



KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTION TOWARDS FEMALE FETICIDE AMONG ADOLESCENTS OF COASTAL SOUTH INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The preference of a male child over a female child has been the main cause for female feticide. The causes can be broadly divided under the grounds of religion, economic and social aspects.

Objectives: To assess the awareness and the attitude regarding female feticide among adolescents.

Methodology: A cross sectional study was carried at few pre-university colleges in Mangalore. Data was collected using a semi-structured questionnaire.

Results: The study included 300 adolescents. 45.7% stated that the major cause for practice of feticide is discrimination between male and female. Majority (62%) of them were aware of all the diagnostic methods to determine the sex of the child and termination methods. 43.3% of the students were aware about the laws enforced. 37% believe that enforcing strict laws could be the way to stop female feticide.

Conclusion: Adolescents agreed that the decline in sex ratio is the main impact of female feticide. The students have adequate knowledge about diagnostic methods used for sex determination. They believe that strict law implementation is a promising way to stop female male feticide. However, they were not knowledgeable about the laws enforced for the control.

Keywords: Adolescents, Female Feticide, Mangalore

INTRODUCTION

India is a secular, democratic and a republic country with population of 1.2 billion¹. It has made tremendous advancements in scientific, social and economic fields, yet certain social evils like female feticide continues to be practiced in our country.

Female feticide is a practice of elimination of female fetus before she is born². India being an patriarchal manner of society, it should come as no surprise for practice of female feticide. The preference of a male child over a female child has been the main cause. The causes can be broadly divided under the grounds of religion, economic and social.

Custom of female feticide exists in all types of social order. Taking a look at statistics, sex ratio in

urban to rural areas in 926 to 902.³ It cannot be regarded as a problem of particular social status but a problem in the reasoning. Even with a Literacy rate of 74.04% in India,^{4,5} it is still sad that people aren't able to recognize the impacts that female feticide leave on the society. Declining sex ratio will also cause increase in crimes such as rape and abuse against women. It is necessary to maintain the sex ratio for a balanced healthy society. Since 2001 to 2011, the sex ratio has not improved a lot from 933 to 940.^{5,6} But yet the child sex ratio (between 0-6yrs) has declined 927 to 914 over past 10 years.^{5,6} Caution has to be taken.

About 5.7 lakh females go missing every year due to practice of female feticide.⁷ Many laws have been implemented to bring a hold on female fetici-

cide. Some of them are MTP Act 1991, PNDT 1994 (Regulation and prevention of Misuse) Act, PC-PNDT (Prohibition of sex selection) Act 2003.⁸ Despite such efforts, numerous clinical ultrasounds and abortions still continue to happen.

In a diverse country like ours about 19.6% of the population that is 236.5% of them are adolescents¹. They are going to be the future citizens of India. The now adolescents are going to be responsible adults of tomorrow. Hence it is necessary that every adolescent must be equipped with ample amount of knowledge which can help them to bring a change in society.

MATERIALS AND METHIDODOLOGY

It is a cross sectional study. The study protocol was submitted for the approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC) of Kasturba Medical College, Mangalore. The study sample was college students studying in 11th and 12th standard below age 19 which was calculated using the equation: $N = 4pq/d^2$. The sample size was 300. After obtaining approval from ethics committee, permission was obtained from the concerned college authorities. The Principal and the class teachers of both 11th and 12th grades were explained about the purpose and importance of the study and consent was obtained. The Students were asked to fill the questionnaire without discussing it with others. The pre-tested multiple choice questionnaire contained queries about perception and source of information about female feticide, the main cause of its practice, reason for male child preference, reasons for rejection of a female child, impacts of female feticide on society, concept of ideal family, diagnostic techniques practiced for female feticide, ways to resolve the problem, legal rules and organizations being established and their part in spreading of awareness. Data was entered in Microsoft Office Excel worksheet and analyzed using the statistical software SPSS version 16.0 and the results was expressed using charts and tables.

RESULTS

The study included 300 adolescents aged 11 to 19 years. They were selected from 4 colleges, 2 government and 2 private. Out of the 300 study subjects 148(49%) were female and 152(51%) were boys. Maximum of them aged 17 years.

Among the study sample 89.3 % (n=168) of them knew female feticide is intentional killing of the female fetus, while the other 10.7 % (n=32) were not clear about how female feticide is defined. The main source of information was TV and multime-

dia (56.7%, n=170), while other sources are Newspapers (19%, n=45) and from college (15%).

About 45.7%, (n=137) stated that the major cause for practice of feticide is discrimination between male and female. Followed by it is are economic factors such as poverty (20.3%.n=61), lack of education (16.7%n=50), socio-ritual factors (17.4%, n=52). The common reason for preference of a male child over a girl is-he is the source of income (61.0%, n=183). While asked the same question is a different way, as why a girl child is preferred less, it was found that practice of dowry system contributed the most (37.1%,n=118) ,followed by it was - being considered as burden (30.1%,n=91), increased crime towards girls (20.1%,n=62). When asked about family composition and size, 92.3% (n=277) of them believed that having one boy and one girl child is the composition of an ideal family.

Table 1: Perception of adolescents towards female child and family composition

Perception of adolescents	Adolescent (%)
Reason for practice of female feticide (N=300)	
Discrimination between male and female	137 (45.7)
Economic factors(poverty)	061 (20.3)
Lack of education	050 (16.7)
Socio-ritual factors	052 (17.3)
Preference of male child over female (N=300)	
A male child is source of income and looks after the family	183 (61.0)
They carry the family name forward into next generation	060 (20.0)
Boys are intelligent	019 (6.30)
Less expensive to raise a boy child	038 (12.7)
Reasons for less preference of a female child (N=300)	
Due to dowry system	118 (38.7)
They are considered as a burden to a family	091 (30.3)
Due to increased crime towards girls	062 (20.7)
They cannot earn and take care of the family	031 (10.3)
Ideal Family Composition (N=300)	
One girl and a boy	277 (92.3)
Two boys	007 (02.3)
Only one boy	013 (4.30)
Only one girl	003 (1.50)

Majority of them were aware of all the diagnostic methods to determine the sex of the child and termination, that is Prenatal sex determination-Ultrasound (62%, n=172), Selective pregnancy and Sex selective abortion. 66.4 % (n=199) of the study sample think that the demand for sex-determination by the pregnant woman & the couples is the cause, while 60 % (n=180) also think that lack of ethics knowledge among the doctors is the cause for the illegal practice of these diagnostics methods. [Table 2]

Table 2: Perception of study participants' impact, methods for prevention and awareness about laws

Perception of adolescents	Adolescent (%)
Impact of the female feticide on society (N=300)	
Decreased child sex ratio	044(14.7)
It will effect mothers physiological health	024(8.00)
Rise of male dominated society	052(17.3)
All the above	181(60.3)
Perceived ways to stop female feticide (N=300)	
By enforcing strict law	111(37)
By creating awareness regarding the issue	072(24)
By punishing doctors and the people practicing	066(22)
By providing financial aid to families with girls	051(17)
Awareness about laws enforced (N=130)	
MTP Act ,1971	84(64.6)
PNDT Act 1994	22(16.9)
All the above	15(11.5)
PC-PNDT Act	09(6.90)

Out of the study sample, 37%(n=98) of them believe that enforcing strict laws could be the way to stop female feticide, followed by making it a punishable offence to both doctor and the person in favor of it (22%,n=66). Only 17 % (n=51) thought that extra financial needs must be provided to people with a girl child[Table 2]. When the doctor is held responsible, cancellation of the doctor's license should be the punishable act according to 40.1 % (n=121) of them, seal of Diagnostic labs was considered next option (35%, n=105). About 130(43.3%) of the students were aware about the laws enforced, which could be employed in the act of female feticide. [Table 2]

It is found that lack of education (33%) was found to be the main cause for failure to reduce cases of female feticide, followed by reasons like failure to implement laws (32.7%) and still being practices socio-ritual factors (20.7%).Conducting Camps in school and colleges (35.7%) was found to be the effective method to spread awareness. It was also observed that only 16% of them thought that campaigns must be held to educating the couples.

DISCUSSION

The situation regarding male child preference in India is alarming, which has frequently led to - the neglect and death of millions of females through feticide, infanticide and sex selective abortions.

In the study among 300 subjects about 89.3% (n=168) could define female feticide while the rest 10.7 % (n=32) were not sure about the exact definition but were aware that it is the death of the fetus. A similar study conducted among school students in Ludhiana claims that about 97.9%(n=516) out of 527 students were aware of female feticide.⁹ Another study conducted in rural Haryana with sample size 1080 adolescents showed high percentage

(87%) of awareness.¹⁰ In the study ,the major source of information seems to be television, while in the study conducted in Haryana shows that the major source of information is Schools (47.4%) followed by media(41.1%).¹⁰ The study in Ludhiana has similar results of TV being major source(56%).⁹

In the current study, the common cause for preference of a male child over a female child according to adolescents is that a male child is the source of income and looks after the family. Common cause for not preferring a female child is Dowry system and being considered as financial burden to family. While among adults, a study performed in Jammu and Kashmir among the Muslim community stated male preference is cause of female feticide (mothers72%, fathers70%).¹¹ 80.43% of the mothers preferred sons because they carry family lineage and majority of fathers (90.90%) prefer son as they take care of them during old age. The couple considered it their right and safe method to have a son. In the above study it was also seen that only 2% of the sample size considered crime against girls as the cause of female feticide. ¹¹ There is a difference in opinion observed among adolescents and elderly. In contrast to the above findings a study done in south coastal part of India to see gender preferences among the antenatal woman shows that about 60.6%(n=80) of them did not have any gender preference.¹² Son preference is a more prevailing issue in Southern Asia, Western Asia, and Northern Africa. ¹³An empirical review of data among 17 European countries about the gender preferences shows strong tendency towards a mixed sex composition while a girl child preference was seen in Czech Republic, Lithuania and Portugal.¹⁴

When asked about the ideal family composition majority of them chose for one girl and a boy. Only 1 % (n=3) for a girl and 4.3 % (n=13) for only one

boy. In a study conducted in rural area of west Bengal about gender preference and reproductive behavior of mother, it was found that about 62.8% of the mother considered two children as ideal number in the family, and among them 53.8% considered one girl and one boy.¹⁵ Also a considerable amount of mothers (32.7%) desired for more sons, and desire for only boys was expressed by 11.5% of the mothers. Another study conducted among adolescents in Ludhiana shows very similar results, that is 99.4% of adolescents thought that ideal family should consist of one girl and a boy.⁹

Majority of the students believe that Decrease in sex ratio the major crisis of female feticide. Also another study conducted in south coastal part of India about gender preferences among antenatal woman, the majority of the study subjects were aware about the adverse sex ratio and its consequences¹². Among the study subjects majority of the participants were aware of the diagnostic method's used in practice of female feticide. In another study conducted with the aim to assess the knowledge of pregnant woman about ultrasound scanning and prenatal scanning it was found that 93.5% were aware of it and stated that it is done to check the growth of the baby.¹⁶ In the study conducted in a Muslim community related to female feticide, majority of the mothers (80%) and fathers (96%) were aware of Ultrasound method for sex determination.¹¹

Students believe that female feticide is a punishable offence. Doctors hold an equal responsibility for the same. About (40.3% n=121) students think that doctors license must be cancelled. Similar opinion was obtained in a study conducted among medical undergraduate in a teaching institution, Mumbai.¹⁷ In another study conducted among interns with regard to female feticide, showed 26% of the sample were in favor of stricter punishment for doctors practicing illegal ultrasound.¹⁸

Female feticide has caused a greater damage to the society and a must be controlled. 37% of adolescents believe that enforcing of strict laws is an effective way to stop female feticide while 24% think creating awareness could still work. In another study 37.8% of the study subjects believe that increasing awareness among the society and parents is the way.⁹ It is seen that the children realize the importance of spreading awareness and their impacts. The more the people are enlightened about the facts, lesser are the problems.

About 43.3% of the students were aware about the law implemented to stop illegal abortion and sex determination. Among which majority of them that is 64.9% were aware of MTP Act but very few that is 18.4% are aware of the PC-PNDT act. In one of the study conducted in Haryana, it was found out

that two third (62.5%) subjects were aware about PC-PNDT act while rest 37.5% subjects were not aware about this act.¹⁰ Difference in knowledge in cities with high incidences of female feticide such as Punjab and Haryana and south India can be appreciated.¹⁹ Another study conducted among the pregnant woman in southern India to check their awareness and attitude regarding PC-PNDT act shows that 100% of the subjects were familiar with it.²⁰

The main cause stated for failure of methods which have made an attempt to curb female feticide

is lack of education (33%, n=99). It can be confirmed by the study conducted in slums of Mumbai among 302 families, findings revealed that Sex selective abortion decreased with increase in the level of education.²¹

The best way to spread awareness among is, by conducting educational camps in schools and colleges. (35.7%, n=107). A study reveals that the adolescent are in favor of the fact that equality between boys and girls for curb of female feticide.⁹ This awareness could help in bringing an effective change in the attitude of thinking at a younger age.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that adolescents have an optimum level of awareness about the factors of female feticide. Majority of them believed that the composition of an ideal family is one boy and one girl, yet there were few who thought that one boy child makes an ideal family. They favored that the decline in sex ratio is the main impact of female feticide. The students have adequate knowledge about diagnostic methods used for sex determination. They believe that strict law implementation is a promising way to stop female male feticide. Conducting educational camps in school and colleges should be the strategy to spread awareness is the opinion.

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