GENDER INEQUALITY, FOETICIDES AND MISSING GIRLS IN INDIA: REGIONAL COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Introduction:

One of the significant contributors to the adverse child sex ratio (females per 1000 males) in India is the practice of elimination of female foetus. The prevalence of patriarchy especially, in many states of northern part of India and huge dowry demand has negative influence on the desire for daughters that leads to termination of female foetus and thus unfavorable sex ratio. Empirical evidences indicated that the phenomenon of sex determination and sex selective abortion is now concentrating not only in towns and cities but also approaching in rural India. For curbing the menace of female foeticides, the government of India brought into force the Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act on 20th September 1994. The act came into force with effect from 1.1.1996). Though, Government of India has undertaken various steps to prevent the practices of female infanticide and foeticide. Unfortunately, sex determination tests have continued and, in fact, spread more rapidly even to remote areas with the advent of ultrasound.

Census of India 2001 shocked the whole nation by reporting a sharp decline in the child sex ratio (0-6) in the past decade. It has declined from 976 in 1961 to 927 in 2001. During 1991-2001 in the States of Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Chandigarh UT, it has declined more than 50 points. In fact, the mentality of sex selective abortion is diffusing from higher socio-economic status group to lower socio-economic status and if the stringent measures are not taken up it will diffuse in most part of India leading to further imbalance in sex- ratio and thus lead to long term impact on demographic imbalance.

The main **Objectives** of the present investigation are:

(a) to analyze the regional variations in the overall sex ratio and child sex ratio;

(b) to measure the proximate determinants of declining female population under different (child, adolescent and total female population) age groups;

(c) to study the influence of existing female mortality disadvantage on declining sex ratio and female population missing in different age groups; and

(d) to analyze the impact of decline in sex ratio on demographic imbalance at the regional as well as at national level.

Data for the present study has been taken from Census of India 1991 and 2001. In addition information also collected from the reports of Central Bureau of Health Intelligence (CBHI), Sample Registration System (SRS) office of the Registrar General of India, National Family Health Survey II (NFHS II) and Human Development Reports.

Methodology:

To study the regional variations the States/UTs are grouped into four regions. To measure female mortality disadvantage for the age groups 0-1, 1-4 and 0-5 an index developed by Hill and Upchurch (1995) has been used. For a population *i* age range x, x+n, the index $Ii(x, x+n)$ of female disadvantage is given by

$$Ii(x, x+n) = ({}_nq_x^f / {}_nq_x^m) - [({}_nq_x^f / {}_nq_x^m)^s : {}_5q_0^m]$$

Where $Ii(x, x+n) = [({}_nq_x^f / {}_nq_x^m)^s : {}_5q_0^m]$ is the standard ratio of mortality.

A positive value of I indicates a female disadvantage (higher female to male mortality than expected gives the overall level of under five mortality) whereas negative value indicates a female advantage (relative to that expected). Here the difference of ratios are used because once the epidemiological sex difference is controlled, the remaining difference is an absolute indicator of discrimination (Hill and Upchurch, 1995). The above has been used to estimate the contribution of female mortality disadvantages on decline in sex ratio as well as missing females due to foeticide, infanticide and sex-age differentials in mortality.

To study determinants of sex ratio log linear multiple regression analysis for 32 states and UTs has been used considering the group of demographic, economic, and social and religious factors. Demographic variables such as age wise female mortality, economic factors like level of income, percentage of people under below poverty line (BPL) and above BPL, female work participation and social factors like percentage of SC, ST and OBC population, religious factors like proportion of people under different religious groups. Further, the decomposition technique has been applied to study factors that are more influencing for the changing (declining) sex ratio. The mean and coefficient of variation were computed to assess the regional variations.

Results indicate that though there is slight (6 point) increase in overall sex ratio in India during 1991-2001 but during the same period there was unfortunate high (18 points) decline in the child sex ratio (0-6 age group). Region-wise highest decline in the child sex ratio observed in North/ North-West part of India. In this region the most affected states/UT are Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Chandigarh UT where the decline in child sex ratio found more than 50 points. In this region all the states recorded decline in child sex ratio and the decline in overall sex ratio was found except in two states Rajasthan and UP. For the other three regions all the states / UT (except Sikkim) recorded improvement in the overall sex ratio. Again unfortunately (except in Kerala, Lakshadweep and Pondicherry of South India) all the States showed decline in the child sex ratio. Though, the decline in these three regions was not as high as recorded in Northern states of India. The results show that the imbalances in sex composition of children i.e. unfavorable for females; further aggravated due to gender differential treatment of the girl's child leading to relatively high child morbidity and mortality. The higher child mortality for girls than that of boys clearly indicates the existence of female

disadvantage in the society. This phenomenon found strong in North, West and East groups of States than in South group of states.

The results of the multiple regression analysis suggest that among the social factors, except proportion of ST population other factors have influenced negatively for the level of child sex ratio. However, these coefficients are not statistically significant. The negative coefficient for female literacy rate suggest that higher the level of female literacy lower will be the child sex ratio indicating higher usage of sex determination tests by literate women. Similarly, higher the proportion of urban population means more accessibility of such services in the cities and towns.

The economic factor like percentage of population depends on agriculture has negative influence on the level of sex ratio which suggests that agriculture dominated families have strong son preference. The percentage of population Below Poverty Line (BPL) has positive influence on sex ratio. This means that the people of BPL might not have discrimination for male or female child because of their economic position to undertake such facilities. The sex selective tests are very costly and it is not easily accessible and affordable for poor people. The female work participation rate also showed positive influence indicating female advantageous position. Means higher the female work participation rate lowers will be the discrimination against girl child especially for health and nutrition.

The religious factors indicated that major religions like Hindu, Muslim and Christian population have significant positive influence on the level of sex ratio. Where as the proportion of Sikh population has negative significant influence on the level of child sex ratio and that of Jain population has negative but non significant. In Sikh community the son preference is stronger due to higher prevalence of patriarchal family and strong preference for son and in Jain population due to high prevalence of dowry system, the general trend is for son preference.

Conclusions

The falling of child sex ratio is definitely a matter of concern. The situation is going to be worse in future because the CSR is not only low but also declining with rising incidence of female feticides. In the Indian context, there is strong preference for sons. This preference is influenced by various socio-cultural and economic factors; such as the son being responsible for carrying forward the family name and occupation. Sons are desired because they are considered as a source of support during old age and for performing religious rites at the time of cremation and subsequently. The practice of dowry and daughter being viewed as *"paraya dhan*" (to be married and sent away) is yet another reason why sons are preferred to daughters. If this phenomenon continues, than a stage will reach when it would difficult to make up for the missing girls. Society needs to recognize this discrimination. Girls have right to live just as boys do. If the stringent measures are not taken up it will lead to further imbalance in sex- ratio and will have long-term impact on demographic imbalance in India.