Study of Awareness Regarding Gender Preference and Female Foeticide amongst the Youth of Uttarakhand, India

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Abstract

The present study focuses on the Awareness Regarding Gender Preference and Female Foeticide amongst the youth conducted in the state of Uttarakhand, India. A sample of 1300 unmarried youth from the 13 districts of Uttarakhand between the age group of 20-24yrs was taken for the study. A pre and post test was conducted to measure the awareness level of the youth towards the issue, which revealed the lack of knowledge and low awareness levels amongst them. There is an urgent need to educate the youth of the country on whose shoulder lays the responsibility of building a nation based on equality.

KEY WORDS: Son Preference, Girl Child, Female Foeticide, Sex Ratio

INTRODUCTION

Sex ratio is an important social indicator to measure the extent of the prevailing equity between males and females in a society at a given point of time. Changes in sex ratio largely reflect the underlying socio-economic and cultural patterns of a society in different ways. Determinants of changes in sex ratio vary from sex differentials in mortality, sex selective migration, sex ratio at birth, and at times, sex differentials in population enumeration. India is one of the few countries in the world where males outnumber females. However, the high incidence of induced abortions and sharp decline in the child sex ratio in the last decade clearly proves the practice of female foeticide.

The increasing incidence of female foeticide has led to a drastic decrease in the number of girls to boys in India in the 0-6 age group. The practice of eliminating female foetuses is believed to be one of the main reasons for the adverse child sex ratio. Pre-birth elimination of females (PBEF) seems to be more prevalent in urban areas than in rural areas, but the gap is rapidly decreasing because of easy availability of sex determination tests in rural areas.

The declining sex ratio in the country has sent shockwaves across all sections of society. It seems that the socio-cultural factors are so embedded in the psyche of the people that they even accept wrong ways of life for the sake of social superiority. It is not poverty alone that kills baby girls – the choices made by her parents and family have a greater role to play in curtailing her life. Custom and tradition shape these choices and when resources are meager; these can make a difference between life and death. Significantly, micro-level studies have shown that baby girls are more likely to die in a family where there is no older male sibling, pointing to strong circumstantial evidence of discriminatory care.

Girls in India are discriminated against in other ways as well – fewer months of breastfeeding, less nurturing and play, less medical treatment if they fall ill, less special food, less prenatal attention. As a result, girls are far more susceptible than boys to disease and infections, leading to poor health and a shorter lifespan. It is this lifelong discrimination in nurturing and care that is the real killer of girls, less visible and less dramatic, but as unequivocally lethal as female foeticide and infanticide (UNICEF, 1998). In one of the few existing country-specific studies on this theme, Miller (1981)
argued; “The problem is that son preference is so strong in some areas of India and amongst some classes that daughters must logically suffer in order that families’ perceived and culturally mandated needs are fulfilled”. Logically, this would imply that preference for sons coexists with discrimination against daughters; the stronger the son preference, the more intense the daughter discrimination would be. The desire for sons, whether strong or weak, is directly related to daughter discrimination and neglect. This, in its most extreme form, results in the death of daughters. In India, the practice of female infanticide has apparently continued even in recent years (UNICEF 1995: Chunkath and Athreya 1997; George, et al. 1992).

Interestingly, Bandewar (2003) found that 64 per cent of the abortion service providers were against sex selective abortions; 10 per cent said they were against it but had to do it and the rest about 24 per cent approved the practice of sex selective abortions. Although there was not much variation among service providers working in public/private health care facilities or rural/urban location but difference was found among men and women service providers. About 28 per cent men approved of sex selective abortion practice whereas it was only 17 per cent in case of women providers. Thus it was higher percentage of women providers (68 per cent) compared to men (61 per cent) who were against such a practice. Those who disapproved of the practice of sex selective abortions but engaged in it against their principles expressed their compulsions and helplessness for two reasons:

1. Due to pressures arising out of unhealthy competition in the health care service sector it was said that if they did not provide abortion care services, some others would have provided them, and
2. Implications in terms of persistent abuse and exploitation that the women have to face back home in case they did not get the abortion done.

Many talked of compulsions that women have at their ends to go for sex selection abortions. These arise either out of social norms fostering son preference or because their lives are put at stake in case they do not produce a son. Some also said that unwanted girls ran the risk of severe ill treatment at their natal homes causing them emotional and mental trauma. Hence the service providers empathised with the woman’s social needs for sex selective abortions (Economic and Political Weekly, 2003). Nearly 10,000 cases of female foeticide have been reported from Ahmedabad alone (Gangrade, 1988). Additional threat that causes grave concern is the development of new pre-selection techniques, such as, Electrophoresis, Ericsson’s method, etc., which involve prior manipulation of the sex of the child. What will be the future of the female race is a moot question.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:

The present study was conducted in the state of Uttarakhand, India with the aim of finding out the trends in gender preference and attitude towards female foeticide amongst the college studying youth of the state. The data over the years has shown a negative bent towards the girl child leading to increasing number of ‘missing’ girls, female foeticide an open secret. According to the 2011 census of India, the number of females/1000 males is 940, and the child sex ratio is 913. In Uttarakhand it is 963, the child sex ratio (0-6 yrs) is 886 – projecting the acutely damaged sex ratio. Through the present study attempt has been made to understand the attitude of the youth towards female foeticide and gender preference as issues of concern for the ‘Modern India’, which is going to define the future of nation. A sample comprising of 1300 unmarried youth was taken from the 13 districts of Uttarakhand, including both girls and boys between the age group of 20-24yrs. The sample comprised of youth belonging to different religions, regions and SES.

METHODOLOGY
Sample: The sample of 1300 unmarried youth was taken from 13 degree colleges of 13 districts (one college from each district) from Uttarakhand, India. From every college 100 students were taken for the study. Random sampling technique was employed for the selection of college and students.
Figure 1. Showing Sample for the study conducted.

Procedure

For conducting the study a self made questionnaire was designed, which was used as a pre and post test tool. The pretested and pre-structured questionnaire was used to collect the information on their knowledge, attitude and practice towards gender preference and female foeticide. The variables in the questionnaire included evaluation of the knowledge about the status of girl child in India, declining sex ratio, son preference, methods and awareness about the punishment associated with female foeticide. A one day workshop of four hour duration was organized on ‘Awareness towards female foeticide and the issue of gender preference’ in each of the degree college for the students. The pre test was given to the students before the beginning of the workshop while the post test was conducted after the completion of the workshop. The data was analyzed through Microsoft excel proportions. Unstructured interview and discussion was also held with the youth present during the workshop.

Tools Used:

Perception and Actions scale (PAS Scale 2004 FF / FI) self-made questionnaire by Balodi, G. and Singh, S: For every question one mark was given for the option chosen by the respondent. Scoring for the group was done by evaluating the score obtained for every option thus calculating the percentage.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1: Showing response obtained on Pre and Post test questionnaire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q1. Who is responsible for declining sex ratio in the society?</th>
<th>Response Options</th>
<th>Pre test (Response %)</th>
<th>Post test (Response %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Society</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Ultrasound</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Declining Moral Value</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) All the above</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q2. In comparison to 2001, there has been an increase in sex ratio of 2011.</th>
<th>Response Options</th>
<th>Pre test (Response %)</th>
<th>Post test (Response %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Yes</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) No</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Don’t Know</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q3. Due to declining sex ratio, in the coming days the crime against women will increase.</th>
<th>Response Options</th>
<th>Pre test (Response %)</th>
<th>Post test (Response %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Yes</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) No</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Can’t Say</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q4. There is provision of punishment for the person found involved in the act of sex detection.</th>
<th>Response Options</th>
<th>Pre test (Response %)</th>
<th>Post test (Response %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) One year</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Three years</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Five years</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) On the basis of crime</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the pre and the post test give a glimpse of the existing attitude of the youth towards the issue and the fact that a serious effort has to be made to awaken the sensitivity levels of the young population. A study done by Anand, 1998 revealed that a strong patriarchal family system gradually gave rise to the practice of ancestral worship, resulting in a strong preference for sons. These have now become institutionalized values. Along with this, according to Hindu philosophy, a woman is to obey her father before marriage, her husband during married life and her son in widowhood. These traditions stress the importance of perpetuating the family lineage through sons. These values provided the justification for female infanticide in the past and female foeticide during contemporary times. The results of the pre and post test reveal the attitude and the attitudinal change the youth underwent during the workshop. When the participants of the workshop were asked as to who is responsible for declining sex ratio in the pre test (Q1), the answers saw a major dominance of all the three factors (50%) for being responsible for the declining sex ratio followed by the Declining moral value (20%), Society (20%), and least number of answers found the Ultrasound machine responsible. This was one aspect of the mindsets of the participants before the workshop, but when they were inquired of on the same question in the post test, the incidence of the answers showing the responsibility of the modern technology in the form of ultrasound machines increased by 20%. The youth (35%) felt that society, modern technology and declining moral values were equally responsible in declining sex ratio for the greed of the human beings has itself become the most important devastating factor for them. Sabu George, Rajaratnam Abel and B.D. Meller have carried out research in 12 villages of K.V. Kuppam block, North Arcot Ambedkar District in Tamil Nadu State for four years beginning in April 1987 to September 1989. After creating a good rapport with the people, the
father or other family members would tell the village worker that if the current pregnancy resulted in the birth of a female, it would be killed. They found that each village had an assigned village level worker whose primary function was to provide education about child care to village mothers. The worker in all cases was a local resident of the village. (George et al 1992)

The ruthlessness of man is accentuating but the census survey of 2001 saw the CSR to be 934 and the picture in 2011 is a bit brighter by the CSR being 940(Q2). The youth of the Indian society cannot be expected to be making any effective positive change unless they are made aware of the grave situation the contribution each one of them can make in overcoming this problem. The pre test revealed that 80% of the youth did not know what was reflected by the sex ratio of India. The post test results thus helped in making the students aware of the situation turning the figure into 75% knowing the correct sex ratio. The need of making the youth of the state at an urgent speed and guiding them to choose the correct path of not discriminating between a girl and boy child is greatly felt. Ghosh, Goel and Balda (2005) in a study conducted in Allahabad district on 100 couples found that 64 per cent males and 74 per cent females had no knowledge about the sex ratio.

In the Pre test questionnaire 60% of the participating volunteers agreed with the statement, in the coming day’s crime against women will increase due to the declining sex ratio (Q3). 10% showed complete disapproval and remaining 30% couldn’t reach any conclusion. However in the Post State Questionnaire drastic change was seen in the mindset of the participants. 90% of them now agreed readily to the supposition that declining sex ratio would raise crime against women. The various problems foreseen owing to increased female foeticide include non-availability of brides, rise in sexual violence against women, lack of female workforce and polyandry (Ghose, Goel and Balda, 2005). Unless the youth of today are made aware of the existing truth and brought face to face with the existing realities, they cannot be blamed for not being able to take justified actions based on moral thought and thinking. It is evident from the pre test that in the beginning participants were not familiar with the upshot of distorted sex ratio. People usually spend all their lives hanging on to the decadent social customs without a single thought upon the contemporary conditions. The results which came after the workshop were eye-openers in the sense that people need more awareness programs to bring about a reformation in the society. Different forms of violence against women and girls reflect existing inequalities between men and women and between adults and children, as well as concepts of masculinity based on aggressiveness and exercise of force as means of affirming virility. Such forms of masculinity manifest themselves through sexual violence. Women who remain in violent relationships are paralyzed by the lack of a self-defence mechanism, by economic and psychic dependence, and by low self-esteem resulting from a long history of submission. Violence against women and girls consists in a series of behaviours, beliefs, and practices aimed at compromising the full exercise of their rights, often with societal tolerance. Sexual violence represents an assault on basic human rights and on the victims' personality, body, and conscience, and on the conscience of their families and even their communities. A number of measures should be taken to eliminate sexual violence, including sex education within the family, school, and elsewhere (Velez Londono A, 1998).

Nayar (1995) found that the level of awareness about various laws under which violence against women and their harassment is a punishable offence was very low among the women. In the pre test it was found that only 35% knew that punishment is given on the basis of crime in relation to sex detection, rest of the youth did not know the correct response and 15% supported one year, 30% said two years, while 20% said five years. The need of awareness is reflected through the post results which also stress upon the importance of making the youth aware of the existing laws to help curb the crime and also put a check on elements that are against the birth of a girl child. The post test results reveal that now 75% of the students were aware of the correct response i.e. punishment on the basis of crime committed. Sinha, S, (1997) narrates that the girl child is deliberately deprived of love, affection and care which she needs during the vulnerable period of her development. Considered more to be a liability than an asset, she is treated as a second class citizen. Education remains a distant dream for
most of them. From puberty to adulthood, dowry stalks them. Failure to fetch it, leads to her torture, her burning and even her death. For that parents want to get rid of their daughters either by an abortion or by killing them once they are born. Rearing a female child is also a very tedious and tenuous job in Indian society, where her security is of prime concern. But there are also many families where a girl child is considered to be a prized possession, and she is treated with great love and affection, provided with every opportunity, which helps her to attain an honourable social status in every walk of life.

Dr. Bose and Mira Shiva (VHAI), 2003, conducted a study on female foeticide in Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Haryana. The study, ‘Darkness at Noon’, shows that "demographic fundamentalism" preference for a boy-child is on the rise in the country, particularly in North India resulting in declining sex ratio. The study, which covered Kurukshetra in Haryana, Fateh Saheb in Punjab and Kangra district in Himachal Pradesh, categorically states that female foeticide was the result of an unholy alliance between the traditional preference for a son and modern medical technology, increasing greed of doctors and rising the demand for dowry that makes daughters financial burdens. It also shows up the ineffectiveness of the PNDT Act and the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act and the lack of any serious involvement of civil society in fighting this social menace. It says that the force of the son complex cuts across religion, caste, socioeconomic group and place of residence. In the Indian society, the birth of a son is a necessary condition not only for women to gain status in the family but also for the entire family as it is considered important not only from the point of view of social prestige, economic security, psychological satisfaction but most importantly for attaining salvation for in the Indian culture it is believed if the son doesn’t give fire to the pyre attaining moksha can never be possible. In the pre test 60% youth said that it was essential to have son while 10% were indecisive about the issue. The results of post test revealed a change in attitude showing 50% of youth saying that birth of a son was not essential condition for salvation while 30% said yes and 20% were indecisive, the reason being the deep rooted orthodox thinking instilled in the young minds blocking the path of independent thinking, reasoning the correctness of their action. According to a study conducted by (MOHFW and TINNARI, 2002) Son preference was strongest among the middle income group. Reasons for son preference were that they perpetuate the family name and inherit property, they are providers in old age and to perform the last rites

The reason for wanting a son is to attain moksha (Prasad, 2001; and Nayar, 1995);power, prestige, to perform the last rites and to continue the family lineage (Yadav and Badri, 1997).

Voluntary Health Association of India (2003) has published its research report based on fieldwork in Kurukshetra in Haryana, Fatehgarh Sahib in Punjab and Kangra in Himachal Pradesh that have worst child sex ratio as per 2001 Census. The study surveyed 1401 households in villages, interviewed 999 married women, 72 doctors and 64 Panchayat members. It revealed that “the immediate cause for the practice of female foeticide is that daughters are perceived as economic and social burden to the family due to several factors such as dowry, the danger to her chastity and worry about getting her married.” Among the educated families, adoption of small family norm means minimum one or two sons in the family. They can do without daughter. The propertied class does not desire daughter/daughters because after marriage of the daughter, the son-in-law may demand share in property. Few classes dispose of daughters to avoid dowry harassment but they don’t mind accepting dowry for their sons. Birth of a son is perceived as an opportunity for upward mobility while birth of a daughter is believed to result in downward economic mobility.

CONCLUSION:

Allowing girls to opt for higher education, strict implementation of the law against dowry, incorporation of anti-dowry education at school and college levels, improving the facilities for providing education to girls and modifying laws to heavily fine people who perform female foeticide and female infanticide, restricting prenatal sex determination tests to disclose only genetic
abnormalities, restricting availability of prenatal sex determination tests to government hospitals only; using the media to change peoples’ opinions; creating public awareness about the equal capabilities of men and women; organizing campaigns on television and radio for equality of both sexes; economic empowerment of women; raising salaries and the status of careers which are particularly suited to women; overcoming traditional norms; and giving incentives to parents of only girl children, are effective strategies for preventing female foeticide (Anand, 1998).

Multimedia campaigns at the National and state levels should be launched against female foeticide to create awareness to curb the problem and synergize government initiatives to promote women-oriented programmes.

REFERENCES: