEDIA TO OVERCOME THIS PROBLEM

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### ABSTRACT

*Since time immemorial, human civilization has witnessed one thing in common among entire nations on this planet and i.e. exploitation of women. Women who roughly constitute half a human population have been discriminated, harassed and exploited irrespective of the country to which they belong, unmindful of the religion which they profess and oblivious of the time-frame in which they live. Though we consider this century as an advanced and modern one, still women are confronting new challenges and facing severe threats to maintain respect, equality and dignity. Female foeticide is perhaps one of the worst forms of violence against women where a woman is denied her most basic and fundamental right i.e. “the right to life”. The phenomenon of female foeticide in India is not new, where female embryos or fetuses are selectively eliminated after pre-natal redetermination, thus eliminating girl child even before they are born.*

*Authors Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner have argued that if women could choose their birthplace, India might not be a wise choice for any of them to born. It is estimated that more than 10 million female foetuses have been illegally aborted in India. Researchers for the Lancet Journal based in Canada and India stated that 500,000 girls were being lost annually through sex-selective abortions. The land of martyred former Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi has been killing its daughters by the millions for decades. Nationwide, the numbers of girls for every 1000 boys has dropped from 975 in 1961 to 910 in 2011. The situation is particularly alarming in some of the urban areas of Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh; especially in parts of Punjab, where there are only 300 girls for every 1,000 boys, according to Laura Turquet, Action Aid’s Women’s Rights policy official. It has been widely noticed that Punjabi culture is extremely violent as well as abusive towards the women at large, with no respect for the fairer sex.*

*Hence, this research paper wants to throw light that what are the factors behind Gender-Bias and pitiable conditions of the Girl child. How far Indian media is responsible for stereotyping the women and portraying her as an inferior being? What possible roles can government, media and social action-groups can play in women empowerment and to fight the cancerous mentalities which led couples to abort female fetuses. This Research Paper intends to evaluate the problem, causes behind it and to find innovative and peaceful solutions for the biggest challenge 21<sup>st</sup> century India face.*

**Key Words:-Female foeticide, women empowerment, sex-selective abortions, female fetuses.**

Female foeticide is perhaps one of the worst forms of violence against women where a woman is denied her most basic and fundamental right i.e. “the right to life”. The phenomenon of female foeticide in India is not new, where female embryos or foetuses are selectively eliminated after pre-

natal sex determination, thus eliminating girl child even before they are born. Due to selective abortion, between 35 and 40 million girls and women are missing from the Indian population. In some parts of the country, 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 long standing tradition of son preference, coupled with medical technology now gives to the status conscious Indian families, the choice between payment of large dowry for their daughters or elimination of daughters. The traditional method of getting rid of the unwanted girl child was female infanticide, where the female baby was done away with after birth in various ways – either by poisoning the baby or letting her choke on husk or simply by crushing her skull under a charpoy.

The girl child in India is treated right from her birth as an additional burden, an extra mouth to feed, a liability and another man's property. The birth of a son is regarded as essential in Hinduism and many prayers and lavish offerings are made in temples in the hope of having a male child. Modern medical technology is used in the service of this Hindu religion driven devaluing of

women and girls. Woman is created par with man in all aspects. "Women have equal rights with men upon earth; in religion and society they are a very important element. Divine Justice demands that the rights of both sexes should be equally respected since neither is superior to the other in the eyes of Heaven."

The sex ratio has altered consistently in favor of boys since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Table), 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 community (mostly educated and rich Hindu and Sikh population) rather than illiterate community.

**Sex Ratio (females per 1000 males), India 1901–2001(1)**

YEAR	SEX RATIO	SEX RATIO IN CHILDREN(0-6 YEARS)
1901	972	---
1911	964	---
1921	955	---
1931	950	---
1941	945	---
1951	946	---
1961	941	976
1971	930	964
1981	934	962

1991	929	945
2001	933	927

Source: Registrar General of India

The census 2001 and the recent news reports data indicate a grim demographic picture of declining female to male ratios. Surprisingly the most affected states are progressive states like Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Gujarat. According to UN norms, male-female ratio in the world is usually 1050 females for 1000 males. But in India, this ratio is dropping down to nearly 850 per thousand. In Human Development Survey Report also, India is placed in 124<sup>th</sup> position among 173 countries. It is a fact that our country is much behind compared to other countries in respect of education, health and gender discrimination (2).

This Research Paper intends to find answer that why sex ratio is regularly dwindling in India. What are the possible causes behind this? What important role can media play to ward off this great problem? How can government play a significant role in order to check this heinous crime and what steps can society take to curb such sick mentalities? From the macro point of view, it affects status of women and has serious ecological and demographical ramification. It is a grave problem that affects the life and health of society. Sadly, the problem of

female foeticide and female infanticide has received little attention.

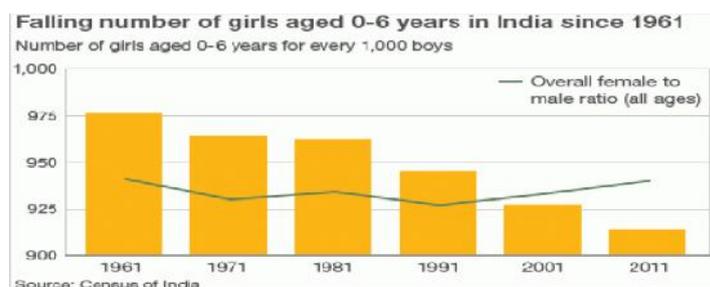
### **UN Finds India Most Deadly For Girl Child**

According to data released by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA) an Indian girl aged 1-5 years is 75% more likely to die than any Indian boy, making India the most deadly place for newborn baby girls. The data for 150 countries over 40 years shows that India and China are the only two countries in the world where female infant mortality is higher than male infant mortality.

In the decade of 2000s, there were 56 male child deaths for every 100 female child deaths in India, compared with 111 in the developing world. This ratio has got progressively worse since the 1970s in India; even as Pakistan (120) and Sri Lanka (125) have improved. The land of former Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi has been killing its daughters by the millions for decades. Economically resurgent India is witnessing a rapidly unfolding of female genocide across all castes and classes, including the upper class rich and educated. Nationwide, the number of girls for every

1000 boys has dropped from 975 in 1961 to 910 in 2011. The situation is particularly alarming in some of the urban areas of Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana, Himachel Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, especially in

parts of Punjab, where there are only 300 girls for every 1000 boys, according to Laura Turquet, Action Aid's Women rights policy official.



Those lucky enough not to be aborted as fetuses face inequality and cruelty at every turn because of the low social status given to women in India.

The UN report is a wake-up call for India. Clearly, the problem is much more serious than female abortions. It extends to post natal abuse and neglect leading to high mortality rates for little girls and an increasingly skewed male-female ratio.

#### UN Statistics on girl child in India

The UN statistics on the girl child in India present a depressing picture.

- Almost 50 million girls and women are “missing” from India’s population
- Of the 12 million girls born in India every year, 1 million do not see their first birthday
- One out of every six girls does not live to see her first birthday

- Every sixth girl child’s death is due to gender discrimination
- One out of 4 girls is abused before the age of 4
- Death rate among girls below the age of 4 years is higher than that of boys.
- 53% of girls in the age group of 5 to 9 years are illiterate

#### Factors behind Gender-Bias and pitiable condition of the Girl Child

- Lack of gender sensitization of current generation of parents leads them to treat their daughters with discrimination. Educating parents through media and sensitizing students through schools can change this attitude.
- Lack of old-age pension in India means that parents rely on sons for old-age support. Hence they invest more in sons.

Social pensions will reduce son preference.

- Shortage of land in relation to the high population size means that a girl is seen as an extra mouth to feed rather than an extra pair of hands to work the land or to add to family income. Reduced population growth will raise girls' value in society.
- Gender-division of labor means that women mostly stay at home for child-bearing/rearing and are typically not productively employed (only 28% labor force participation rate of women in India). Thus women/girls suffer lower status. Raising women's employment will improve girls' status.

#### **Female Foeticide: Origin and Magnitude of the Problem**

This process began in the early 1990s when ultrasound techniques gained widespread use in India. There was a tendency for families to continuously produce children until a male child was born. This was primarily due to the large sexist culture that exists in India against women. This is reflected by literacy rates among women as well as economic participation, which are both particularly low in states where female foeticide is prominent and an unequal population ratio exists alongside. The government

initially supported the practice to control population growth. (3) The Preconception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act was passed in 1994, making sex-selective abortion illegal. It was then modified in 2003 holding medical professionals legally responsible. However, the PCPNDT Act has been poorly enforced by authorities.

It is estimated that more than 10 million female fetuses have been illegally aborted in India. Researchers for the Lancet journal based in Canada and India stated that 500,000 girls were being lost annually through sex-selective abortions. (4) Pre-natal sex-determination was banned in India in 1994, under the Pre-conception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act. The act aims to prevent sex-selective abortion, which, according to the Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, "has its roots in India's long history of strong patriarchal influence in all spheres of life." (5)

It is most prominent in Gujarat and the North Indian states, which according to census data have an alarmingly low ratio of female children. Certain castes regularly practiced female infanticide and later female foeticide. The castes

with a much lower proportion of female children to male children included lewa patidars and the Rajputs in Gujarat; Jats, Rajputs, Khattris and Royal Brahmins in undivided Punjab, Rajputs and Gujars in the Uttar Pradesh. (6) Cases relating to female foeticide have hardly been reported among Indian Muslim Community as Islam strictly forbade killing of girl child and seriously guarantees the “right to life with dignity”.

#### **Government Steps to Curb Female Foeticide**

Parliament has realized the grave implications arising out of the misuse of the pre-natal diagnostic techniques and therefore intended to regulate its use only for certain medical purposes. The Government has realized that abuse of techniques for determination of sex of the foetus leading to female foeticide is discriminatory against the female sex and also affects the dignity and status of women. With the above objectives, the Parliament has passed the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act 1994; which came into force from 01.01.1996.

**Right to life of Foetus:** Our Constitution provides for the Right to Equality under Article 14 and right to

live with dignity under Article 21. Sex – detection tests violate both these rights. Right to life is a well-established right and is recognized by various international instruments. Now the question is, does a foetus enjoy this right? We do not have a definite answer. Globally, Constitutions recognize the sanctity of life, yet have failed to adequately protect the life of foetus. Judicial pronouncements are also not conclusive and vary in different jurisdictions. In India the right to life is guaranteed to every person under the Constitution of India. The concept of personhood complicates the position of legal status of foetus. Often courts shy from answering this question due to complex issues that arise in determining this question – like when does foetus attain personhood? This question is baffling the courts worldwide. There is a desperate need for the courts to come clear on this vital issue and recognize the rights of the foetus. (7)

In India, Article 21 of the Constitution guarantees the life and liberty of every person. (8) But it is doubtful if this would include the life of foetus as the meaning is restricted by the use of the word person. The Indian Constitution has

recognized the right to life under Article 21 as also recognized in several cases.

(9) But this is hardly available to the unwanted girl child. Hence the right of the girl child may be construed in broader terms and should be inferred as

- Right to be born and not to be aborted only because she is a girl.

- Right to remain alive after birth and not to be killed at any moment after birth.

- Right of the girl child to her mind her body, right to childhood and right to a healthy family environment. (10)

However there are a number of statutes that indirectly provide protection to the life of foetus. The Indian penal code under various provisions makes causing miscarriage an offence. (11) In 2001, the Supreme Court in India gave orders to five multi-national companies — Philips, Symonds, Toshiba, Larsen and Toubro and Wipro GE — to give them the names and addresses of all the clinics and persons in India to whom they have sold ultrasound machines in the last five years to enable the state government to find out if these machines were registered. Unfortunately, not much happened after this directive, although the companies were reported to have supplied all the information that was

required. The Statesman, a leading newspaper reported on February 3, 2002 that not a single illegal ultrasound machine has been impounded in Delhi.

(12)

India's prime minister acknowledges gendercide as a national shame; however, the police and judiciaries do not implement the law because they believe in the same thing. Authorities often let the unlawful parents and doctors off with light punishment. Often, when the mothers disobey the husband's family decision to abort the female foetus and report it to the authorities, the suits are ignored or given a light sentence: The mother is targeted for bearing girls and disobeying the family's decision to abort the child. She may even lose her job, be exposed to constant death threats, and be left with unresolved cases. In addition, others who give birth to girls are prone to violence. Even if she is able to give birth to the baby girls, the family is likely to not report the births and even murder them. (13)

### **Role of Society and Social Action groups to curb Female Feticide**

Society has to realize the importance of females for the healthy functioning of a nation. People both in rural as well as in urban areas have to be made aware about

the need of female child in the social milieu as that of a son. A progressive legislation alone cannot solve social problems. The people must be aware of the progressive legislation which has certain deterrent facts. Many women are compelled to undergo tests and seek abortion on acceptable as well as unacceptable grounds under compulsion. A new spirit has to be imbibe propagating that a female child is not a curse. It is not a liability. It is not a drain of economy. It is not an instrument through which dowry has to be given. A feeling has to be nurtured that she is the daughter, she is the mother and she is the life partner. (14)

If we want to stop the female foeticide or neglect of women, we have to stop looking for quick fixes and instead face the problem squarely. There is no way to ensure the healthy survival of baby girls unless families find them worth nurturing. That is indeed a complete task, which allows for no easy short-term solutions. Activists' intervention has not led to curbing sex determination tests. The real challenge before us is to figure out ways in which a realization of the value of daughters can be enhanced in the eyes of their own families. All

those who have a stake in it apart from the government authorities, like women's group, health groups, non-governmental organizations, the academia, the media and most importantly the medical professionals have to play their part to see that the provisions are implemented and the provisions are strengthened by amendments of the act. Unless social action is supplemented with prompt implementation of regulations under the law meant to stop female foeticide, such practices will continue to flourish. To ensure smiles on the faces of our youth, both boys and girls, let us intensify joint efforts to root out unhealthy social elements, 'Now' since future depends upon what we do in the present.

The most important aspect for which I advocate is the mentality of Indian community as a whole needs to be change. We must remember that education has failed to curb this heinous act of crime against humanity. It's because the cases of female foeticide have been reported in rich, educated and affluent families as compared to lower strata of society. Religions especially Hinduism which inspires a couple to have son for carrying out certain rituals

must bring some changes and made it more female friendly. When a mother can fast for a son, what's wrong if the same mother can fast for a daughter? The youth had to show its activism and take all proper incentives to shun this practice. Our school curriculum needs to be amended in a way that it emphasis on equality, respect and importance of women since grade-I.

#### **Importance of Media to curb Female foeticide**

Media is considered as the "*mirror of a society*". Media plays an important role in opinion building. In a country like India with lot of illiteracy, media plays a pivotal role in influencing the masses. Sadly, media of our nation is more responsible for depicting women as an "object" and hence "stereotyping" women. Media can educate the masses via films and tele-serials sending a clear-cut message that girls are the honor and pride of family. Some outlets of our media has shown a keen interest in bringing such instances to light and exposing the faces of old age beliefs, prejudices and outdated customs. The earlier meek populace now has the chance to raise its voice as in the cases of helpless victims like Falak and Hina. Education too has an important role to

play. Increasing awareness of the problem has led to multiple campaigns by celebrities and journalists to combat sex-selective abortions. Aamir Khan devoted the first episode "Daughters Are Precious" of his show Satyamev Jayate to raise awareness of this widespread practice, focusing primarily on Western Rajasthan, which is known to be one of the areas where this practice is common. Its sex ratio dropped to 883 girls per 1,000 boys in 2011 from 901 girls to 1000 boys in 2001. Rapid response was shown by local government in Rajasthan after the airing of this show, showing the affect of media and nationwide awareness on the issue. A vow was made by officials to set up fast-track courts to punish those who practice sex-based abortion. They cancelled the licenses of six sonography centers and issued notices to over 20 others. (15)

This has been done on the smaller scale. Cultural intervention has been addressed through theatre. Plays such as 'Pacha Mannu', which is about female infanticide/foeticide, has been produced by a women's theatre group in Tamil Nadu. This play was showing mostly in communities that practice female infanticide/foeticide and has led to a

redefinition of a methodology of consciousness raising, opening up varied ways of understanding and subverting cultural expressions.(16) The Beti Bachao, or Save girls campaign, has been underway in many Indian communities since the early 2000s. The campaign uses the media to raise awareness of the gender disparities creating, and resulting from, sex-selective abortion. Beti Bachao activities include rallies, posters, short videos and television commercials, some of which are sponsored by state and local governments and other organizations. Many celebrities in India have publicly supported the Beti Bachao campaign.

### Conclusion

Female foeticide has taken a grave form in Indian society. Government and society, both have to join hands in order to stop this heinous act of crime. Days are not so far, when there may be emergence of the situation where brides will not be available for the marriage of

the sons to maintain lineage and continue the human race of even those people who believe on long standing tradition of son preference, that “only sons can offer Pyre Pindadana, Mukhagni (giving fire to dead parents) and not the daughters”. Therefore it is felt that the mindsets of the people should be changed right from now towards the importance of the girl child in the family.

Meaningful education can play an important role as it opens the minds of people to receive new ideas and accept all human beings as equals. Government must make and implement strong laws to curb female foeticide. Gender based sex determination is a criminal offence as per government of India and it's a huge welcoming step in this regard.

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