

Preference for son: Cry of unborn girl

Renu Yadav

Department of Education, Coordinator Women Empowerment Cell, Central University of Haryana, Mahendergarh, Haryana, India.

Corresponding author: ryadavrenu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Preference for son is visible in India in the form of skewed sex ratio. Patriarchal shackles never let girl born and flourish in beautiful earth. However, only patriarchy is not the norm for preference of male over female. Many psychological and economic dimensions are involved in this aspect. The present paper highlights these perspectives especially in the context of Haryana which is prosperous in terms of GDP but poor in sex ratio.

Keywords: Female foeticide, Psychological perspective, Economic Perspective

“It’s a miracle a woman survives in India. Even before she is born, she is at risk of being aborted due to our obsession for sons,”

Shemeer Padinjsharedil.

Introduction

We are living in the era of power, power in the form of political, economic, social, cultural, religious and technological. This power is exercised against the person who is subjugated and oppressed. Subsequently the culture of masculinity also exaggerated supremacy and power in societal structure. The culture becomes inherent in our society and constitutes integral part of the man mentality converted into female’s oppression. Thus for getting share in power and gender equality women always have to fight within family and society. History reveals the struggle and misfortune as an integrated part of woman. However, struggle is not ending and women always live with no choice, voice and right.

Unequal distribution of power and rights are visible in every arena of life and misfortune is that it is more rampant before birth. Statistics indicate that violence against women and girls is a universal phenomenon, irrespective of income, class and culture (as 7 in 10 women in the world report having experienced physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lifetime). The condition become worsens

when it comes to scion. Only the boy child is eligible to run dynasty and girls are only the slave of family to reproduce child. This cruelty becomes ghastly crime when they are murdered before taking birth (*I will call female foeticide purely intentioned murder*). Female foeticide is the result of many combined factors like patriarchy, masculinity, institutional structure where head of the family is always man and have right on the property. However, it is convenient to kill them while in mother's womb on the name of safety, security, dowry and scion (most of the parents give this argument). A study by Lancet between 1980 to 2010, showed that 4.2 to 12.1 million girls were aborted in this period. India has led to 7.1 million fewer girls than boys' upto age 6. From 2001 to 2011 sex selective abortion rate increased at a rate of 170% and technology is playing a significant role in it. With the introduction of amniocentesis in the 1970s, the practice of sex selection abortions has become a commercial enterprise, causing India to develop most skewed male to female ratios in the world. Estimates claim that over 20 million females have been aborted solely because of their sex. This is despite of The Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, 2003 (PCPNDT Act). The 2012 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), indicates that after taking into account all forms of infanticide, abortion, murder and death due to malnutrition and mistreatment, over 35 million Indian women are unaccounted for in the population. In 2011, among the IPC crimes, foeticide reported an increase of 19% over 2010. A total of 132 cases of foeticide were reported in 2011, of which the highest number registered from Madhya Pradesh, followed by Chhattisgarh and Punjab and these States together reported 56% of the total Foeticide registered in 2011 in the Country. Besides technology many inhumane methods are adopted. In the case of abortion, the proportion of sex-selective abortions to abortions for other non-medical reasons has been estimated between 2.5% and 17% among married women in community based studies in West India (Ganatra, Hirve and Rao, 2001; Malhotra *et al.*, 2003; Elul *et al.*, 2004). Many inhumane modes like beating of mother so that unborn child can be aborted in the womb without spending a single penny. *As an infant*, she may be one of 10,000 girl children in India who are murdered by female infanticide every year.

The cumulative impact of sex-selective abortions on women's survival prospects was powerfully demonstrated in Amartya Sen's ground-breaking work on "missing women". Sen and his colleagues undertook a comparative analysis of sex ratios in countries in areas with relatively higher levels of gender equality, such as Europe and North America, and with countries where the gender gap places serious constraints on women's and girls' development, such as China and India. The results indicate that a female-male ratio in the first group of countries is about 1.05 or 1.06, reflecting women's biological advantage. In the second group of countries, in the areas of East Asia (China), South Asia and North Africa, the ratio was lower, ranging from a high of 0.94 to lesser values. He concluded that if these

regions had similar sex ratios as the countries with less gender discrimination, there would be more than 60 million more females alive today.

Scenario of Haryana

In 2011 census child sex ratios are the lowest ever in some of the affluent states of the country situated in northern parts of India. As a whole, the preference for a son is stronger in the north than it is in other parts of the country. Haryana, a developed state, has one of the lowest sex ratios as well as a decreasing trend in child sex ratio in the last two decades. Haryana ranks lowest among all 28 states on the sex ratio front. Against Kerala's high of 1,084 females per 1,000 males, Haryana reports a sorry number of just 877.

However, the technologies like sonography and amniocentesis that help to detect physical or mental abnormalities in the unborn child can also identify the sex of the foetus at no extra cost or effort. Not only did its use spread in urban areas but also in rural areas to identify the sex of the child for female murder. In Haryana there are 1175 ultrasound centres and many more mushrooming illegal centres. Since 1994 when PCPNDT was enacted there have been only 93 convictions. Of the 1036 on-going cases only a small% possibly 10% relate to charges of communication of sex. A majority of cases are related to non-maintenance of record and ultra sound machines. In Haryana 54 court cases have been registered under PCPNDT and 28 have been convicted. According to NFHS-3 at fertility levels, a woman in Haryana will have an average of 2.7 children in her lifetime, the same as the national fertility level. Fertility in rural areas is 2.9 children per woman, but fertility in urban areas (2.2 children per woman) has almost reached the replacement level. In Haryana there is a strong preference for sons. Twenty-2% of women and 18% of men want more sons than daughters, but only 1-2% of women and men want more daughters than sons. However, most men and women would like to have at least one son and at least one daughter. Women's desire for more children is strongly affected by their current number of sons. For example, among women with two children, 97% with two sons and 92% with one son want no more children, compared with only 26% with two daughters who want no more children. The data clearly depicts that societal attitude plays a major role in female foeticide in Haryana. In developing discriminatory societal attitude psychological and economic perspective contribute noteworthy.

Psychological Perspective

The psychological effect of son preference on women and the girl child is the internalization of the low value accorded them by society. When a woman becomes a mother for most of the women first thing comes to her mind is the sex of the child rather health. In pioneering work, Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe (1976)

followed up on observation and propose that major life change cause stress and that increased stress causes illness. In College Undergraduate Stress Scale Renner and Mackin (1998) show that concern about being pregnant generates 91% stress (physical and psychological response to internal or external stressor) in a woman. This stress is further enhanced by the stress for sex of the child. So one can assume the level of stress women faces being pregnant and it definitely deteriorates her psychological health.

Scientific evidence of the deleterious effect of son preference on the health of female children is scarce, but abnormal sex ratios in infant and young child mortality rates, in nutritional status indicators and even in population figures show that discriminatory practices are widespread and have serious repercussions. Geographically, there is often a close correspondence between the areas of strong son preference and of health disadvantage for females. The girl child who suffers from bigotry at birth put her whole life as second choice in terms of health, education, sanitation, employment opportunity and satisfaction in life.

According to the report of UNICEF 2011, 46% girls are fully vaccinated compared to boys. When children are sick parents spend about ₹ 126 on treatment of boys compare to 105 for girls. The roots of the patriarchy is so deep rooted that parents generally consider girls as liability, that is why 30% of girls aged 15-19 years are married or in union compared to only 5% boys of same age. India Human Development Survey (IHDS) found that more than 15% of loans are related to marriage expenses. Imagine a woman with two daughters who comes from an ethnic group that places a very high value on sons. She and her husband live with her in-laws, who threaten to render them homeless if she gives birth to another girl. Clearly, we might wish that this woman could leave this situation or, better, simply live in a world where such things do not happen.

Economic Perspective

Economic discrimination against women prevails from national to societal level. At national level Gender Budgeting can contribute to achieve the objectives of gender equality, human development and economic efficiency however, implementation is not in true spirit. The provision of gender budgeting cell (GBC) has come in 2005-06 but *up to 2011 only 56 ministries has adopted it and the number is stagnant (confusion still exist in part A and B's Schemes)*.

At societal level practice of son preference is rooted in culture of economic power and plays a major role in the low valuation and neglect of female children. Son preference manifests itself either covertly or overtly. The birth of a son is welcomed with celebration as an asset, whereas that of a girl is seen as a liability, an impending economic drain. According to an Asian proverb, "bringing up girls is like watering the neighbour's garden". The son is considered to be the family

pillar, who ensures continuity and protection of the family property. Sons provide the workforce and bring in a bride—"an extra pair of hands" with negligible cost and dowry as gift for whole life. Sons are the source of family income and have to provide for parents in their old age. They are also the interpreters of religious teachings and the performers of rituals, especially on the death of parents, which include feeding at large number of people, sometimes several villages. The evolution of property rights in a patriarchal system has contributed further to the subordinate status of women. The practice of son preference emerged with the shift from subsistence agriculture, which was primarily controlled by women, to settled agriculture, which is primarily regulated and dominated by men. In the patrilineal landowning communities with settled agriculture which are prevalent in the Asian region, the economic obligations of sons towards parents are greater. Especially in terms of Haryana where big fatty marriages are tradition birth of a girl child further diminished the hopes of family to get a big amount of dowry in son's marriage and lot of expenditure in terms of daughter's marriage. Son is generally presumed as a fix deposit for old age and main support for parents. That could be the reason that 86% women expect financial support from their sons and 85% women expect to live with their sons. Thus investment in girls education specially higher education is generally considered as not a good investment because it will not give return.

Conclusion

The patriarchal history of India is the first culprit in perpetuating violence. Gender inequalities remain deeply entrenched in every society. Economic power and the continuation of "culture of silence" are foremost reasons that violence in India has continued. Especially in Haryana where roots of the patriarchy is more deeply rooted due to many reasons (economic, psychological) girls are seen mere as liabilities for whole life thus killed before their birth. Social attitude of patriarchy developed in the masculine power and resulted in sexual assault and violence. Gender blind approach to economy further enhances the discrimination. Mainstreaming a gender perspective in development initiatives can make a real difference in social attitude. Legal judicial system should be made more responsive and gender sensitive to women's needs, especially in cases of domestic violence and personal assault. Women's perspectives must be included in designing and implementing macro-economic and social policies by institutionalizing their participation in such processes. Strategies should be designed to enhance the capacity of women and empower them to meet the negative social and economic impacts, which may flow from the globalization process.

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