

Knowledge and perception among anganwadi worker regarding gender discrimination and female foeticide

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ABSTRACT

The present investigation was undertaken to know the perception of Anganwadi workers regarding female foeticide on a sample of 100 respondents. The sample was selected from ICDS projects, Jammu and Gandhinagar. Random sampling technique was used to draw a sample for the study. A self devised interview schedule was used as a tool for data collection. The results revealed that majority of the respondents were aware of the prevalence of gender discrimination. They were also aware about the declining sex ratio and repercussions of missing girls. Contributing factors for son preference found were like sons bring dowry, perform last rites, support provider in old age and carry on the family lineage. Awareness of AWW's regarding Medical Termination of Pregnancy and Pre-natal diagnostic techniques (PNDT) act was negligible. They were not aware about guidelines and legal aspects regarding PNDT.

KEY WORDS : Anganwadi, Foeticide, Amniocentesis, Foetus

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The Atharvaveda says, "The birth of a daughter, grant it elsewhere, here grant a son". This saying in the holy scripture sums up the Indian attitude towards female children who are subjected to multifarious travails inflicted by the society on them. The girl child in India has been the most vulnerable for centuries and is even today, vulnerable to the insults of deprivation as well as discrimination. Whatever the natural biological laws of human reproduction had given mankind for balancing its natural sex ratio, has been taken away by manmade laws, customs, traditions, religions, beliefs and sophisticated medical technology, resulting in a lower status in society for girls as well as women.

Girls are often treated as inferior and are socialized to put themselves last, thus undermining their self-esteem. In India, the girl child is considered economically as a bad bargain for parents.

They considered son as asset and daughter as a burden (Prasad, 2001). According to religious belief, a man can't attain Moksha unless he has a son to light his funeral pyre (Yadav and Badri, 1997). The major reason for not wanting girls and the gender discrimination is that bringing up girls is a costly affair and wasted investment as they have to be married off and arranging for dowry is difficult (Srivastava *et al.*, 2005). For too long they have been facing discrimination throughout their entire journey

from cradle to grave. It is agonizing to know that the gender bias and deep rooted prejudice and discrimination against girl child are now found to begin in the womb that face the peril of pre-birth elimination *i.e.* female foeticide which is increasing alarming day by day and dowry was found as the major reason for it (Walia, 2005). This is dualistic attitude towards the girl child as on one hand she is deprived of rights and equal opportunities for development (Sampark, 2008).

The latest advances in modern medical sciences- the tests like amniocentesis and ultra sonography are being misused. These tests were originally designed for the detection of gender related congenital abnormality of the foetus which are now being abused particularly in India, to detect the sex of the foetus with the intention of getting it aborted if it happens to be a female. Laws banned this heinous practice but still this abuse of girl child is violation of her human right to life and continue to prevail not only in India but also across many countries. Studies revealed that many Indian women in UK (United Kingdom) came to India to abort their female fetuses.

The increasing incidence of female foeticide has led to a drastic decrease in the number of girls to boys in India in the 0-6 age group. The practice of eliminating female foeticide is believed to be one of the main reasons for the adverse child sex ratio (Sen, 2002). Pre-birth

elimination of females found to be increased along with the increase in female literacy rates (Chattopadhyay, 2003). It seems to be more prevalent in urban areas than in rural areas, but the gap is increasingly decreasing because of easy availability of sex determination tests in rural areas. Recent data for the 20 years in India shows a loss of over 10 million girls (Banerjee, 2008).

Declining sex ratio is now increasingly recognized as a complex and an urgent problem and needs to be addressed head on as it will lead to serious demographic imbalance and social consequences. Beset with male child syndrome in the socio-economic set up in Jammu and Kashmir, one girl out of 7 female babies is eliminated in Jammu district of the state worsening child sex ratio (George, 2008).

The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, flagship programme of the Ministry of Women and Child Development launched in 1975 is one of the prime programmes for women and children in the age group of 0-6 years. The Anganwadi worker is the grass root level worker. One AWW is allotted to a population of 1000. She is the key workers in delivery of services to the masses like regular health check-up, immunization, health education, non-formal pre-school education. Her services can be utilized for gender related work.

Keeping in view the above said facts, the study was planned to know the perception of Anganwadi workers regarding gender discrimination and female foeticide. The study focused on socio-cultural factors that have traditionally undervalued daughters as compared to sons and in order to examine as to what extent AWW have the knowledge about prenatal diagnostic technique prevention and misuse of the act. The study was conducted on Anganwadi workers as they continuously track women and young children through home contacts. Their services at the Anganwadi centres offer a unique opportunity to address the problem of missing girls and gender inequalities/discrimination as the ICDS programme is universal and it has the inherent strength to ensure wider coverage.

RESEARCH METHODS

Sample:

The sample for the present investigation consisted of 100 Anganwadi workers from Jammu district comprising two urban ICDS project *i.e.* Jammu city and Gandhinagar.

Sample technique:

Random sampling technique was used to select the sample for the study.

Tool used for data collection:

Selected subjects were contacted personally for data collection. Data were collected using self-devised interview schedule keeping in mind the objectives of the study so that it could be used to get in depth information from the respondents in order to find the required results. Before finalizing the interview schedule, pre-testing was done on 10 Anganwadi workers to see appropriateness of the interview schedule in the form of addition and deletion and then interview schedule was finalized and applied on the respondents.

Data analysis:

The responses obtained were coded, tabulated and percentages were calculated to derive detailed information about the perception of Anganwadi workers regarding female foeticide.

Year of experimentation: 2010

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The perception of the respondents towards the practice of female foeticide was drawn out by using interview schedule. The reasons for indulgence in this illegal and immoral act were known from the respondents themselves. The following main aspects were investigated and related findings are detailed out below:

Table 1 reveals meaning of gender discrimination according to the respondents. Majority (60%) of the respondents responded that gender discrimination means discrimination between son and daughter, on the other hand 58 per cent responded for son preference and 20 per cent responded that gender discrimination means avoidance of girls.

Fig. 1 gives an insight into reasons for declining sex ratio. Overwhelming majority of (75%), cited dowry as the main cause for the declining sex ratio. For them marriage had become an expensive affair. The greater

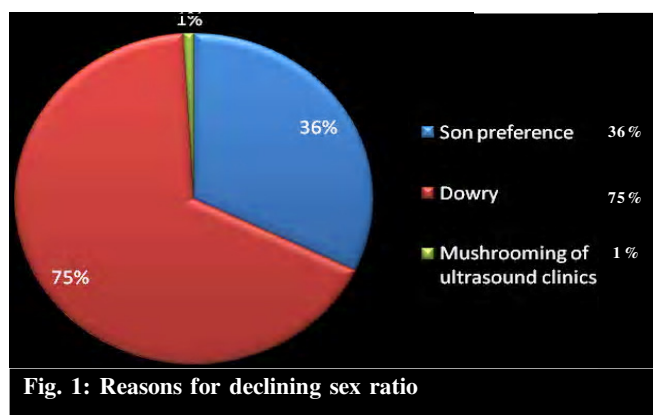


Fig. 1: Reasons for declining sex ratio

Table 1: Respondents perception towards gender discrimination

Perception of gender discrimination	Nos.	Percentage (%)
Son preference	58	58
Avoidance of girls	20	20
Discrimination between son and daughter	60	60
Total	-	-

*Multiple choice

the number of daughters more was the economic burden on the parents. 36 per cent respondents found son preference as the factor to the declining sex ratio. A negligible (1%) of respondents responded that the mushrooming of ultrasound clinics was one of the factors for the declining sex ratio.

Decline in the number of females can have serious repercussions for the future. The respondents were asked about the possible consequences. The various problems foreseen owing to increased female foeticide include non-availability of brides, rise in sexual violence against women, lack of female workforce (Ghosh *et al.*, 2005). The various repercussions as perceived by the respondents are presented here.

Table 2 depicts non-availability of brides (90%) as the major repercussions of missing girls followed by lack of female workforce (5%) and increased rates of crime against women (5%).

Table 2: Repercussions of missing girls

Repercussions	Numbers	Percentage (%)
Non-availability of brides	90	90
Lack of female work force	5	5
Increased rates of crime against women especially sexual violence	5	5
Total	100	100

Fig. 2 gives an insight into reasons for son preference as perceived by AWW's. The various reasons found for son preference were that son is preferred because a

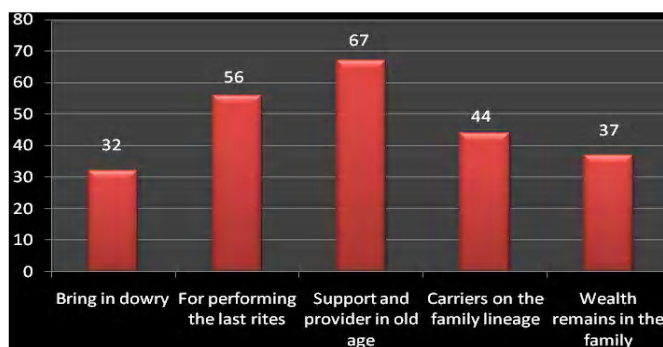


Fig. 2: Reasons for son preference

son is seen as a support provider in old age (67%) and for performing the last rites. Similar results revealed by a study carried out by Nayar (1995). 44 per cent responded that son carriers on the family lineage and 37 per cent were of the view that wealth remains in the family.

Fig. 3 presents the awareness of AWW's regarding various sex determination tests. Ultrasound as a method of sex determination was known to 85 per cent respondents. Aminocentesis (91%) and chronic villi biopsy (12%) were mentioned by the AWW's as a method of determining the sex of the foetus.

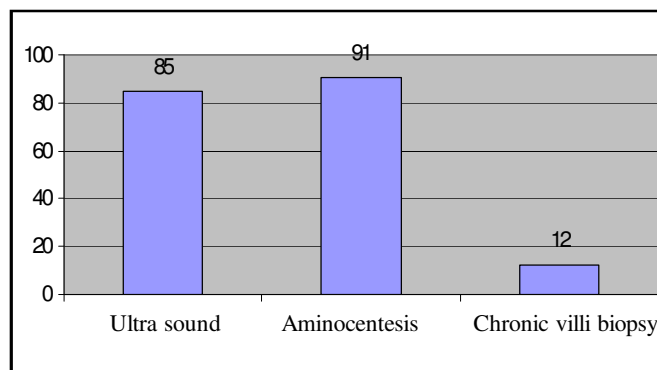


Fig. 3: Awareness related to various sex determination tests

Fig. 4 highlights the various sources of information about the sex determination methods as reported by *viz.*, AWW's. Friends/Relatives (72%), Training Institute (80%), Media (61%) and Doctors/Private clinics (91%).

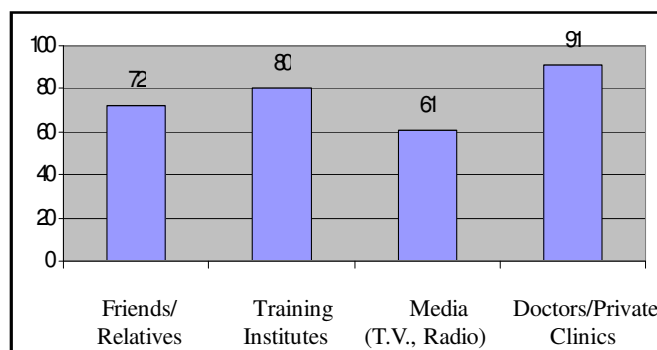


Fig. 4: Sources of information about the sex determination method

Knowledge of functionaries about the PNDT act:

Table 3 provides details regarding the knowledge of functionaries about the PNDT Act and its provisions. It reveals that there is a serious knowledge gap in the AWW about the provisions of the PNDT Act which needs immediate attention.

Table 3: Knowledge of functionaries about PNDT Act

Awareness about the provision under PNDT Act	No (%)	Yes (%)
It prohibits sex selection before or after conception	38	-
No lab or clinic to conduct ultrasound for sex	26	-
Sex of the foetus not to be disclosed to pregnant women or concerned by words, signs or method	40	-
No advertisement on availability of services	20	-
Prenatal diagnostic techniques to be conducted by Qualified persons.	30	-
Total	-	-

Perception of AWW about measures to combat the declining sex ratio:

Fig 5 presents the perception of AWW about measures to combat the declining sex ratio. The various measures suggested to combat it included creating awareness about the declining sex ratio (44%), creating awareness about the act (68%), creating awareness about the value of girl child (49%) and stringent measures to implement the PNDT Act (71%), imposing ban on the use of sex determination tests in Government and private hospitals.

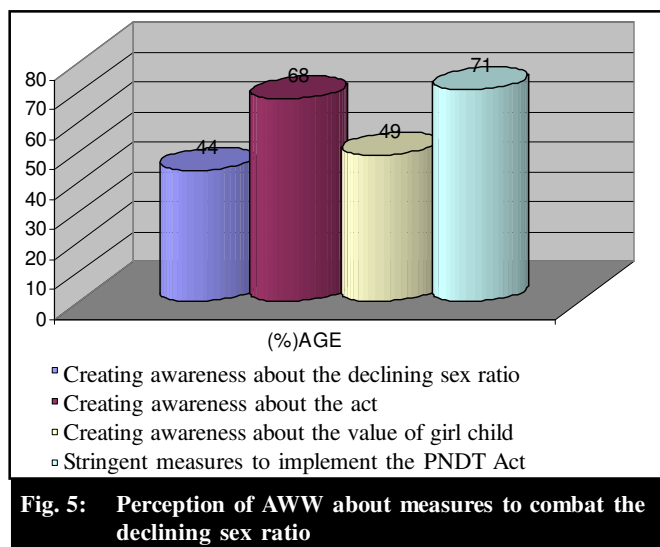


Fig. 5: Perception of AWW about measures to combat the declining sex ratio

Conclusion:

Declining sex ratio is an issue of grave concern in India. Family and social pressures to produce a son are immense. Sons are desired for reasons related to kinship, inheritance, marriage, identity, status, economic security and lineage. This preference for boys cuts across caste and classlines and results in discrimination against girls even before they are born. In a gross misuse of the technology that facilitates prenatal diagnosis of any

potential birth defects and associated conditions, female fetuses are selectively aborted after such prenatal sex determination. This is happening across the country inspite of a massive influx of legal regulations banning the same. From the results of the study on the knowledge and perception of Anganwadi workers regarding female foeticide, it appears that dowry, son preference and mushrooming of ultrasound clinics were the contributing factors to the declining sex ratio. Results revealed that majority of the respondents perceived non-availability of brides as the major repercussion of missing girls followed by an increased rate of crimes against women and lack of female workforce. AWW were aware regarding various sex determination tests and sources of their information about these tests were friends, relatives, training institute and media respectively but it was found that there is a serious knowledge gap in the AWW's about the provisions of PNDT Act which needs immediate attention.

Recommendations/Suggestions:

- Programmes on issues related to girl child should be organized for Anganwadi workers.
- Anganwadi workers should be made aware about various schemes launched by the state/central government for girl child as these people have mass contacts and they can pass this information to others.
- Data on child sex ratio available with Anganwadi workers should be updated continuously which provide valuable information for action by the convergence of services of all sectors under one roof.
- Sensitization programmes on prevention of female foeticide should be organized.
- Campaign should be launched against female foeticide to create awareness to curb the problem and synergize government initiatives to promote women oriented programmes.
- Anganwadi workers should popularize central/state government schemes in operation in the state through which economic benefits accrue to those families who have daughters.

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