

# Socio-Economic Benefits of Having Sons and Female Feticide in India: Gender Discrimination in Sex Selection

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*Sons are always preferred over daughters in India for a very long time. There are some perceived socio-cultural and economic benefits of having sons in Indian patriarchal social system. The paper highlights some major socio-economic factors which are responsible for the female feticide in India. After giving some brief introduction, paper discusses socio-cultural traditions and norms which neglect girls and prefer sons. Paper also highlights some religious quotes which degrade women and grant higher status to the men. The next part of the paper deals with the economics behind female-feticide. Sons are considered as assets while girls as liabilities in Indian patriarchal society. Parents expect more economic benefits from the sons than daughters. The rational economic mind of parents forces them to select male sex than female. Son brings dowry, a free servant (wife), salary and other economic benefits into the family. Paper concludes that the major causes of female-feticide are- socio-cultural beliefs, religious customs and unfavorable labour market towards women. Some important suggestions to stop female feticide are presented at the end of the paper.*

*Key Word: female-feticide, son preference, social beliefs, dowry, gender discrimination.*

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## **Introduction:**

The presence of a preference for sons over daughters in a number of countries of Asia including India is well-established in the literature (Arnold, Choe, & Roy 1998; Gupta et al. 2003; Clark 2000). There is an old Indian proverb according to which “eighteen goddess-like daughters are not equal to one son with a hump” (Adgar Dahl, 2010). Women’s lack of economic power, male dominance within the family, dependence on sons for old age support, high dow-

ries, patrilineal clans, and marital exogamy have been the principal suggested forces compelling parents, both mothers and fathers, to favor sons over daughters. An old Tibetan proverb says “Daughters are no better than crows. Their parents feed them and when they get their wings, they fly away” (Dahl, 2010). In China also, the peasants have a saying: “the birth of a boy is welcomed with shouts of joy and firecrackers, but when a girl is born, the neighbours say nothing” (Attane, 2005). Some years ago, the bill-

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board messages in India promised: “Invest INR 500 now, save 50000 later,” encouraging prospective parents to abort female fetuses in order to avoid future dowry expenses (Retherford and Roy, 2004).

Over the span of more than 100 years, the deficit of women has progressively increased as evident from the sex ratio of the population, the number of women per 1000 men or less steadily declined from 972 in 1901 to 927 in 2011. Sons are preferred over daughters for a number of reasons such as economic, social and religious including financial support, old age security, property inheritance, dowry receipts, family lineage, prestige and power, birth and death rituals and beliefs about religious duties and salvation (Schmeeckle, 2013; Singh, 2010). According to Hindu tradition, sons are needed to kindle the funeral pyre of their parents after death and to help in the salvation of their souls (Das Gupta, 2003; Dahl, 2010; Kishor, 1995; Wesley and Choe, 2007; Zimmermann, 2012).

### **Why Female Feticide?**

The root cause for female feticide lies within the cultural norms as well as the socio-economic policies of the country where this practice prevails. The most infected are the South Asian countries like China, India, Vietnam, Korea etc. from where this social evil has mushroomed today to the western nations like the USA and Canada. This is the end result of immigration that has brought along female feticide across the pond. What is the rationale, one may wonder. Surprisingly, the reasons aren't quite as diverse for these nations as one may perceive.

**Preference for the male child:** Elimination/removal of girls from the family tree even before they are born clearly indicates the vehement desire for a boy child. In the countries where female feticide has become unbridled, the core factor is the need to continue the family line through the male born into it. Sons are seen

as the main source of income. Even though women today can easily rub shoulders with men, almost in every field they set their mind to, the common misconception still remains that it is the male who will help run the house, and look after his parents. Once married, women are like cargo, ready to be shipped off to another household, while parents breathe a sigh of relief for a job well done in getting their ‘daughter’ settled.

**Strict Social Conditions for Women:** The next reason is the problems that a family faces while raising a female. In India, a girl is a symbol of a family's dignity. Her character is open to the comments of the entire society. Her decency lies in how meek she is, how easily she follows the instructions given to her. The purity, sanctity and modesty of a woman lies not in her heart, not in her brains, neither in her kind words, nor in her good behavior—it lies in her virginity. A slight rebellion from the strict path and the girl is no longer worth a decent boy; that means no marriage, and an unmarried girl is a curse for her entire family. When such strict social conditions are imposed upon a girl, she becomes a liability; most parents would choose to shy away from such a responsibility. The solution is: no female child in the family

**Dowry:** The age old dowry system in India puts a damper on the parents' spirits who are ‘blessed’ with a girl child. Right then and there, begin the calculations associated with marriage expenses, which may happen after a couple of decades, following the child's first breath. A lump sum paid to the daughter in twenty years when the currency value may depreciate and inflation may skyrocket is seen as a tragedy waiting to happen. In most families, a boy is educated to fetch a large amount of money as dowry when he gets married. The higher the salary of the boy, more the dowry he demands from the girl's family. Owing to this custom, most families do not educate their girl children; if they spend on

the education, saving for the dowry becomes impossible. After the marriage the girl cannot take up the responsibility of her parents as she belongs only to the husband, hence all the money spent on her up-bringing goes to waste. So essentially, raising a girl child is equivalent to investing in a failing business and raising a boy is an assurance to a lottery win. Who in their right minds would give birth to a female kid?

**Deteriorated Status of Women:** I'm not a rabid feminist who would shout herself hoarse about the domination of men in any society. Sure, males are the stronger sex when it comes to the pecking order in a country, but that does not entail a curbing of rights for women. Rather than whining about the denied opportunities, women should stand up and try to grasp the chances they want for themselves.

However, this Utopian scenario is not quite easily achieved in practice. Centuries of repression has made inferiority second nature to most women. They willingly embrace the role of the meek, submissive, docile wife who works relentlessly to cater to the whims of her husband. The worst enemy of a woman is the woman herself. Female feticide happens with the explicit consent of the mother. While most mothers-to-be agree to this misdeed out of a sense of duty to the family, there are many who take the initiative themselves.

**Marriage System:** When a girl gets married, she is expected to sever all ties with her own family where she was born. She is expected to be devoted to her husband and in-laws. The kids she bears carry the name of the husband's family, and the blood relations reach only as far as the family tree of the husband reaches. The identity of the girl and her own relationships are lost in the process. In extreme cases, the father of the bride is forbidden even to have water at his daughter's place. In this kind of a social set-up, the struggle to keep the family name alive makes it compulsory for a couple to bear a son,

and for a family with limited resources multiple children are unaffordable. So they chose the gender of their kid; only the male child survives.

**Foul Medical Ethics:** The opening conversation to this hub satisfactorily covers this point. With the legalization of abortion in India, illegal sex determination and termination of pregnancies has become an everyday reality. The professionals in the medical field are only too glad to help parents realize their dream of a healthy baby boy. Female feticide is openly discussed amongst many in the healing fraternity and even pin boards outside certain clinics read, 'Pay Rs.500 (\$ 10) today to save the expense of Rs. 500 000 (\$ 10 000) in the future'. The initial meager sum is the cost of a pregnancy termination, while the bigger amount specified in comparison, is the expense that the family will be burdened with in the form of dowry for the girl.

### **Social Benefits of having Son in India:**

Socio-cultural norms, beliefs, traditions, rituals and customs are the major causes of son preference over daughters in India. Female infanticide has a long tradition in India. In the nineteenth century the Jhareja Rajputs killed virtually all their girls at birth. They were even known as the 'kuri mar,' the 'daughter killers' (Dahl, 2010). Socially men are valued higher than women. Women have very less freedom in social life and decision making process. Parents are always worried about the chastity of the girl and if the girl loses her chastity, family loses its honour. Girls are therefore much more of a risk to family honor and identity than sons to whom the strict moral code does not generally apply. In such social situations, parents decide not to have daughters at all and hence don't care of aborting the baby girl.

Kinship system in India also favors sons. A central tenet of the North Indian kinship system is that brides are brought into the extended family from outside the family and from outside the

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local area. This means that parents often have little motivation for long-term investment in their daughters. Once married, they become a part of someone else's extended household, often at some distance from their natal village so that continued social relations can become quite infrequent (Dyson and Moore, 1983).

The patrilineal and patrilocal character of the North Indian kinship system dictates that sons are responsible for maintaining their aged parents. Couples with only daughters face a potential future of deprivation and loneliness. Preferences for sons, therefore, are closely tied to security for one's old age. Widows are especially vulnerable in old age so the need for sons is felt as much by mothers as fathers. Women culturally cannot inherit ancestral property in large part of India so that parents need a male heir to pass their land and family possessions (Dyson and Moore, 1983; Almond et al. 2009; Dharmalingam, 1996). In patrilineal extended families, it is the tie between father and son, not husband and wife that is the key social relationship. Thus, the kind of companionate marriages that develop in a system of nuclear families is largely missing or weak in much of India. Instead, the conjugal tie can be seen as a potential cause of the division of family lands and joint households. In this system, women are a threat to family stability while sons are the guarantor of prosperity and local influence. Economic Benefits of Having Sons in India: Economics plays a crucial role in son preference. Preference for sons over daughters is purely a rational economic decision of the parents. One of the major causes of son preference in India is the perceived economic utility of having sons. Expenses made on son's bringing up and education is quite receivable in the form of dowry at the time of son's marriage or in the form of earning when he gets a job. The son is expected to earn and 'pay back' by looking after the parents in old age. Dowry is a big economic bonanza for the parents, if

they manage to sell their son to the highest bidder. On the other hand, all the money spent on a girl's education is considered a 'waste' and even if the girl earns it will go to the husband's family. Worse, giving birth to a girl means that the parents will have to 'buy' a groom for her when the time comes. Compared to daughters, sons provide help in family businesses and farms, have more earning opportunities in labour market and provide financial help during old age (Miller, 1981; Bardhan, 1988; Basu, 1989).

Where women are employed or are independent producers, they can establish their potential economic independence from male domination. This economic autonomy reverberates through marital, kinship, sexual, and political aspects of gender relations as well. If only sons are seen as potential contributors to the economic prosperity of the family, then they will be preferred and daughters will be seen as an economic burden. Men are considered as main bread winners in India. The labour market is also more favourable towards man than woman. More men are employed than women and in some cases men get more wages than women for the same work. In this way sons become beneficial to the family than daughters. Girls are considered a drain on family resources during their childhood without bringing economic benefits later on. Fathers and mothers need to have sons because of their higher earning potentials. While a son is considered an asset, a daughter is considered a liability. There is a proverb, 'Bringing up a girl is like watering a plant of other's garden'.

Rosenzweig and Schultz (1982) in their study find that parents seek to maximize family utility when making resource allocation decisions and investments in children, and therefore sons who are perceived to have higher income-earning potential receive a proportionately greater share of family resources. Higher expected earnings are likely to motivate greater human capital in-

vestments in daughters relative to sons, and that intra-household equality brought on by working women's contribution to household income may equalize expenditures on sons and daughters (Behrman et al 1999; Kingdon 2005).

Daughters are considered to be liabilities because of the tradition of dowries. Families do not have the same incentives to invest in the education of their daughters as they do with sons because daughters leave their parental homes and live with their husbands and in-laws. In much of India, marrying off daughters can become a huge family expense. There are costs for sons' weddings as well, but the dowries and gifts that come with the new bride mostly end up with the sons' families. So, on balance, more sons can eventually mean more resources while more daughters can be a drain on household wealth (Das Gupta, 2003; Kishor, 1995). As dowries have grown larger with economic development and as they have spread beyond their traditional North Indian region, they have been widely cited as a cause of discrimination against girls.

In most Indian families which are patriarchal in nature, only sons can inherit the family property and women have very less such rights. North India is characterized by a rigid patriarchal society in which a man who does not have a son would rather adopt one than allow the daughter to inherit his property (Das Gupta, 2003). Son preference is also connected with land holding of the family. Big landlords in North India who belong to the higher castes among Hindus have deep son preference than lower castes who are poor and don't own land (Liddle and Joshi, 1986).

### **The Consequences:**

As Newton's Third Law of Motion states, 'For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction', the after effects of this genocide are fatal and far-reaching. Blinded by the need for an assertive gender to rule the house after the

parents' demise, the majority are often ignorant of the disaster they unwittingly invite by indulging in female feticide.

**Skewed Sex Ratio:** In India, the number of girls per 1000 boys is declining with each passing decade. From 962 and 945 girls for every 1000 boys in the years 1981 and 1991 respectively, the sex ratio had plummeted to an all time low of 927 girls for 1000 boys in 2001. If that statistic is a matter of concern, the current figures are toeing the danger line with only 914 girls for 1000 boys in 2011. In the case of China, the sex ratio is an alarming 118 boys for 100 girls; that means 848 girls for 1000 boys. This is just an example of two nations trapped in the vicious circle. There are many others struggling with a skewed sex ratio.

**Female/Women Trafficking:** The steep decline in the number of girls makes them scarce for the teeming number of males eligible for marriage. As a solution to this issue, illegal trafficking of women has become commonplace in many regions. This is a graver matter than the ideology of mail order brides. Women, often young girls who've just crossed the threshold of puberty, are compelled to marry for a price fixed by the groom-to-be. They are usually bought in from neighboring areas, where the number of girls might not be as miniscule as the host region. Child marriages become a rage and child pregnancies, a devastating consequence. The moment when a land participates in the trade off of its women population, it is a sure path laid ahead with pitfalls.

**Increase in Rape and Assault:** Once women become an endangered species, it is only a matter of time before the instances of rape, assault and violence become widespread. In the backdrop of fewer available females, the surviving ones will be faced with the reality of handling a society driven by a testosterone high. The legal system may offer protection, but as is the

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situation today, many cases might not even surface for fear of isolation and humiliation on the girl's part.

**Population Decline:** With no mothers or wombs to bear any child (male or female), there would be fewer births, leading to a decline in the country's population. Though a control in the demographic statistics is currently the goal of many nations like China and India, a total wipeout of one sex is not the way to achieve this target. Science would then have to look up solutions to do away with the swarming number of men, should such a worst case scenario happen.

### **Suggestions:**

The issues of female infanticide, female feticide and selective sex abortion have gained global attention. Many international and national law making bodies have come forward to stop this cruel practice. Of the numerous steps taken to curb the matter, the prominent ones are:

- Cancellation/permanent termination of the doctor's license who partakes in fulfilling a client's demand to do away with her girl child.

- Heavy penalty imposed on companies like GE, that specialize in marketing medical equipments used for illegal sex determination and abortion in unlicensed clinics and hospitals.

- High fines and judicial action against 'parents' who knowingly try to kill their unborn baby.

- Widespread campaigns and seminars for young adults and potential parents to enlighten them about the ill effects of female feticide. Ignorance is one of the major causes for the increase in the selective sex abortion cases. Spreading awareness can go a long way in saving our future sisters, mothers, girlfriends and wives.

A cohesive and concerted effort by everyone can prove to be the requisite baby step in the right direction. We may not support the notion of women rising above men, or them becoming the dominant sex, or conquering the world. However, the basic humane consideration to let an innocent child live and see the world she was conceived to grow in is not too much to ask. Let's not be murderers of our own flesh and blood.

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