

Female Feticide in India: A Deep-Rooted Social Challenge

21

Er. Mihika Manuraj

Abstract

India, a country renowned for its cultural heritage, spiritual traditions, and centuries-old civilization, is also a nation burdened by persistent social challenges. Despite making remarkable progress in fields such as technology, economy, and global diplomacy, the country continues to struggle with deeply rooted issues like poverty, corruption, illiteracy, caste-based discrimination, and gender inequality. Among these, gender inequality stands out as one of the most damaging and shameful barriers to true progress, as it not only denies half of the population their rightful opportunities but also fuels practices that undermine the very foundations of society. Perhaps the most disturbing expression of gender inequality is female feticide—**the deliberate abortion of a fetus solely because it is female**. It is a practice that denies a child the basic right to be born and strips women of dignity, autonomy, and respect even before they come into existence.

Keywords

Abortion, sex determination, marriage squeeze, patriarchal traditions, psychological impact, child sex ratio.

Er. Mihika Manuraj

Design Engineer

STMicroelectronics Pvt. Ltd., Greater Noida

Anu Books

Social Issues: Trends and Analysis

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31995/Book.AB348-O25.Chapter21>

Plagiarism Report: 04%

The problem of female feticide in India is particularly troubling because it demonstrates how social prejudice and modern technology combine to perpetuate injustice. Despite strict laws that prohibit prenatal sex determination, it is not uncommon to find clinics and doctors covertly advertising services to reveal the gender of the unborn child. Some even use chillingly insensitive slogans such as “**Spend 500 rupees today and save 50,000 tomorrow,**” a direct reference to the expenses of dowry that parents supposedly avoid by eliminating a girl child before birth (Kumar, 2021). Instead of being agents of healing, doctors and clinics often become enablers of discrimination, treating life as if it were a financial transaction. What makes this practice even more disheartening is the fact that in many rural regions, it is not only men but also women—especially mothers-in-law and even some mothers themselves—who perpetuate this cycle. Pressured by patriarchal expectations and internalized gender bias, they sometimes insist on female feticide out of fear of social ridicule or financial hardship. The act thus becomes not only a reflection of gender inequality but also a tragic example of women enforcing the very system that oppresses them.

Women who are coerced or pressured into aborting female fetuses often experience profound psychological distress that can have long-term consequences. The moral and emotional burden of knowingly terminating a female child conflicts with maternal instincts and internalized ethical values, resulting in intense feelings of guilt, shame, and grief (Ravindra, 2018). Many women reports experiencing depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms following the procedure, which can affect their mental health for years. In cases where societal and familial pressures are extreme, mothers may feel trapped between the fear of social ostracism and their desire to protect their unborn child, creating chronic emotional tension. Additionally, the psychological trauma is compounded by persistent internalized patriarchy, as women often blame themselves for conforming to discriminatory practices despite their own moral objections. Studies have shown that repeated exposure to such coercive environments can diminish self-esteem, create long-lasting feelings of inadequacy, and even affect future parenting decisions, perpetuating

cycles of gender bias within the family (Das, 2017). This highlights that female feticide not only violates the rights of the unborn child but also inflicts deep emotional harm on the very women who are expected to nurture life, revealing another tragic dimension of gender inequality.

Causes of Female Feticide:

The roots of this practice lie deep in India's history. For centuries, Indian society has shown a strong preference for sons. This bias can be traced back to patriarchal traditions where sons were seen as heirs who would carry forward the family name and perform the sacred rites of cremation for their parents, ensuring salvation for their souls. Daughters, by contrast, were considered temporary members of the family, expected to leave for their husband's household after marriage. The prevalence of dowry, which demanded that parents of a daughter pay substantial sums to secure her marriage, reinforced the idea that daughters were burdens (Sen, 2019). Sons, meanwhile, were valued not only for their perceived economic contribution but also for their role in ensuring the family's honor, protection, and continuity. Inheritance laws further entrenched this imbalance by excluding women from property ownership and granting sons almost exclusive rights to family wealth. Though legal reforms have since been enacted to correct these inequities, their historical influence continues to linger in cultural practices and family expectations.

Beyond dowry, several economic factors continue to fuel the practice of female feticide in India. Daughters are frequently perceived as financial liabilities because, in most traditional households, they are expected to marry and move into their husband's family, which means parents often feel they will not benefit directly from the investment made in raising or educating them. Sons, by contrast, are regarded as future breadwinners who can provide financial support in old age and carry forward the family property and business (Das, 2017). This belief is reinforced in agrarian communities, where male labor is overvalued while the significant yet invisible contribution of women in farming and household work is overlooked. In addition, cultural practices surrounding marriage—lavish wedding expenses, jewelry, and

household gifts—add to the perception of daughters as economic burdens. At the social level, entrenched patriarchy continues to privilege sons. Couples without male children often face stigma and pity, while daughters are treated as transient members destined for another household. The pressure to produce a son falls heavily on women, and in many rural settings, it is often mothers-in-law who insist on sex determination or abortions if the fetus is female. This internalization of gender bias highlights how deeply systemic inequality operates within families, perpetuating a vicious cycle across generations.

While advances in medical technology were meant to safeguard maternal and child health, their misuse has tragically deepened gender discrimination. The availability of ultrasound machines has made it possible to identify the sex of a fetus, and despite the prohibition under the *Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act, 1994*, many clinics continue to conduct these tests illegally. The collusion between parents desperate for sons and medical practitioners willing to flout the law has turned technology into a tool for perpetuating injustice (Gupta & Kishor, 2020). This widespread misuse has made female feticide easier, more accessible, and more normalized, particularly in states already grappling with skewed sex ratios.

The consequences of female feticide are grave and long-lasting. At the demographic level, it has led to a dangerously skewed sex ratio. The 2011 Census of India reported only 919 girls per 1000 boys in the age group of 0–6 years, with states like Haryana and Punjab showing even lower ratios (Government of India, 2011). Such an imbalance threatens the natural equilibrium of society and creates long-term social problems. A reduced number of women inevitably results in a “marriage squeeze,” where many men are unable to find partners. This, in turn, fuels practices such as bride trafficking, forced marriages, and polyandry, particularly in states with the lowest sex ratios (Jha et al., 2006). The shortage of women also increases their vulnerability to violence, commodification, and exploitation. In contexts where women become scarce, they are often treated as property, leading to a rise in abductions, harassment, and crimes such as rape and domestic abuse. Beyond demographic and social

challenges, female feticide constitutes a flagrant violation of human rights. It deprives the unborn female child of her most fundamental entitlement—the right to life. The practice also has severe psychological consequences. Women coerced into aborting female fetuses frequently endure trauma, guilt, and persistent emotional distress. Children raised in households with strong son preference may internalize feelings of inferiority, thereby perpetuating cycles of diminished self-worth among women.

Recognizing the severity of the issue, the Indian government has enacted several laws and initiatives to combat female feticide. The most significant among these is the ***Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act of 1994***, which bans prenatal sex determination and regulates diagnostic clinics. The Act stipulates penalties, including imprisonment and fines, for medical practitioners and families implicated in illegal sex determination. However, its implementation has been inconsistent, with many offenders escaping punishment due to corruption, inadequate monitoring, and a lack of awareness (Ravindra, 2018). To strengthen these measures, the government launched the *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* campaign in 2015, focusing on awareness, enforcement of laws, and promotion of girls' education. Several state-level initiatives, such as Haryana's *Ladli Scheme* and the *Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana*, have also aimed to provide financial security and incentives for families raising daughters. While these programs reflect serious commitment, progress has been uneven, as the core of the problem lies in cultural attitudes rather than legal loopholes alone.

India's declining sex ratio is often compared with China's, where the One-Child Policy led to widespread female feticide and a similarly distorted demographic structure. However, international examples also provide hope. South Korea, which once faced similar challenges, managed to reverse its sex ratio imbalance through sustained awareness campaigns, strict law enforcement, and gradual cultural transformation (Chung & Das Gupta, 2007). This demonstrates that change is possible if legal, social, and cultural efforts align over time. The role of media, education, and NGOs has been instrumental in drawing attention to female feticide. Campaigns on television and

radio, along with impactful films such as *Matr Bhoomi* and *Dangal*, have highlighted the dangers of gender discrimination. NGOs working in rural areas have organized awareness drives, counseled families, and promoted the value of girl children. Education has also proven to be a powerful tool for transformation. States with higher female literacy rates, such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, display better child sex ratios, underscoring that empowerment through education can erode discriminatory practices and reshape cultural values.

Solving the problem of female feticide requires a multi-faceted approach. Laws must be enforced with greater rigor, and monitoring of diagnostic clinics must be intensified to prevent illegal sex determination. Whistleblower mechanisms should be strengthened to ensure accountability. At the same time, education must be prioritized for both girls and boys, with gender sensitivity integrated into school curricula to foster equality from an early age. Economic reforms, such as strict enforcement of dowry prohibition laws and equal inheritance rights, are critical to eliminating financial biases against daughters. Cultural transformation, however, remains the most pivotal element. Society must shift from viewing daughters as burdens to recognizing them as equal contributors to family, community, and nation. Celebrating women's achievements in fields such as science, politics, sports, and business can help establish positive role models and instill pride in raising daughters. Men and community leaders must also be actively engaged in awareness campaigns, as dismantling patriarchy cannot be the sole responsibility of women.

Female feticide is more than a demographic issue; it is a moral and ethical failure that undermines the essence of humanity. By denying girls the right to life, society perpetuates cycles of inequality, violence, and injustice. While laws and government schemes provide a necessary framework for reform, the authentic solution lies in transforming mindsets and dismantling patriarchal structures that fuel discrimination. Every child, regardless of gender, deserves the right to be born, to live with dignity, and to realize their potential. India, aspiring to global leadership, cannot achieve genuine progress while half of its population continues to be denied the right to exist. Eradicating female feticide, therefore, is not merely a matter of legal

enforcement but also of social transformation and moral responsibility. It demands collective effort from governments, civil society, families, and individuals to ensure that daughters are valued equally to sons. Only then can India aspire to become a truly just, modern, and equitable nation.

References

1. Chung, W., & Das Gupta, M. (2007). The decline of son preference in South Korea: The roles of development and public policy. *Population and Development Review*, 33(4), Pg. 757–783.
2. Das, N. (2017). The socio-economic roots of female feticide in India. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(2), Pg. 125–140.
3. Government of India. (2011). *Census of India 2011: Provisional population totals*. New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General.
4. Gupta, R., & Kishor, S. (2020). Misuse of ultrasound technology and its impact on female feticide in India. *Asian Population Studies*, 16(3), Pg. 301–318.
5. Jha, P., Kesler, M. A., Kumar, R., Ram, F., Ram, U., Aleksandrowicz, L., ... & Bassani, D. G. (2006). Trends in selective abortions of girls in India: Analysis of nationally representative birth histories from 1990 to 2005 and census data from 1991 to 2011. *The Lancet*, 367(9506), Pg. 211–218.
6. Kumar, S. (2021). Female feticide and gender discrimination in India: A critical study. *Indian Journal of Social Sciences*, 32(1), Pg. 45–59.
7. Ravindra, R. (2018). Implementation challenges of the PCPNDT Act: A critical review. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 64(3), Pg. 325–338.
8. Sen, A. (2019). Tradition, patriarchy, and the burden of daughters in South Asia. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 78(2), Pg. 401–420.