The unabated female feticide is leading to bride crisis and bride trade in India

Dear Editor,

The declining sex ratio in Northern and Northwestern Indian states indicates that there would be a bride crisis if female feticide continues unabated. According to the UNICEF report, an eligible Jat Groom from the Indian state of Haryana travels 3000 km to find a bride in Kerala, an obviously different state from Haryana in all social aspects. With glaringly fewer girls in their state, this is the only way left to alter their single status.[4]

The Problem Statement

Several reports on this issue reveal that thousands of marriageable girls from rural parts of different Indian states including Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Kerala, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh have been either brought or “bought” for the purpose of marriage in Haryana. These women in Haryana are called as “molkis” as the buyers pay money to buy these girls from their parents. One of the field studies in Haryana revealed that more than 9000 married women are bought from other Indian states as molkis.[5] Post wedding, the situation with these “molkis” varies greatly as most of these girls adjust with the difficult Haryanavi culture or pass through several bouts of “Agni pariksha” in the form of physical, mental, moral, and emotional torture. There are instances where these “purchased brides” have been forced to work as maids, exploited, or even denied their basic rights. Figure 1 gives an idea about the repercussions of female feticide related to bride crisis, trade, and related problems.

This is obviously not a natural calamity or warfare that has only targeted the female community and disappeared them overnight rather a continuous act of selective sex determinations and female feticide that has acquired genocide proportions which are finally catching up in Indian states, particularly North Indian states such as Punjab and Haryana.[1] In a normal scenario, elsewhere in the world, the population of female is normal or little higher than that of the male population; however, the situation in India is opposite. It was in China where the proportion of girls to the boys is less; however, the 2001 census revealed dismal results where the proportion of girls aged 0–6 years dropped from 945:1000 to 927:1000 since the previous census done 10 years earlier. This indicates 35 million fewer females registered to males during the decade. The more disturbing fact from this census is that the phenomenon has reached high proportion in states where a similar problem was not observed during earlier censuses. Reports reveal that the child sex ratio (boys per girls) in some of the states like Punjab (118), Haryana (120), and Jammu and Kashmir (116) as of 2011 census.[9]

Sociocultural Factors

While there are several studies on the quantitative aspects of declining sex ratio in India, qualitative inquiry regarding the declining female population is very limited. Canada’s International Development Research Centre, through its Women’s Rights and Citizenship program and in partnership with the Indian nongovernmental organization, ActionAid India, has documented the socioeconomic and cultural factors behind declining sex ratio in some of the Indian states that include Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, and Haryana.[14] The study revealed that once a girl child is born in the family, it is perceived as a burden in the family as one of the respondents in Madhya Pradesh stated, “...from the moment a daughter is born, the paramount concern of the immediate family is to accumulate money, valuables, and goods for her wedding.” Another Dhobi (washerman community) stated that “Dowry is like a penalty… it’s for the girl’s security/prosperity, but whether she remains happy or not is decided by her destiny....” It further happens that if a bride returns to her maternal home owing to some marital disturbances or dowry problems, it again becomes a problem for the maternal parents.[6]

It is a harsh tradition in Indian communities that the wedding should happen in a grand manner so as to reflect the richness of the family and culture. While it is easy for a richer family to do so, but the poor families suffer a lot for the same. Hence, a girl child is always perceived as a curse rather than a boon. Furthermore, it has been estimated that a total of 91,200 dowry deaths have been reported in India between January 1, 2001, and December 31, 2012, as per National Crime Records Bureau.[5] This is an indication that poorer people desire not to have a girl child and if detected during pregnancy, try to commit female feticide which is the main contributing factor for declining sex ratio. The flip side of the coin is that if the modern sex detection tools are not available with some rural communities, parents tend to have as much as a female child till they land up with one male child. In Indian communities, the male child is believed as a helping hand who can contribute to the family economy. These poor families with more girl child get trapped with bride trafficking in India which is an emerging social malady. As per 2013 United Nation’s
report, the demand for girls of marriageable age is so high that bride trafficking has turned into a thriving business in India.\(^6\)

Albeit Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, 1994, is in place, unethical and illegal sex-selective abortions are happening throughout the country which is a great matter of concern from social-cultural-economic and public health perspective. It is estimated that the sex-selective abortion business by unethical means has grown into a Rs. 1000 crore industry (US$ 244 million) in India.\(^1\)

This is especially easy in Indian states owing to the marriage of harsh cultural practices, with modern technology resulting in lethal outcomes. The sharp decline in the sex ratio did not occur until the 1990s with the large-scale availability of an ultrasound machine intended to protect maternal and infant health. Instead, its usage in India led to a surge in the sex-selective abortion of female fetuses. Since 1991, 80% of the Indian districts have recorded a declining sex ratio with Punjab being the worst, followed by Haryana, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Himachal Pradesh. Every year, an estimated 500,000 girls are lost to female feticide.\(^7\) An estimated 4–12 million sex-selective abortions of girl child have occurred in different Indian states during the past three decades, and the brutal massacre still continues.

**Way Ahead**

Haryana boys may have found a tentative solution to the problem of bride crisis; however, demographers caution that the crisis will lead to increasing sexual violence and abuse against women and female children. This will also lead to trafficking, increasing number of child marriages, increasing maternal deaths due to abortions and early marriages and increase in practices of multiple partners.\(^1\) This is undoubtedly a nexus of social-cultural-economic and public health issues tied into a single problem of female feticide.

Bringing change to alleviate this social malady requires a multi-pronged approach. The most important ones include women education and women empowerment including right to property and land rights. Some of the Indian states such as Northeast and Kerala where women have these rights show better results in sex ratio. More recently, the Ministry of Women and Child Development introduced a scheme, Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao Yojana (save girl child, educate girl child scheme) on January 22, 2015. The main objective of this scheme is to prevent gender biased sex-selective elimination, ensure survival and protection of girl child, and ensuring education and participation of the girl child.\(^8\)

Female feticide has been a major social malady in Indian society. It is being practiced across all strata of Indian society: all religion, educated-uneducated, rich-poor, and rural-urban. It would be difficult to root out this problem if the entire society does not get aware and value the significance of a girl child.

**Financial support and sponsorship**

Nil.

**Conflicts of interest**

There are no conflicts of interest.

**Janmejaya Samal\(^1\)**

*Research Consultant, International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease (The Union), Pune, Maharashtra, India*

**Address for correspondence:** Dr. Janmejaya Samal, C/O-Mr. Bijaya Ketan Samal, Pansapalli, Bangarada, Gangapur, Ganjam - 761 123, Odisha, India. E-mail: janmejaya_samal@yahoo.com

**References**

1. UNICEF India. Female Feticide in India. Press Release by Alka Gupta. Available from: http://www.unicef.in/PressReleases/227/Female-foeticide-in-India. [Last accessed on 2016 Jan 05].
2. Masoodi A. Human Trafficking Caters to Demand for Brides. Live Mint. Last Modified: 2014 Sep 05, 12:17 am IST.
3. Census of India 2011: Child Sex Ratio Drops to Lowest Since Independence. The Economic Times, India. PTI; 2011 Mar 31, 11:17 pm IST.
4. IDRC. The daughter deficit: Exploring declining sex ratio in India. Women’s rights and citizenship. Ontario, Canada: International Development Research Center. http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Documents/the-daughter-deficit-india.pdf [Last accessed on 2016 Jan 07].

5. Ministry of Home Affairs. Crime in India 2013 compendium. New Delhi: National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India; 2014.

6. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Current Status of Victim Service Providers and Criminal Justice Actors in India on Anti-human Trafficking. Country Assessment; 2013.

7. Jha P, Kesler MA, Kumar R, Ram F, Ram U, Aleksandrowicz L, et al. 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. Lancet 2011;377:1921-8.

8. Govt. of India, Ministry of Women and Child Development. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao. Available from: http://www.wcd.nic.in/BBBPScheme/main.htm. [Last accessed on 2016 Jan 10].