

Committee: Human Rights Council

Issue: The issue of female feticide and girl infanticide

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INTRODUCTION

Although the world has progressed and developed in various sectors such as technology and medicine, in many areas around the world violent and inhumane practices related to culture or religion still exist. One of the most prominent practices is female infanticide and feticide. Despite the fact that these practices sound as something distant and of the past, they take place not only in the Middle East and Asia, but in Europe as well.

As of today, female infanticide may have been reduced with various means, however, that does not mean the problem has been eradicated completely. On the contrary, there are numerous reports and studies showcasing various incidents, with the number of women gone missing surpassing that of 80 million. Moreover, infanticide is an act that goes directly against one of the most important human rights, the Right to Life of children. Although it used to be more common in the past, today we still come across cases of infanticide, particularly against girls (female infanticide). Therefore, it is of vital importance that this issue is solved and dealt with accordingly.

The United Nations (UN) parties, the European Commission and other international organisations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Children Fund, have taken action that has successfully decreased the practice of infanticide worldwide. However, such cruel and inhumane practices must stop immediately .

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Infanticide

Infanticide is described as the killing of the newborn. It has often been interpreted as a primitive method of birth control and a means of ridding a group of its weak and deformed children; but most societies actively desire children and put them to death (or allow them to die) only under exceptional circumstances. ¹

¹<https://www.britannica.com/topic/infanticide>

Feticide

Female feticide is the termination of the life of a fetus within the womb on the grounds that its sex is female. Female feticide is thus the conjunction of two ethical evils: abortion and gender bias. A fetus's right to life outweighs the parents' rights to wealth, pride, or convenience, whether the fetus is male or female. The term "sex selective abortion" is preferable to the term feticide, since it points to both of the ethical evils inherent in this practice.

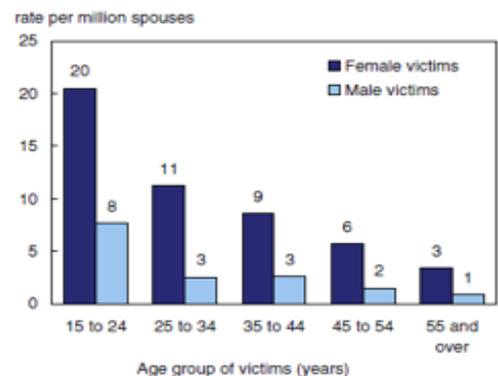
Abortion

Abortion is the expulsion of a fetus from the uterus before it has reached the stage of viability (in human beings, usually about the 20th week of gestation). An abortion may occur spontaneously, in which case it is also called a miscarriage, or it may be brought on purposefully, in which case it is often called an induced abortion.²

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the past, and in many societies, female infanticide was a widespread practice, permitted by different cultures around the world. Although it is considered to be a crime, it is still performed. In some cultures, children under the age of one are not considered human beings until certain ceremonies and rituals have been performed such as name-giving ceremonies. Infanticide occurs rarely once those ceremonies have been carried out. Infanticide is usually difficult to investigate, because in most cases these deaths are covered as stillbirths or children are not registered at the civil registry after their birth.

Chart 4.2
Young females most at risk of spousal homicide, 1997 to 2006



Types of infanticide

Infanticide is classified into two main categories; Direct or Active Infanticide and Indirect or passive infanticide:

- Direct or active Infanticide is killing the baby intentionally, by means of dehydration or starvation, suffocation or head injuries.
- Indirect or passive infanticide begins with insufficient nutrition, neglect or careless parenting, especially when the baby gets sick.

²<https://www.britannica.com/science/abortion-pregnancy>

Sometimes, depending on the situation, there is no clear distinction between infanticide and abortion. For example, in some societies, when an unwanted pregnancy takes place, the woman is encouraged to work during the sixth or seventh month of her pregnancy, and then the unborn child is killed if it shows signs of life after birth.

Causes

Unwanted pregnancies

Unwanted pregnancies are one of the most common causes of infanticide today. One of the reasons is because women or families do not have enough resources to look after their children and because, in many parts of the world, there is no availability of modern forms of birth control or medical abortion. Therefore, many women experience unwanted pregnancies, or they just want a certain type of child, with specific characteristics. A study published in 1992 and conducted in a slum in Brazil over a period of 25 years, revealed an average of 200 deaths per 1,000 children born. Most of these deaths were due to indirect or passive forms of infanticide. Mothers wanted their children to be fast, clever, and active in their development, and children showing opposite features, would not receive medical care when they were sick or were given less food than their siblings, since they were considered not good enough to live.

Another cause of infanticide associated with unwanted pregnancies may be “illicit” births, which means that the pregnancy is not the result of a marriage recognised and accepted by society. In many cultures such births are highly undesirable, since they can dishonour a family.

Biological causes

Some communities still perform infanticide due to biological causes. For example, in some communities in Africa children born with a disability are killed, as negative magical effects or evil spells are attributed to their birth. The same beliefs apply in cases of twin and albino births.

Female infanticide

Female infanticide is the most common type of infanticide, both today and in the past. This practice is mainly due to the fact that, in some cultures, males are more socially acceptable than women. Moreover, female infanticide is sometimes associated to the control of the population. In many societies, infanticide was used as a way to control the population. As a result, it particularly affected female children, since having fewer women meant having a lower rate of reproduction. For example, the UN World Report on Violence Against Children, conducted among 1,000 women in India, revealed that infanticide was the cause of 41% of deaths among newborn girls.

Female infanticide has caused a great imbalance between the sexes in many areas. In 2007, a UN report estimated that approximately 100 million girls worldwide had disappeared, 80 million of them in China and India.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

People's Republic of China

In China the practice of infanticide exists, mainly due to the one-child policy (even though it existed before), which states that each couple can only have one child. Many parents prefer to have an abortion before the birth, if they are aware of the fact that the child is a girl. However, among people who did not have an abortion, infanticide at birth can be performed. According to the Geneva Centre for the democratic control of armed forces, the number of female babies who have died because of gender related issues is in the same range as the 191 million estimated dead accounting for all conflicts in the twentieth century.

India

Female infanticide and female feticide (the selective abortion of girls in the womb) are significant issues in India. Female infanticide has been a problem for centuries, partly as a result of the patriarchal nature of the Indian society. India has one of the highest female feticide incidents in the world. The female child population in the age group of 0-6 years declined from 78.83 million in 2001 to 75.84 million in 2011. During the period 1991-2011, the child sex ratio (0-6 years) declined from 945 to 914. Modern India has tried several ways to tackle the issue. One initiative in the state of Tamil Nadu was taken to attack the underlying economic problems. Where parents had one or two daughters but no son, and either of the parents was willing to be sterilised, the government offered the parents money to help look after the children. This money was to be paid annually throughout the daughter's education, followed by a lump sum on her twentieth birthday, either for use as a dowry or to fund further education.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)

In 2000 and 2001, China deported thousands of North Korean refugees, with many ending up in North Korean prison camps. People who later managed to escape again to China and South Korea, say that prisoners discovered to be pregnant were routinely forced to have abortions. If babies were born alive, they say, guards forced prisoners to kill them. Defectors from DPRK say that the prohibition on pregnancy in prisons dates back at least to the 1980's, and that forced abortions or infanticide were the rule. Until recently, though, instances of pregnancy in the prisons were rare. China's deportations of thousands of illegal migrants from North Korea in recent years has resulted in a sharp increase in the number of pregnant women ending up in North Korean prisons. Defectors, male and female, are reviled as

traitors and counter revolutionaries when they are returned to North Korea. But women who have become pregnant, especially by Chinese men, face special abuse. "Several hundred babies were killed last year in North Korean prisons," said Willy Fautre, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, a private group based in Brussels. Mr. Fautre said that over the last 18 months, he and his volunteers had interviewed 35 recent escapees from North Korean camps.³

Pakistan

Edhi Foundation, a non-profit organization operating in Pakistan, found 255 dead infants from the garbage dumps across the country in 2017. The bodies of over 300 newborn babies were disposed of in garbage bins all over Karachi, in Pakistan between January 2017 and April 2018. According to a report published by Karachi's Edhi Foundation, along with the Chhipa Welfare Organization found 345 newborn babies dumped in garbage bins in the city. Some of the babies were barbarically murdered, according to the Karachi-based News International, with the gender of the babies appearing to play a role in the gruesome acts, since 99 percent of them were girls.

The United States of America

Statistically, the United States ranks high on the list of countries whose inhabitants kill their children. For infants under the age of one year, the American homicide rate is 11th in the world, while for ages one through four it is 1st and for ages five through fourteen it is fourth. From 1968 to 1975, infanticide of all ages accounted for almost 3.2% of all reported homicides in the United States.

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

For more than 20 years, UNFPA has campaigned against the phenomenon, sounding the alarm over son preference and helping communities advocate against gender-biased sex selection. UNFPA co-lead efforts with the World Health Organization to develop and release the first-ever UN-wide policy statement on the issue in 2011. In March 2017, UNFPA, with funding from the European Union, launched the Global Program to Prevent Son Preference and Gender-Biased Sex Selection, the first global effort of its kind. The program will work with governments and local partners to gather data about unequal sex ratios at birth in Asia and the Caucasus, and will design human rights-based and gender-equality focused interventions.⁴

Many governments are already working closely with UNFPA to address son preference. In India, for example, collaborations with the judiciary, health sector, law enforcement, media, researchers and community members – including religious organizations – have resulted in many good practices worthy of sharing.

³<https://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/10/world/n-koreans-talk-of-baby-killings.html>

⁴<https://www.unfpa.org/gender-biased-sex-selection>

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Description of Event
1946	United Nations Commissions on the Status of Women was established.
10 th December 1948	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed.
20 th November 1959	Declaration of the Rights of the Child was adopted.
1971	Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act in 1971 to regulate access to safe abortions
1990	The African charter for Children Rights and Welfare is adopted.
1991	India launches the Child Girl Protection Scheme.
1995	Global Women Conference in Beijing.
15 th March 2006	The Human Rights Council was created by the United Nations General Assembly.
2007	UN report estimated that approximately 100 million girls worldwide had disappeared, 80 million of them in China and India.
2017	Global Programme to Prevent Son Preference and Gender-Biased Sex Selection.

UN INVOLVEMENT: RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

It is a significant document supporting human rights. Drafted by representatives with different legal and cultural backgrounds from all regions of the world, the Declaration was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

It was adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, it is an international bill of rights for women. It consists of 30 articles. It rejects discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination.

Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1989

It is a human rights treaty which sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children.

The Protocol to the African, Charter on Human and People's Rights of Women in Africa

It ensures that comprehensive rights of women including the right to take part in the political process, to social and political equality with men will be improved.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

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In India, apart from Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994 (PNDT Act) to address the issue of sex-selective abortion, India also enacted the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act in 1971 to regulate access to safe abortions. The MTP Act of 1971, amended in 2002, allows abortion up to 20 weeks of pregnancy in cases where “the continuance of the pregnancy would involve a risk to the life of the pregnant woman or of grave injury to her physical or mental health”.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

To deal with a problem that has roots in social behaviour and prejudice, mere legislation is not enough. A concerted effort involving all sections of the society is necessary to change the prevalent social thinking and remove the gender-based discrimination if the goal of an elimination girl feticide is to be achieved. The long-term strategies should include education and empowerment of women.

Empowerment of rural marginalized women and education to improve their lot will increase their status in the society. As the women federation gain in importance and play a greater role in the development of the area, it is hope that their presence and the politico-economic strength they enable will help curb the practice.

The media-both print and electronic-plays a very significant role in removing gender bias and developing a positive image of the girl child in the society, a mix of mass media with various traditional forms of communication may provide a more effective alternative to influence the illiterate and the poor.

Public education on the illegality of fetal sex determination and sex selection abortion will be accompanied by positive messages on the value of daughters. Advertising of sex determination techniques shall be banned forthwith and stringent measures must be taken against the offenders.

There should also be extensive use of media for the sensitive promotion of a positive image of women and girls. In addition, there should be development of school based strategies for inculcating of positive self-image amongst girls.

Female infanticide programmes should include strategies to modify and liberalize the traditional cultural values that are strongly held by the affected communities. For any such program to be effective, it must cultivate in the affected communities more positive attitudes and acceptance of social change, particularly in relation to girl children. Such an intervention program should target middle socio-economic groups in which the tendency and probability of female infanticide is supposed to be higher.

Moreover, an effective way to tackle female feticide is to forbid the use of technological advances, such as ultra-sound machines, to establish the sex of fetuses, so as not to pre-determine the fate of female infants or encourage selective abortion.

Lastly, IGOs could provide yearly reports on how the issue is evolving in the world, focusing both on the achievements of nations that are progressing on the issue, but also on the lack of progress of others. They could also monitor if the solutions are working so as to understand if they are effective.

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