

Girl child in India: A situational analysis

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Abstract: Since 2012, the 11th of October is celebrated as the "International Day of the Girl Child" around the world. The goal of this day is to bring attention to and raise awareness about the numerous issues that girls face, such as female foeticide, forced marriage, girl trafficking, unequal treatment in the fields of education, legal rights, medical care, and even her right to life, as well as the strategies that promote the realization of their human rights. India alone accounts for 20 percent of the world's children and thus has a significant influence in the achievement or non-performance of global child rights and gender equality targets as outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Simply put, if India fails to meet its goals, the entire world will fail. The current study tries to examine the condition of the female child in India in light of this backdrop.

Key Words: International Day of the girl child, Issues of the girl child, Status of the girl child in India, COVID 19 pandemic.

1. INTRODUCTION:

India has come a long way in terms of preserving democracy, alleviating poverty, and raising living standards. We are advancing tremendously as a nation in all areas. India is also becoming a global force to be reckoned with, but Amartya Sen's key work illustrates the other side of the tale that we are ignoring. Sen estimated that about 100 million girls were aborted before birth, slain post birth, or ignored to death (1). This casts doubt on India's overall progress and achievements, given that half of the country's children are girls who fight to live even before they are born.

2. PROBLEMS OF GIRL CHILD :

Every step of a female child's path is filled with challenges and threats that keep her from moving forward. Even before she is born, the female child is confronted with an insurmountable challenge: her parents' decision not to end her life through illegal abortion. If she exhibits ambition later in life, she suffers rejection, discrimination, and fear. It's critical to acknowledge these issues in depth in order to address them. This will allow society to find strategies for transforming today's girls into tomorrow's healthy, productive and happy women.

Survival: Article 6 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (CRC) states all the children have a right to live and makes the government responsible ensuring each child survives and develops to its fullest potentials (2). It further places special emphasis on child's right to proper medical care, nutritious food, safe drinking water along with access to clean and safe environment (3). However, in India where prejudice against the girl child starts even before it comes out of mother's womb fulfilling these requisites looks like a distant dream. A sharp decline in the child sex ratio, a measure per 100 males is a matter of serious concern. In this context, the 2011 census deserves special attention because it recorded the sex ratio of 914 in the age group 0-6 years which was the lowest ever sex ratio on record (4). These alarming statistics are the result of the practice of female foeticide, in which a girl child is attacked before birth or killed after birth, a practice known as Female Infanticide.

Discrimination and Gender Bias: In India, cruel and deliberate neglect of the girl child has the support of the religious and traditional practices. If the female foetus survives numerous ways are devised to discriminate the girl child. Highlighting the fact that a large number of girls are malnourished because of the social bias that prefers sons over daughter, a research paper published in the Oxford Economic in 2011 found that breastfeeding duration was the lowest for daughters and those without older brothers because their parents were trying for a son (5). As she grows the girl

child is often withdrawn from school to lend a helping hand to mother at home and shares the responsibilities of the household, i.e. cleaning, cooking, washing, looking after siblings, collecting fodder, and fuel and fetching water. Gender bias does not stop at childhood but also continues during adolescence at time of decision making, making carrier choices and even marriage.

Child Marriage: Child marriage is still prevalent in modern India as the most heinous practice depriving girls of their childhood. Adolescent pregnancy increases maternal deaths, infant mortality, gender inequality, poverty, school dropout, and sexual exploitation of girls, among other things. World Health Organization in one of its studies asserted that "Child marriage has multiple consequences in terms of the health, mental and socio- economic situation of adolescent girls"(6). In terms of health, adolescent mothers have a much higher neonatal mortality rate (70.8%) than adult mothers (7). Similarly, on a socioeconomic level, child marriage has an impact on the girl child's well-being, as it has been observed that early marriage prevents girls from completing their studies, which in turn prevents them from pursuing their dreams and breaking out of poverty.

Girl Child Trafficking: Child trafficking is a global problem. Child trafficking is described by UNICEF as "any person under the age of 18 who is recruited, transported, transferred, harboured, or received for the purpose of exploitation, whether within or outside of a nation" (8). In India, many children are trafficked not only for prostitution but also for other inhuman practices such as household workers, occupational labour, begging, marriages, and organ trafficking. Owing to the higher demand in the sex trade sector, the girl child is preferred over the male child for trafficking purposes.

Abuse, Exploitation and Violence: Both inside and outside the home, the girl child is particularly vulnerable to abuse, assault, and exploitation. It has been commonly recognised that the number of crimes committed against girls has increased over time. Because of relatives' so-called pragmatism for the family honor, the majority of cases are unreported, the available statistics does not portray the full picture. The girl child is subjected to rape, trafficking, sexual exploitation, child labour, and beggary, among other forms of violence. It's difficult to determine the scope of the problem without gender-disaggregated statistics on abuse, exploitation, and violence against girls. Since some parts of child protection flourish on illegality and secrecy, such as violence, abuse, exploitation, and trafficking, it is difficult for the government to collect reliable data.

Education: Universal primary education, as well as the eradication of gender disparities in primary and secondary education, has been acknowledged as the beginning point for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in society. Children under the age of 14 are entitled to free and compulsory education under the Right to Education Act of 2010. This Act also encourages girls to finish their elementary education. These efforts, however, are hampered when youngsters drop out of school before completing their education. According to a research conducted by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, 3.7 percent of children aged 6 to 10 years and 5.2 percent of adolescents aged 11 to 13 years had either dropped out of school or had never attended any school in 2018. Early marriage, home chores, aiding family members, caring for siblings, remote schools, a lack of female teachers, and absence of adequate toilet facilities are among the factors that contribute to girls dropping out.

COVID 19 Pandemic: The Covid-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the lives of people from all walks of life. While the direct consequences of Covid-19 on hospitalization and mortality have gotten a lot of attention, the methods in which it has affected the young have gotten less. However, the epidemic has had an indirect impact on the young, and it is these indirect effects that pose a serious threat to the generation's future, particularly for the most vulnerable. The effects may be seen in almost every aspect of their lives, and for girls and young women, the implications are far more severe than for boys (9). Lockdowns and abrupt school closure have compelled students to shift to online system and the ones who lack the devices, network access, or technological skills needed to access education, putting them at a higher risk of dropping out permanently. Thus putting girls at greater risk of getting married early and increased violence. Girls also outnumbered boys in terms of increased symptoms of mental illness, and limited access to health services, including those that the young need the most: menstrual health supplies, and other reproductive care, and mental health counselling (10)

3. SPECIAL INITIATIVE FOR GIRL CHILD :

Child Helpline: Child line with a magical number 1098 is a unique 24-hour emergency phone service which provides assistance to children in distress.

UJWALA Scheme: A comprehensive scheme launched in 2007 by the Government of India with an aim to prevent trafficking and to provide assistance the victims of trafficking especially women and girls in the form of rescue, rehabilitation and reintegration into the mainstream.

Kishori Shakti Yojana: A holistic programme focusing on all the aspects of adolescent girls' development. The aim of the scheme is to increase awareness regarding hygiene, health, nutrition, life skills in short preparing girls for participating in the society in a meaningful manner.

Beti Bachao – Beti Padhao: Launched on 22nd January 2015 is a social initiative aiming at generating awareness among the masses regarding various programmes rolled out by the Government of India to empower girl child with a special focus on improving the current child sex ratio.

4. CONCLUSION:

The marginalization of girls is a worldwide phenomenon. In Indian society, the female child has been the victim of various forms of discrimination at all stages, impacting her physical, sociocultural, and mental well-being. Despite the fact that various schemes, summits, conferences, and events have been held to promote girl child rights, male children are preferred over girls, and female children are discarded. It is fair to say that the century-old prejudice against girls can only be overcome by changing society's attitude as a whole.

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