

Short Article

FEMALE FOETICIDE IN DELHI/NCR: EXPLORING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

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Deb R, Bhatnagar P, Avasthy D. Female Foeticide in Delhi/NCR: Exploring The Socio-Economic and Cultural Dimensions. Natl J Community Med 2012; 3(3):548-50.

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Date of Submission: 26-04-12**Date of Acceptance:** 28-07-12**Date of Publication:** 01-09-12

ABSTRACT

Background: The social and psychological fibres of India are predominantly patriarchal and contributing extensively to the secondary status of women. It is yet to be seen if the difference in attitudes towards the practice of female foeticide varies in different socio-economic strata, and in among the different communities of India.

Methodology: The present study is based on a door-to-door survey comprising 100 families, conducted in slum areas of Delhi/NCR. Most of the families living in these areas were immigrants from different states of India with different cultural practices and beliefs.

Results: Though the studied participants differed in their cultural perceptions on role and status of women in society, majority of them testified that the practice is more prevalent in the middle and upper class society, and escalating demands of dowry was cited as the main reason behind it.

Conclusion: The extent of practice of female foeticide is seen to vary among different socio-economic strata and communities. Taking this diversity into consideration, customized social-awareness campaigns must be organized in accordance with different cultural and socioeconomic circumstances existing in the diverse range of communities in India.

Key-words: sex ratio, culture, socioeconomic status, dowry, infanticide, foeticide.

INTRODUCTION

The provisional population totals of NCT of Delhi for 2011 put the sex ratio in Delhi/NCR at 866 females per 1000 males (Census 2011). Even though the figures show a marked improvement since 2001 when the sex ratio count was 821 females per 1000 males (Census 2001)¹, these statistics suggest prevalence of sex-selective abortions on large scale. Gender preference

enshrined in social perceptions is thought to be a major cause of sex-selective abortions.² A widespread misuse of sex selection for eliminating girls before birth in India and among the Indian diaspora is well documented³, where daughters are considered financial and cultural liabilities. A preference for sons stems from their perceived role in providing support for parents and carrying on the family name. In

patriarchal societies, cultural and economic values are attributed to sons. At the societal level, preference for son is related to relative status of women and men and their societal roles vis-à-vis the economy and the family.⁴ In India, gender preference manifests itself in many ways, as seen in differential allocation of household resources, medical care and neglect of girl children and even female infanticide.⁵ Infanticide not only implies outright killing of female infants but also abandoning of female child. In the past in India, a strong preference for sons made unwanted female infants susceptible to infanticide.⁶ The social manifestations of preference for male child may vary in different cultures and in different socioeconomic strata. Some studies suggest that wealth and economic development contribute little towards reducing preference for sons.⁷ Yet, on the other hand this problem is not there among the Khasi tribes of Meghalaya a forward-looking minority in the country.⁸ The Govt. of India has launched various welfare schemes in line with its firm commitment to deter female foeticide. Keeping in view the above facts the present study attempts to explore the female foeticide perceptions and practices lower socio-economic class of Delhi/NCR.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study comprises of 100 randomly selected families residing in the slum areas of Delhi/NCR. This sample size is taken to be sufficient to understand the pattern of occurrence of female foeticide in the area selected. This slum was selected as it has a substantial proportion of migrant workers from Bihar and UP where the incidence of female foeticide is high. The study was conducted from June to December' 2011. A door-to-door survey was carried out; ever married women above the age of 18 years were selected for the study after taking prior consent. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews to know various perceptions, myths and awareness in the community. A semi-structured interview schedule was utilized to extract baseline information on native place, occupation, education, prominence of dowry in community, cultural preference for either of the genders, and their opinion on female foeticide or infanticide. The attitude of the family towards the female members was observed as a part of non-participant observation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It was observed that 57% of the subjects were migrants from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Assam and Bengal. Around 43% subjects claimed to be natives of Delhi. Majority of the respondents were Hindus (98%), Muslims (21%) and only one subject was found to be Sikh. It was found that most of them lived in nuclear families with male as the formal head of family. All the subjects studied were from lower socio-economic strata with low average literacy levels. It was noted that women are comparatively less literate than their male counterparts in all the subgroups, though the difference was relatively narrow in Bengali population. While 66% of the families were illiterate, about 21% of families had male head as the most educated member of the family. In 16% of the families the school going children were more educated than either of their parents. The highest education attained in the group was High School.

Studies on female foeticide point to the patrilineal property transfers, religious and ritualistic practices and dependent status of women as the cause of preference for male child.⁹ While our study indicates that in Bengali subgroup children irrespective of the gender are made to work at a very young age (9-12 years) while in the other subgroups the children mostly start earning at the age group of 15-18 years. Earning age of children can pose as an important indicator with a possible negative correlation with the practice of female foeticide or infanticide among the lower socio-economic strata (Women belonging to low income range, slum dwellers and working as domestic help, vendors etc). In almost all the families studied children were considered as an extra helping and earning hands. The sex ratio in the population is another key indicator that can be linked to the practice of female foeticide or female infanticide (or abandoning of female child). In the present study the average female to male ratio was higher in Bengali group (1:0.94) as compared to other states from northern belt (Bihar 1:1.64, Uttar Pradesh 1:1.45 and Delhi 1:0.97).

All the respondents had opined that female foeticide and infanticide is prevalent because of dowry system in their respective communities. Many subjects in Bengali subgroup testified to have seen incidences of dowry deaths in middle-class families where the stakes and demand for dowry is higher. According to them, the

incidences of dowry deaths and the practice of abandoning female child is rarer in their socio-economic bracket. For them, each child born was an additional helping hand. However it was observed that in some families from Bihar and U.P, daughters were made to do tedious errands around the house and were not subject to the same respect as the sons.

The participants unanimously condemned the practice of female foeticide and infanticide and all of them claimed that they prefer both male and female children equally. But their subjective opinion cannot be taken as a reliable indicator as the sex-ratio was found to be skewed in the families belonging to Bihar and U.P. There is a large variation in sex ratio in different states of India. Kerala has had consistently high female to male ratio through the past decades while Bihar and Orissa have registered a significant decline.¹⁰ Here, the population size of communities surveyed is insignificant for any pattern of sex-ratios to be established for the different communities, hence more such interethnic studies on larger scale are recommended to draw correlation between nativity, culture, and the practice of female infanticide or foeticide.

CONCLUSION

Dowry system was observed to be an almost universal practice. Patriarchal orientation and dowry system potentially compromise the status of women in society as they are perceived as liabilities. But the perception and attitude towards the female child may vary owing to different roles women play in socio-economic and cultural paradigm as observed in this small-scale study encompassing different ethnic groups. In the Bengali population, females start working at a very young age and crucially contribute to the family subsistence. Also, the literacy level of women in the Bengali population was found to be higher than their counterparts from Delhi and Bihar. Given the differential in status of women in different

ethnic groups, we conclude that cultural practices and socioeconomic circumstances of different communities are fundamentally unique. These differences need to be studied for better implementation of social-awareness programmes meant to uplift the status of girl child. A thorough understanding of different cultural and socio-economic circumstances existing among the diverse communities of India will contribute to effective targeting of the government-aided campaigns and an efficient utilization of resources.

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