

Gender imbalance: Addressing causal factors in India

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ABSTRACT

Rapid decline in child sex ratio (CSR) in India is a serious problem with severe socioeconomic, demographic, and cultural implication. It is a broad indicator that reveals the ground realities that exists in the fabric of the society. It measures the parity between males and females in a society at a given point of time. Besides this, it also indicates women's status in the society. In recent times, the decline in the child sex ratio has been a major cause of concern in India's demography. Comparing the situation of 1901, where 3.2 million fewer women existed than men in India; it was found that hundred years later the deficit increased over 10 times to 35 million (Census, 2001). This decline was visible among children between 0-6 years of age. In this regard, the present study attempts to address the causal factors responsible for gender imbalance in India.

Key Words : Sex Ratio, Discrimination, women, child, feticide

INTRODUCTION

"If only women will forget that they belong to weaker sex, I have no doubt that they can do infinitely more than men against war." -*Mahatma Gandhi*

It is truly said by Mahatma Gandhi that women are far more superior and versatile than men. The role of women stands incomparable. In every aspect of life they pose a greater courage, power and endurance to overcome any situation. Yet, due to the patriarchal form of our society, women at many parts of our country are considered inferior to men. However, at no point it is true. The impact of gender preference in a country does not limit to the elderly members of the family but the mental pressure of same can be visualized and witnessed in the mindsets of the pregnant woman (Yadav *et al.*, 1997). A study including a sample of two hundred and three pregnant women visiting the hospital for their trimester antenatal check up was conducted in Bangalore city.

Findings showed that ninety three per cent of those pregnant women, who were already blessed with two female children, are generally found to have high level of anxiety as compared

to sixty seven per cent of pregnant women having one male and one female child. Further, only twenty seven per cent of pregnant women having two male living children. The study has also shown that as high as sixty four per cent of those having only daughters desperately wanted a male child, whereas only six per cent of those having only sons seriously wanted a daughter. The study also concluded those pregnant women were mentally harassed by their husbands and mother-in-laws to give birth to a son especially when they already had two daughters.

National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (2008) prepared a report of falling sex ratio. According to the report, one of the biggest reasons of falling sex ratio in India is the gender biased preference of the society. It is found to be strongest among middle income groups and more in urban than rural areas. Further, (Singariya, 2014) shows the ground realities that still exist in the society. Socio-economic and demographic features is very much responsible for fall in sex ratio, which means that old beliefs like son perpetuates family name, son will bring dowry, and investing on his education is more profitable etc. are responsible for people having son preference. Census 2011 shocked everyone by reporting a sharp decline in child sex ratio. CSR in 2001 census was 927 females per thousand males as compared to 945 females in 1991 census. Present sex ratio is responsible in predicting the future vital events such as therefore it is necessary to maintain a favorable sex ratio in order achieve economic development.

No country can progress till they realize the importance of both genders. Parity in sex ratio determines the social and demographic balance in the country. It acts as substantial indicator of social health. Unfortunately, in a country like India, the society itself is responsible for not developing such ideology. A general mindset that still pertains in the society is that bringing up a girl child is a costly affair and considered as wasted investment in comparison of male child (Srivastava *et al.*, 2005). Two hundred married couples were investigated in Bhopal to evoke their attitude towards girl child and falling sex ratio in the region finding the causable reasons for not wanting a girl child. According to them, a male child retains the family's and ancestors' name ahead from generation to generation. Therefore, the importance of male child is more for them.

Regional Pattern is also identified as another determinant which is accounted for gender imbalance. Son preference is deep rooted in the culture of India, as it is seen since a long time (Tipandjan *et al.*, 2014). It is a matter of concern because it produces an imbalanced sex ratio which means more boys in comparison to girls. Decision to have children is based on the calculus of benefits and costs related to their studies, expenses. Taking into consideration socioeconomic and socio-cultural background of Indian society, it can be very well said that parents expectation of benefits and costs are biased in favor of sons because even daughters can take care of their parents after marriage and investing on girls education is equally profitable as girls can earn the same as boys.

We should not forget that both men and women have equal importance in this world. They are like two sides of the same coin. Both complement each other. And just like there's no meaning of monsoon without rain, similarly there's no meaning of men without women. Our society has rigidly defined the work to be done by both men and women. As the system said, men were supposed to go out and work and women were supposed to take care of the

family. It was simply because in earlier days men had to perform work relating to more physical strength and women were supposed to do more of mental work. But with the change in the technology and the standard of living, the system has taken a new way forward. Now, women are also equally competent in doing the same task which men can do. Be it science, politics, film industry, corporate or any other field, women are reaching the top levels, which were earlier confined to men.

Unfortunately, looking into the other side of the picture, we get a very painful glimpse of condition of our mothers and sisters. In some parts of the country, it was found that if a male child is born, it is celebrated by performing all rituals. Moreover, they distribute money and gifts to relatives and friends, involves in several *pujas* whereas no such celebrations on female births (Tinnari *et al.*, 2002). Another study portrays a weaker position of woman with a Hindu philosophy concluding a woman's duty is to obey her father before marriage, her husband during her married life, and her son in her widowhood (Anand, 1998). However, the author believes that religious motivation can act as an influencing factor in order to control female infanticide, but in case of female feticide, the motivating factors shall be effective in the way of family planning.

Even today, it is experienced that women are not allowed to work out of home. Forget working, the irony is that they are not even allowed to take birth. It is a shameful act which is introducing new set of problems, *i.e.* Problem of unfavorable sex ratio. According to census 2011 for every 1000 males, there are only 943 girls. Despite of rise in awareness, advancement of technology and increase in education; child sex ratio is still decreasing (Dubudu, 2015). This indicates how badly we are facing the problem of declining female population. Situation is even worse in the state of Haryana, J&K and Sikkim, where there are only 877, 883 and 889 females per 1000 males, respectively. This is also leading to serious problem of human trafficking, where females are being trafficked from southern and eastern states to get married to the males of Haryana and J&K. It is simply a consequence of an infected mentality. The main reason behind this huge gap between male and the females is the poor mentality of the people, who believe that girl child is bane for the family (Madan, 2013). What is even more pinching is that even the elderly women are responsible for such practices. In the name of growing the family, only male child are preferred, considering them to be superior and terming girl child as '*paraydhan*'.

Steps should be taken to solve this issue before it is too late. Not only government but each and every individual should step further for the betterment of the society. Parents of lone daughters and daughters with no male siblings should be given indirect support and incentive, girls should be given equal treatment and responsibilities as boys so that they feel equal to them because today's daughters will be tomorrow's mother therefore they should feel equal to men in every way.

Conclusion :

Along with rise in population size, it is visible that the masculinity prevails in the society in general including child sex ratio in particular. India is one of the few countries in the world where males number out females. The practice of eliminating female fetuses is one of the main reasons responsible for adverse sex ratio (Mondal, 2015). Past research witnesses

that pre birth elimination of females (PBEF) was more prevalent in urban areas than rural areas. Although, the practice has become illegal nowadays but had been a major factor in the past. There are possibilities that many doctors may be following such practices illegally even today.

Apart from those reasons already discussed, there are several other reasons accountable for gender imbalance such as more independence of women due to which couples prefer single child due to which the probability of female child also decreases. Biological rationale behind the birth of female to male ratio explains that for 105 male children, 100 female children takes birth. Crime against women is also one of the major factor due to which the society becomes afraid of having a girl child. Many couples and families end up honor killing of female infanticide in fear of any mishap. Further, problems associated like dowry, wedding expenses, assumptions regarding inability of daughters to look after their parents after marriage, domestic violence etc. also adds up.

High infant mortality rate and neo natal mortality rate due to natural factors like improper diet of women, lack of nutrition, proper care in pregnancy period or negligence towards female babies also accounts for skewed distribution. Majority of Indian female child takes birth with Anaemia which becomes another factor for poor health or reason for mortality. Also, out migration can result in decline in sex ratio. If females out migrate from country, the sex ratio for the whole country declines whereas if they migrate within the country, the imbalance increases from their native region. Out migration can occur due to marriage, higher studies or for jobs.

Religion is another factor identified. India is multi religious and includes several religions having Hinduism as the maximum population followed by Muslims, Christian and Sikhs. However, the growth of children is highest in Muslims. Further, they believe in orthodox mentality and do not prefer daughters to work or gain education. While on other hand, male members are considered essential for increasing standard of living. Marital status which classifies women into various categories like unmarried, married, divorced, separated or widow. Earlier, girls used to get married at an early age and therefore the span for the fertility used to be high. However, the trend has now changed which has reduced the reproductive span of the women, eventually declining the trend of population. Consequently it reduces the probability of female child.

By addressing various reasons that account for imbalance in gender ratio, it can be concluded that until and unless a change is realized in the minds of the people; there is no way out changing the present situation. Let us remember that Rabindranath Tagore said that, "*Women are ornaments of society. A women theft is the most fatal of all thefts.*" It is very important that the importance of both genders must be realized by the society and women in India must be saved before its too late (Miler, 1981)

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