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Right to Be Born: A Study on Femicide

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Abstract

Women are one of the marvelous masterpieces of creation. Though the Indian constitution guarantees equal status, in reality the Indian women live in a degraded status as victims of violence. Increased domestic and communal violence are also part of this scenario. Certain forms of violence are popularly known but there are other forms of violence still not brought to the lime light of the society. One of such violence according to census 2001 is reflected in reduction of juvenile female sex ratio i.e. sex ratio which was 972 females per 1000 males in 1901 was 933 females per 1000 males in 2001. It is due to wide spread practice of femicide, which includes female foeticide and infanticide.

This form of violence of killing the voiceless female foetus and infants resound the female struggle for their survival or existence as human being. This form of violence has denied them the right to life just because they are women. 'Black Zones' where less than 850 girls were born per 1,000 male children is on increase. Above all the young mother goes through physically and mentally an agonizing experience. Young women who are not able to face it become a victim of maternal mortality. The women who revolt against this violence are not accepted by her in-laws. Her reproductive right is denied. There is an urgent need of putting an end to this problem. In Tamil Nadu, women Self Help Groups (SHGs) in the recent past have played successful role in bringing successful transformation in social life. This active forum could be used to put an end to femicide form of violence.

At a large perspective, it will enable the country to move forward in achieving Millennium Development Goals specifically brining gender equality, empowerment of women and reduction of female child mortality. In Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) and Human Development Index (HDI) also the country will be able to move forward.

Context and relevance of the study

In Tamil Nadu, which is one of the states of India dropping juvenile sex ratio has posed a serious and growing problem. While in 1991 there was just one district, Salem District had sex ratio of 849. But such black zones in Tamil Nadu are on increase. Tamil Nadu's juvenile sex ratio, which was 948 girls per 1000 boys a decade ago, has reduced to 939 in 2001. District wise the lowest juvenile sex ratio begins with Salem (826) and it follows as Dharmapuri (878), Theni (893), Namakkal (896), Karur (923), Madurai (927) and Dindigul (929). Prevalence of female foeticide and infanticide (i.e. femicide) is one of the major causes of the decline. An estimate of 14 million girls being killed even before they were born in the past decade (The Hindu, Feb 1,2003).

Goal

- End the violence against women done in the form of femicide
- Ensure the right to be born for a female baby,
- Establish the reproductive rights of women

Policy implications

- Pre-Natal Diagnostic Test (PNDD) act has to be implemented forcefully. If need be amendment has to be made in view of safeguarding the female babies and the young mothers.
- Social supportive system has to be established to protect the reproductive right of young mothers
- Measures to welcome the female babies have to be introduced. For instance the young mothers have to be given incentives for giving birth to female babies.

RIGHT TO BE BORN: A STUDY ON FEMICIDE

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Women are one of the marvelous masterpieces of creation. Though the Indian constitution guarantees equal status, in reality the Indian women live in a degraded status as victims of violence. The development indicators namely vital statistics on sex ratio, mean age at marriage, health, literacy rate, work participation rate and participation in decision making bodies bare witness to the lower status quo of women in India. Increased domestic and communal violence are also part of this scenario. Certain forms of violence are popularly known but there are other forms of violence still not brought to the lime light of the society. The Census 2001 report has portrayed that Indian woman especially the female children are struggling for their survival or existence as human being. They are denied the right to life just because they are women. Given the lower value placed on women, prenatal sex determination with the intention of preventing female births and killing the female infants are viewed as a manifestation of violence against women, a violation of their human rights.

Depleting female population in India is an urgent need to be addressed. At a large perspective, dealing with femicide will enable the country to move forward in achieving Millennium Development Goals specifically brining gender equality, empowerment of women and reduction of female child mortality. In Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) and Human Development Index (HDI) the country will be able to move forward.

Femicide

Femicide includes female foeticide and female infanticide. These forms of killing the voiceless female foetus and infant resounds the extreme form of violence against women. It occurs both in the rural and urban areas. Female foeticide is an act of crime, which means intentionally eliminating the fetus from the womb of a woman. In other words, female foetuses are selectively aborted after pre-natal sex determination, thus avoiding the birth of girls. For the past two decades since access to ultrasound scan became widespread in India. However, sex selective abortions have been banned in India for more than a decade and it is punishable by the law. But it continues to prevail due to various socio-economic factors. Consequently some of the cheap advertisements like 'Spend 500 Rupees Now, Save Five Lakhs Later' in scan centres attract the ordinary people in cities and towns.

Female infanticide, the prevalent form of sex-selective infanticide, is the systematic killing of girls at or soon after birth. It normally occurs when a society values male children to the point that producing a female is considered dishonorable, shameful, or an unacceptable

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investment to the individuals. In rural areas where a lot of people do not have access to sex determination facilities, female infanticide is shockingly common. The parents wait until the mother gives birth, and when they find out that a daughter is born, they are ready to kill the baby by adopting various means.

Methods of Femicide

The determination of the sex of the foetus by amniocentesis and ultrasound scanning has aggravated the rate of female foeticide. Amniocentesis is the deliberate puncture of the amniotic fluid sac per abdomen. In this test a 20-22 gauge spinal needle about 4" in length is pierced into the amniotic cavity with the stiletto in. Later the stiletto is withdrawn and few drops of liquor discarded. About 10 ml of fluid is collected in test tube for diagnostic purposes.

Hazards of Amniocentesis

- a. Maternal complications are
 1. Infection
 2. Haemorrhage (Placenta or Uterine Injury)
 3. Premature rupture of the membranes and premature labour
 4. Maternal isoimmunisation in Rh- negative cases.
- b. Foetal hazards are
 1. Trauma
 2. Foetomaternal haemorrhage

The complications are about five times more in mid- trimester termination irrespective if the methods are employed. The complications are either related to the methods employed or to the abortion process. Gynaecological disturbances include

- (a) menstrual disturbances;
- (b) chronic pelvic inflammation,
- (c) infertility due to corneal block,
- (d) scar endometriosis, and
- (e) Asherman's syndrome leading to secondary amenorrhoea.

Some of the methods of female foeticide done by giving milk of plant *Calotropis* (*Erukampal*), giving boiled water with a few grains of paddy, feeding tobacco paste or pesticides, pressing its nose and mouth, closing the face of child with a thick wet towel, leaving the new born in the open space, etc. Other methods of female foeticide are strangling the baby, dumping her in a garbage bin, drowning her, burying her alive, starving her or stuffing her mouth with salt. It is shocking to know these femicide practices.

Global Scenario of Femicide

In most of the countries in the world, there are approximately 105 female births for every 100 males. But in 2000, a United Nations report estimated that 79 million females are missing in South Asia alone and attributed this number to sex-selective abortion and infanticide. Sex-selective abortion was rare before the late 20th century because of the difficulty of determining the sex of the fetus before birth, but ultrasound has made such selection easier. However, prior to this, parents would alter family sex compositions through infanticide. It is believed to be responsible for at least part of the skewed birth statistics in favor of males. It is estimated that 30.5 million females are 'missing' from China, 22.8 million in India, 3.1 million in Pakistan, 1.6 million in Bangladesh, 1.7 million in West Asia, 600,000 in Egypt, and 200,000 in Nepal. The existence of the practice appears to be determined by culture, rather than by economic conditions, because such deviations in sex ratios do not exist in economically backward sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. An Oxford University study has found that Indian women in the UK are aborting daughters in order to have more boys. The research indicated that 1,500 girls have gone 'missing' from the birth statistics in England and Wales since 1990.

Sex Ratio in India

Femicide, a ruthless violence against women, is reflected in the sex ratio in India. Sex ratio i.e. number of females by 1000 males is getting more and more disproportionate over the years. According to a recent report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) up to 50 million girls and women are missing from India's population as a result of systematic gender discrimination in India. The following table depicts the sex ratio based on religion. There is a glaring difference found in the juvenile sex ratio.

Table - 1
Census information - 2001

Composition	Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Sikhs	Buddhists	Jains	Others
% total of population	80.40%	13.40%	2.20%	1.90%	1.10%	0.40%	0.50%
10-Yr growth % (est '91-'01)	20.30%	29.50%	22.60%	18.20%	24.50%	26.00%	103.10%
Sex ratio (avg.)	935	940	1009	895	955	940	100
Rural sex ratio	944	953	1001	895	958	937	995
Urban sex ratio	922	907	1026	886	944	941	966
Juvenile sex ratio (0-6 yrs)	925	950	964	786	942	870	976

Source: Census report, 2001

According to census of India, the female sex ratio was 972 females per 1000 males in 1901 and 933 females per 1000 males in 2001. It could be attributed to the wide spread practice of femicide, which includes female foeticide and infanticide.

Table - 2

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

Year	Sex ratio	
	Adults	Juvenile (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

The juvenile sex ration is also depicted in table -2. Instead of a natural birth ratio of slightly more girls than boys, figures have fallen to as low as fewer than eight girls for every 10 boys (BBC news, 15 Feb, 2003, 12:30 GMT). Among the 0-6 years children population revealed that it was 927 female per 1000 children in 2001. Among the Indian states, the disparity in the ratio was more severe in Punjab (793), Haryana (820), Chandigarh (845), Delhi (865), Gujarat (878), and Himachal Pradesh (897). Thus, India remains as one of the few countries where the overall sex ratio is not favourable to females.

Black Zones

‘Black Zones’ are the areas where less than 850 girls were recorded per 1,000 male children. As per 2001 Census, there are 49 districts in the country that have recorded an alarming low child sex ratio. Despite higher literacy rates, economic progress in many of these states and various steps taken by the government and non– government organizations to stop female foeticide, black zones are on increase.

Reasons for Femicide

India being predominantly an agrarian society, boys are considered an extra pair of hands on the farm for the rural people whereas the girl child has traditionally been considered inferior and a liability. Partly the dowry system demands the family to pay out a great deal of money when a female child is married. Hence a poor family sees the birth of a girl child as a signal of financial ruin and extreme hardship. While questioning the economic

compulsion on women survival, the example of Punjab contrasts the fact. Reports apparently prove that even prosperity and literacy have taken the country nowhere. Punjab is one of India's richest states but development has not had the desired effect in stopping female foeticide or in narrowing the sex ratio gap. The reasons of economic issue related to femicide in other areas have been ruled out in this state.

There is even the widespread belief that if a baby girl is killed, then the next baby will be a boy. Much of these practices are to do with cultural beliefs and social norms too. In the patriarchal society, the oppression and exploitation experienced by women make them feel that their daughters also should not go through the same agonizing problems. Another reason is the result of cheaply available ultrasound during the past twenty years. Due to deliberate deception by vested interests of doctors e.g. those who make a lot of money using ultra-sound machines determine the gender of the unborn child and they terminate pregnancies (kill an unborn child) for non-medical reasons attributed to it.

Unfortunately the educated and the elite still seem to consider their male child a status symbol and thereby partake in creating an imbalance in the male-female sex ratio. The situation is further worsened by a lack of awareness of women's rights and by the indifferent attitude of governments and other professionals. Where the daughter's life is spared, parents often neglect her and expect her to work around the house serving her brothers and father. Girls are rarely sent to school, and those who were sent to school are removed after a few years of education and put to work - perhaps sent to cities to work as maids in homes, and send back money earned by them. In all probability, they are treated far better at the homes they work in as maids than they are in their own homes but instances of harsh ill-treatment and abuse of such girls are also just as common.

Consequence of Femicide on Young Mothers

This violence of femicide is an agonizing experience physically and mentally for the young mothers to go through. Young women who are not able to face it often become a victim of maternal mortality. The women who revolt against this violence are not accepted by her in-laws. Her reproductive rights are denied by the partner. Often the pregnant woman, anxious to have a boy, is frequently pressurized to undergo numerous procedures. Many women suffer from psychological trauma as a result of forcibly undergoing repeated abortions. Demographers warn that in the next twenty years there will be a shortage of brides in the marriage market mainly because of the adverse juvenile sex ratio, combined with an overall decline in fertility. A society with a preponderance of unmarried young men is prone to particular dangers. More women are likely to be exploited as sex workers. Increases in molestations and rape are an obvious result. The Hindustan Times recently reported that young girls from Assam and West Bengal are kidnapped and sold into marriage in neighbouring Haryana.

PNDT Act

The Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994, was enacted and brought into operation from 1st January, 1996, in order to check female foeticide. The Act prohibits determination and disclosure of the sex of foetus. It also prohibits any advertisements relating to pre-natal determination of sex and prescribes punishment for its contravention. The person who contravenes the provisions of this Act is punishable with imprisonment and fine. It was later amended and replaced in 2002 by the Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act without ever having been properly implemented.

The Act has a central and state level Supervisory Board, an Appropriate Authority, and supporting Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee provides expert and technical support to the Appropriate Authority. Contravening the provisions of the Act can lead to a fine of Rs 10,000 and up to three years imprisonment for a first offence, with greater fines and longer terms of imprisonment for repeat offenders. The Appropriate Authority informs the central or state medical council to take action against medical professionals, leading to suspension or the striking off of practitioners found guilty of contravening the provisions of the Act.

In reality, PNDT Act has many loopholes and requires appropriate amendments. Many states in India do not strictly enforce the PNDT Act and as a result scanning centres are not being checked. The advisory committee of each state has to take keen interest to see that this Act is implemented in full. With tougher legislation it is may be possible for the authorities to crack down, staging raids on pre-natal clinics to check records and look for evidence of illegal sex selection.

Attempts to Eradicate Femicide

A study conducted in an ultrasound centre at Punjab regarding the checking of female foeticide revealed that among the 66 suspected cases were short-listed. Of these, 35 were found to have given wrong addresses, 22 were continuing with pregnancy, three were outstation patients and six foeticide cases have been found. Thus the need to create gender consciousness is deeply felt to be more essential element in upholding the women. In Goa, the government has passed Goa's children act, 2003 to check femicide.

At Chandigarh, a unique 'Integrated Monitoring System', described as first of its kind in the country, has been launched as a pilot project in Ludhiana to check misuse of technology for female foeticide. The monitoring system has developed software to maintain the information about the pregnant women. The 'suspected' cases i.e. the woman had one girl child or more and no male child, were detected while keeping record of children in the family. Women getting ultrasound within 12-18 weeks of pregnancy also come under this category. The ultrasound centers would undergo surprise and regular checks for which a

three-member team comprising a senior government doctor, an NGO member and an Indian Medical Association member has been set up. With various efforts femicide persists. In view of assessing the depth of the problem the research conducted an empirical study too.

Context of the study

In Tamil Nadu, which is one of the states of India dropping juvenile sex ratio has posed a serious and growing problem. While in 1991 there was just one district, Salem District had sex ratio of 849. But such black zones in Tamil Nadu are on increase. Tamil Nadu's juvenile sex ratio, which was 948 girls per 1000 boys a decade ago, has reduced to 939 in 2001. District wise the lowest juvenile sex ratio begins with Salem (826) and it follows as Dharmapuri (878), Theni (893), Namakkal (896), Karur (923), Madurai (927) and Dindigul (929). Prevalence of femicide is one of the major causes of the decline. An estimate of 14 million girls being killed even before they were born in the past decade (The Hindu, Feb 1, 2003). The census report gives vividly of the femicide occurring in urban areas specifically Madurai and Coimbatore tops in the list. Urban areas with higher educational status do not seem to bring gender equity in those areas.

Goal

Some of the vital goal of this study is to,

- End the violence against women done in the form of femicide
- Ensure the right to be born for a female baby
- Establish the reproductive rights of women

Study Area

In Dindigul District, Viruveedu union of Vathalagundu block, where the researcher lives has a high infant mortality rate (IMR) and maternal mortality rate (MMR). It is also identified as a black zone as per census 2001, India. The study focused intensely on this area to look deeper into the issue. The researcher is working with rural women and children in 83 villages with 296 Self Help Groups.

As the initial step, the researcher held focus group discussions with village women leaders. They articulated the prevalence and reasons for femicide. They admitted that sex determination and abortions were common in some of their villages. Even killing of female babies was silently done and the community supported it quietly. For boys are considered a source of income for the family and the girls a heavy expenditure, not only with regard to dowry, but also for other expenses like the first delivery, special rituals, etc.

Increase in Femicide

'Physical including the sexual violence posed on women within and outside family is one of the threats to have female child' said one of the participant. Moreover for any form of femicide, only the women are held responsible. They are penalized by the court. The men who play major role in crushing the life of budding new born often remain without being convicted. It was witnessed by the researcher in one of the villages where three female infant killing took place within a month. But the law was too slow to act upon the convicts. However there had been a fear instilled among people. It is witnessed in the increase numbers of female babies in the government cradle baby centers.

Painful rejection of a female baby

Two weeks back a pregnant woman from a neighbouring village was admitted in a private hospital at Vathalagundu. She gave birth to a third baby girl. Her husband refused to see the child and the in-laws begun to curse the mother. The family even refused to take the child home! There was no choice for the mother but to leave the child in the hospital itself at the request of the hospital administration. Later the concerned officials handed over the female baby to a children's home.

The order of girl's birth is one of the factors either to accept or reject the female child. The 'male child preference' syndrome is very strongly prevalent. It is believed, though often wrongly, that son will take care of the parents in their old age. To think of having a female child created the threat that she would suffer physical and sexual violence.

Alternative Approaches

The motivated action of women at the grassroots level and the involvement of professionals can prevent the growth of black zones. The 'male child preference' syndrome can be eliminated by transforming public opinion in favour of gender equality. In the study area, the involvements of the researcher and her team over the years have proved that female children can be welcomed by the family members. In few cases they handed over the female babies without being killed. The continuous involvement and working with the people especially women has given way for the following suggestions,

Checking Femicide - Policy implications

It is an urgent need to prevent the growth of black zones and to reduce the intensity of problems in these areas. Hence the issue of femicide has to be addressed from multiple perspectives. In the rural and urban areas as a community based approach,

- Counseling sessions - Risk couples need to be identified. While the woman becomes pregnant counseling sessions has to start for her along with the members of the family mainly the husband and the mother-in-law. It has to spread out through out the span of the gestation period of the woman till the delivery takes place.

- Family Resource Units can be established in each panchayat and can be managed by women. People can come and seek counseling, advice on the above matters in this Family Resource Unit. The women in these units need to be extensively trained to make house visits in the Panchayat covering all the villages apart from that fixed timings.
- Community sensitization and social education about the problem is very essential for elimination of the issue of femicide. Women Self Help Groups (SHGs) in the recent past have played successful role in bringing successful transformation in social life. This active forum could be used to put an end to femicide form of violence.
- Adolescent girl groups and youth groups can be formed. Healthy discussions and debates on the issues can be conducted from time to time
- Motivation and joint action of women at the grass root level and the venture of professionals has to be intensified. Programmes has to be launched aiming at altering attitudes, including those prevalent in the medical profession is inevitable.
- Cultural wing - dramas, skits, songs on the various issues of femicide can be developed

From the gender perspective

- Measures to welcome the female babies have to be introduced. For instance the young mothers have to be given incentives for giving birth to female babies.
- The 'male child preference' syndrome has to be eliminated by creating public opinion to accord equality to the girl child and gradually negate. The hard reality of the male children not caring the elderly parents especially has to be discussed from ground reality.
- Gender sensitization has to be part of the curriculum in high schools. Competitions centering on the issues of girl children, female infanticide, early marriage, etc can be conducted among the various schools
- Involving men in educating about the gender discrimination and mutual respectability is inevitable. Government need to sort out strategies in collaboration with the non-governmental organization to sort out plans for black zones.

From the legal perspective,

- Pre-Natal Diagnostic Test (PNDT) act has to be, implemented forcefully. If need be amendment has to be made in view of safeguarding the female babies and the young mothers. It has to include the compulsory registration of the scan or birth of female baby. Immediate legal action has to be taken against the unregistered ultrasound centers. Speedy investigation of the causes has to done on various occurrences.

- Social supportive system has to be established to protect the reproductive right of young mothers
- In case of femicide both father and mother of the female baby has to be penalized not the mother alone.

Conclusion

There may be greater incidence of rape, sharing of women within and outside wedlock, abductions, and in general, in reducing women's freedom and mobility. Persistence of femicide is a merely a human right violation but it is also a threat to the future of human species. If femicide is not stopped it can lead to increased violence against women. Let the humanity realize at the earliest that

Women have the right to live

Women are part of human race

Women are the co creators of the world.

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