

## Girl Child – My Life My Responsibility

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### ABSTRACT

The cases of female foeticide and infanticide quite interestingly but disgracefully portray how scientific and technological development and economic growth can be together deployed for the downfall of the mankind. Causes of female foeticide and infanticide are ingrained in our customs, traditions, practices and mind-set. A pertinent question that arises in such an appalling environment is where does the society actually stand in terms of women empowerment. Saving and educating girls is important for the sake of true spirit of women empowerment by helping women secure a confident self-image and develop decision-making capacity while ensuring their participation in decision-making process at all levels from family to community, as also providing economic independence to them. The present paper efforts to stimulate its readers towards the responsibility that we as a society owe as regards saving, nurturing and empowering girl child by highlighting both the dark and brighter patches in terms of girl child rights, women empowerment and the societal ambiguity in practicing the related laws.

Yatra naryastu pujiyante ramante tatra Devata,  
yatra itaastu na pujiyante sarvaastatrafalaah kriyaah

(Where Women are honoured, divinity blossoms there,  
and wherever women are dishonoured, all action no matter  
how noble it may be, remains unfruitful.)

----- Manusmriti

### 1. Introduction

Violence against women is manifested in several ways and female foeticide and infanticide are the most heinous of the lot for the simple reason that they are inflicted at the most ignorant stages of life. We as a society are so hypocritical in our outlook and practices that on one hand, we pray feminine power in the form of so many goddesses to attain prosperity, health and well-being while on the other, suppress it in all possible ways including female foeticide and infanticide, dowry deaths, child abuse, sexual harassment, domestic violence and what not. Is it because they feel threatened by this Feminine Power? Or, is it because they have failed to own and deliver upon their responsibilities as the complementing gender? Or, is it because there is too much commodification of the feminine gender? The questions are numerous but the pertinent answer to all such forbidding thoughts and practices is only one that let us stand up against this stinking mind-set for our own cause and existence. The Nature is beautifully and equitably poised throughout, but we do not seem to be learning from our own mistakes and unfortunately keep meddling in Nature's ways. Continually diminishing female population percent is one such thing; and if this continues, we would soon be at the verge of a hitherto unknown, untold and unheard kind of disaster leading the entire mankind to a catastrophe with *Homo sapiens* eventually becoming an extinct species. An altogether new kind of biodiversity crisis it would be. Howsoever exaggerated this may appear but this is certainly not misplaced.

### 2. Objective and Methodology

The sole objective of the author through the present paper is to make efforts to stimulate its readers towards the responsibility that we as a society owe as regards saving, nurturing and empowering girl child by highlighting both the dark and brighter patches in terms of girl child rights, women empowerment and the societal ambiguity in practicing the related laws. The discussion on the issue herein is based most importantly on the observation made alongwith the variegated literature reviewed comprising books, news articles and government reports, narratives gathered across women belonging to different strata of society, discussion carried out with social activists, doctors and many other professionals. On the basis of all this indulgence, the author has attempted to put down some relevant findings and analysis, and propose a few suggestions as well to address the issues of female foeticide and infanticide which have long been risking female security at a very tender age and putting the women empowerment movement on back gears.

### 3. Discussion and Analysis

The birth of a child completes the sphere of a family and the first cry of the new-born fills the life with an altogether novel joy, bliss and fulfilment. However, quite many, instead of embracing that blissful fulfilment, prefer discriminating it into a boy's cry or girl's cry. In many cases, the birth of a boy child is welcomed and celebrated with much fanfare whereas the birth of a girl child besides being abhorred distastefully attracts too much of socio-cultural pains afflicted on the mother, both physically and mentally; the most shameful acts coming from the womenfolk themselves in their several roles they play in a family, community and society. In the backdrop of such social status of women are many causes, but the immediate and most measurable effect of the subsequent act of killing a girl child either in mother's womb or after she is born is only one – fall in male-female ratio. The dialectics of this are very simple but disastrous – falling female population in the society, insufficient girls for marrying off boys, hence no family, an all-

male society eventually giving rise to practically no society. The saddest part is that we are cutting down our own roots by giving a death blow to the Creator's very own creation whom He bestowed with His own powers to create... Woman. Why such a simple fact is so difficult to comprehend!!

Discrimination against girls in the country is going on unabated since many years. Boys are bestowed with several privileges while girls are restricted to domestic confines denied any opportunities to grow in life. The backdrop of this attitude is the general mind-set of viewing girls as mere liabilities. It is imperative to revolutionize this archaic mind-set. Girls have proved themselves par excellence in all the walks of life and have many a time outperformed their male counterparts. Given the opportunities she can be a good economic support to the family instead of a financial liability that she is presumed to be and can be a great help in taking the family out of the ditches of poverty. We as a society need to respect the quintessential co-existence of both the genders and need to realize that they are not two island entities rather complementary beings who together are responsible to make this world a better and beautiful place to live in. The beauty lies in their moving in togetherness and not isolation. Saving and educating girls is important for the sake of true spirit of women empowerment by helping women secure a confident self-image and develop decision-making capacity while ensuring their participation in decision-making process at all levels from family to community, as also providing economic independence to them. The most ironical state of affairs is that we have got into the habit of rhetorically blaming almost everything on the menfolk and holding them responsible for all ills against womenfolk, possibly as the aftermath of long continued and prevalent patriarchal inequities in the society. That is indeed a factor but not the only factor; and of late, its share is rather receding. There are several other causes to it at the focus of which lie both men and women to the effect that women have equal or even larger role toward all that is happening to their very own section. The most appalling fact is that women themselves inflict atrocities through all possible relationships they possess with another woman in a family. We always expect and ask others to change and behave but forget about our own deeds. Why we women do not ask ourselves to learn, listen, change and stand up unitedly for the sake of our own well-being? Why cannot we muster courage to stand up against anything and everything that endangers our dignity, self-respect, self-confidence and existence? The researcher calls upon all the women to reflect, rise and respond for things to change in our favour. Stop Asking, Start Doing is the *mantra*.

As such, both foeticide and infanticide are underlined with the denial of right to life for someone's convenience, pride and wealth; and these coloured in the hue of gender-bias become even more despicable. Causes of female foeticide and infanticide are ingrained in our customs, traditions, practices and thinking – low status of women, extreme poverty, illiteracy, dowry system, gender discrimination (preference for the girl child), safety concern due to growing incidents of rape, molestation, sexual abuse, domestic violence, trafficking, etc. Female foeticide fast replaced female infanticide as a means to shrink and decimate girl child population the worldwide due to various socio-religious beliefs, pressures and advancement in

medical science and technology. In India, female infanticide practised by many communities was posing a huge concern as it continued into the 20th century defying all progress and growth claimed by the other spheres in the country, and the scenario in the 21st century appears to be even worse with India reporting one of the highest female foeticide incidents the worldwide. A declining female child population from 78.83 million in 2001 to 75.84 million in 2011 in the age group of 0-6 years, and the dipping child sex ratio (0-6 years) during the period 1991-2011 from 945 to 914 portray an abysmal picture. The legalisation of abortion through the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 subject to certain acceptable reasons such as medical risk and rape actually proved counterproductive as it intensified female foeticide. In view of this misuse of the law the Government of India passed Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technique (PNDT) Act in 1994 later amending it to the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) (PCPNDT) Act in 2004 to deter and punish pre-natal sex screening and sex-selective abortion. However, the Act has been reported to be poorly enforced. As has been acknowledged by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, illegal abortions still outnumber legal abortions amounting to deaths of thousands of women due to complications resulting from such unsafe abortions. Also, the Population Research Institute reports that, at least 12,771,043 sex-selective abortions had taken place in India between 2000 and 2014 marking 2,332 as the daily average of sex-selective abortions. The under-reporting under the MTP Act has also been a major problem in calibrating the severity of the crime.

Pre-natal sex determination and medical termination of pregnancy have a huge role to play in context of escalating cases of female foeticide. All those engaged in such activities are brutal murderers with their hands smeared with blood of innocents. It is of utmost importance that special eradication drive is carried out backed with formulation and execution of stringent laws against all those who indulge in such heinous criminalities. Licenses of doctors indulging in such practices must be cancelled in addition to other penalties like imprisonment and heavy fine. Of late, these practices are not confined to villages alone and are equally prevalent in urban areas. Strikingly, urban and developed areas and well-educated people are equally implicated in the act.

A few even go on to blame it on religions, but no religious text whatsoever ordains female foeticide. These are our (mis)interpretations and (mis)understandings of those texts which are at fault and should be blamed. Moreover, any attempt to associate killing of girl child with any kind of religious and moral shame is bound to be perceived as an attack on people's character further defeating the entire cause as it may lead to unsafe abortions and societal retaliation.

The situation in Indian society is so alarming that in the prosperous state of Haryana as many as one-third of the marriageable menfolk are not married in want of brides due to a skewed sex ratio of 834 girls per thousand boys. This in turn, as also accentuated by the patriarchal system, has had a destabilizing effect on the society and has given rise to more evils. These menfolk have indulged into purchasing brides from

poorer eastern parts of the country, like West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, and sometimes from across border as well; and these brides tend to be exploited to the extent of getting passed from one husband to another. The practices of female foeticide and infanticide have trapped us in a vicious circle as they lower down female-male ratio further perpetuating low women-status again leading to even more killings of girl child. In the longer run, this gender-imbalance poses bigger threats to the future and existence of the society as it directly relates to negative impact on family and population growth in turn causing destabilization and disruption of the economy.

Education has immensely significant role in empowering girl children and women as it develops a rationale in them, understanding of their own rights, issues and entitlements, grooms them into better citizens contributing towards the growth and welfare of their own family and hence of the society. A popular African proverb adequately substantiates this – *“If you educate a man, you educate an individual; but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation.”* - Dr. James Emmanuel Kwegyir-Aggrey. This simply means that educating a girl child has far-reaching positive impacts on the society. Indian government's *Beti Padhao, Beti Bachao* campaign introduced in January 2015 is an effort in this direction only and it supports the notion of education being a pre-condition to the welfare of the feminine section as it is perceived to be transforming the consciousness of individuals and thereby the mental pattern of the society as a whole. The campaign was initiated by the government to address the declining child-sex ratio in the country. Besides this attempt to encourage families to have girl children, prevent female foeticide and educate the girl child, the government also launched several conditional cash transfer schemes such as Balika Samridhi Yojana and Dhanalakshmi Scheme to deal with the mental block associated with treating girls as bigger financial liability.

Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani teenage girl who escalated to global recognition and reputation courtesy her outright and firm support for the cause of education of every child proving herself to be an epitome of an empowered girl, also popularly puts it as – *“One child, one teacher, one pen and one book can change the world. Education is the only solution. Education first”*. Her stance in a simple manner reflects upon the transformation that education can effect on the society.

All are responsible for this genocide including parents, society, government, self-proclaimed religious leaders, trade partners, industrialists, etc. Therefore, all stakeholders need to be awakened, sensitized, educated and mobilized clearing the related myths, misconceptions and misunderstandings. The practice of female foeticide needs to be decried and denounced the worldwide alongwith tactful dealing of the hypocritical abortion rights by deploring the circumstances that lead women to resort to abortion as the best possible option. In addition, a nationwide network of orphanages should be established where unwanted girl babies can be taken in. This, of course, is a merciful symptomatic response and does not offer a solution to the problem, but would certainly help in dousing the flares of girl-killing practices engulfing the society. Radiologists, obstetricians and pediatricians need to come forward in support of this entire drive to save girl child by

vociferously abhorring and opposing female foeticide. Sound and stringent laws complimented with an adequate compliance and monitoring regime need to be put in place to provide a legal framework to the entire mission. All laws pertaining to women-status need to be comprehensively looked into and amended accordingly, and one and all must be acclimatized in accordance with these laws.

#### 4. Conclusion and Suggestions

Women empowerment, spreading awareness in the society about the importance of girl child, compulsory education are some significant measures to be taken to save girl child. However, merely creating awareness, sensitizing, counselling and developing an understanding would not bear the desired fruits, the mission to Save Girl Child instead calls for strong political will backing the stringent laws against defaulters while providing support and incentives to those who rear a girl child. It is, however, not possible for government alone to reach every nook and corner of the society to resolve issues and problems whatsoever. If the path is to be paved and the desired change is to be brought, every dimension of the societal fabric needs to be cooperating, contributing and supporting the cause and efforts for the revolution to see the light of the day. NGOs, citizens, governments, private organizations, media, educational institutions, medical fraternity all need to work concertedly in tandem. In fact, medical practitioners have an important and critical role in this entire gamut of issues concerning Girl Child.

Practices like “Eco-feminism” can also cast an effective change in the entire scenario. Rajasthan's villages Piplantri, Budania and Luhavad surrounding the capital city of Jaipur alarmed with the tilted child-sex ratio have come up with an innovative and eco-friendly way to counter the problem of female foeticide. They welcome the birth of a girl and boy child alike. In fact, they have linked environmentalism and gender activism as they celebrate the birth of girls by planting trees, the ceremony termed as “eco-feminism” by experts. This brings home a valuable learning that revolutions occur only when visions are supported by strong and stern stances and concerted actions of one and all.

We claim to be the world's fastest growing economy accelerating on the path of development. However, this development seems to be regressive as a few problems that it should have automatically dealt with resolving them for the betterment of the society as a whole have been found otherwise rampant to the extent that present development scenario has rather contributed in aggravating those problems further worsening the situation as it has equipped the mankind to having developed an understanding that he can now decide his own fate, write and re-write his destiny. Female foeticide and infanticide probably mirror this anomaly in the ugliest possible form. This one cause interestingly but disgracefully portrays how scientific and technological development and economic growth can be together deployed for the downfall of the mankind. But wait! Is it really so that we humans have come to replace the Creator here. Think back upon the repercussions so starkly written on the wall but continually ignored by us only to put ourselves and our very own existence at yet graver risks. We need to mend our ways now, modify our

outlook, shoulder our responsibilities and deliver them with full honesty and in full swing while ensuring that our efforts bear the desired fruits. Let us effort to make India a better and safer

place for our and others daughters, sisters and mothers; and letting them live empowered in the real and not the skewed sense of the term.

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