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**AN ATTITUDINAL ANALYSIS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS IN MADURAI CITY ON ABORTION AND FEMALE FOETICIDE**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Modern technology has ushered in many changes, one of which is a new means to determine the gender composition of families. Amartya Sen has called it a “technological revolution of a revolutionary kind”. The declining Child Sex Ratio in India point to the use of technology to determine the gender composition. This decline cannot be simply viewed as a medical or legal issue. History has revealed that this practice was embedded within the social construction of patriarchy that increased the value of the male and devalued the female and is reinforced by tradition, culture and religion. Hence, this problem needs to be located in its social context for any solutions to be found.*

**Keywords:** *Child Sex Ratio, gender composition, abortion and female foeticide*

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**1. Introduction**

Modern technology has ushered in many changes, one of which is a new means to determine the gender composition of families. Amartya Sen has called it a “technological revolution of a revolutionary kind”. The declining Child Sex Ratio in India point to the use of technology to determine the gender composition. This decline cannot be simply viewed as a medical or legal issue. History has revealed that this practice was embedded within the social construction of patriarchy that increased the value of the male and devalued the female and is reinforced by tradition, culture and religion. Hence, this problem needs to be located in its social context for any solutions to be found.Therefore, this study aims to analyse:

* the attitude of youth towards abortion and female foeticide
* the gender differences in such perceptions
* the variations in attitude due to socio- economic and cultural background

**2. Literature Review**

**2.1 Child Sex Ratio in India**

The overall sex ratio in 2011 has improved by ten points to 943 against 933 in 2001. However, the child sex ratio in India has declined by 8 points from 927 in 2001 to 919 in 2011. The child sex ratio has continued to decline over the last five decades (976 in 1971 to 919 in 2011). The child sex ratio for rural areas at the national level was 946 while it was 900 in the urban areas in 2011. The falling child sex ratios in urban areas are a matter of serious concern as it implies adoption of technology to determine the gender composition of families.

**2.2 Status of Tamil Nadu**

The population sex ratio for Tamil Nadu has increased from 984 females per 1,000 males in 2001 to 995 in 2011. Population sex ratios have declined in seven districts during this decade while all the districts of Tamil Nadu had registered an increase in the previous decade. The southern districts with the significant exceptions of Madurai, Ramanathapuram and Theni report population sex ratios (number of females per 1000 males) in excess of 1000. The child sex ratio for Tamil Nadu has increased from 942 in 2001 to 946 in 2011**.**

 **Table 1.** **District-wise Child Sex Ratio in Tamil Nadu (2001 and 2011)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **S. No.** | **Districts** | **Child Sex Ratio in the Age Group 0-6 Years** |
| **2001** | **2011** | **Change in Points** |
| 1. | Ariyalur | 949 | 892 | -57 |
| 2. | Chennai | 972 | 964 | -8 |
| 3 | Coimbatore | 968 | 963 | -5 |
| 4 | Cuddalore | 957 | 895 | -62 |
| 5 | Dharmapuri | 826 | 911 | +85 |
| 6 | Dindigul | 930 | 942 | +12 |
| 7 | Erode | 939 | 956 | +17 |
| 8 | Kancheepuram | 961 | 967 | +6 |
| 9 | Kanniyakumari | 968 | 961 | -7 |
| 10 | Karur | 930 | 946 | +16 |
| 11 | Krishnagiri | 905 | 924 | +19 |
| 12 | Madurai | 926 | 939 | +13 |
| 13 | Nagapattinam | 963 | 961 | -2 |
| 14 | Namakkal | 889 | 913 | +24 |
| 15 | Perambalur | 937 | 913 | -24 |
| 16 | Pudukkottai | 955 | 959 | +4 |
| 17 | Ramanathapuram | 964 | 967 | +3 |
| 18 | Salem | 851 | 917 | +66 |
| 19 | Sivaganga | 952 | 961 | +9 |
| 20 | Thanjavur | 959 | 957 | -2 |
| 21 | The Nilgiris | 979 | 982 | +3 |
| 22 | Theni | 891 | 937 | +46 |
| 23 | Thiruvallur | 957 | 954 | -3 |
| 24 | Thiruvarur | 970 | 962 | -8 |
| 25 | Thoothukkudi | 953 | 970 | +17 |
| 26 | Tiruchirappali | 955 | 952 | - 3 |
| 27 | Tirunelveli | 957 | 964 | +7 |
| 28 | Tiruppur | 954 | 951 | -3 |
| 29 | Tiruvannamalai | 948 | 932 | -16 |
| 30 | Vellore | 943 | 944 | +1 |
| 31 | Viluppuram | 961 | 938 | -23 |
| 32 | Virudhunagar | 958 | 962 | +4 |

Source: Census Data

In 2001, 11 out of the 32 districts has a CSR lesser than 946, in 2001, while in 2011, 13 districts have a CSR below 960 (Table 1). Infanticide and foeticide has resulted in millions of missing women. Though there are efforts by the government and voluntary agencies to change the attitude of men and women in these areas, this practice is slowly spreading to neighbouring taluks and to other communities. The 2011 census confirms this.

**2.3 Status of Madurai**

Madurai district has a lower population sex ratio as well as child sex ratio (939) where there is considerable evidence from the field of the widespread practice of female infanticide. It is quite common among certain communities even to this day while education had slowly brought about awareness that it is equivalent to murder and illegal and hence should be avoided. Therefore, female infanticide had a particular caste and class composition which makes it qualitatively different from the urban phenomenon of female foeticide[[1]](#footnote-1). But the mindset that daughters are an expensive burden to bear remained so much so that they stopped with one child if the first was a daughter as they did not want to risk another daughter in the family. It is for this educated group who considered infanticide as a barbarous practise that technology has come as a boon.

The extent to which these geographical and cultural negative vibes have influenced future generations can be gauged by studying the prevailing attitude among the youth towards abortion, which in turn, will indirectly reveal innate attitudes on selective abortion as it will have a long-term impact on population sex ratios.

**3. Methodology and data Analysis**

**3.1 Collection of Data**

The present study is mainly based on primary data. A questionnaire was prepared and validated by experts from the fields of Psychology, Sociology and Economics who critically examined the various items. A pilot study was carried out on 50 students taken at random and based on the feedback from experts and student respondents, the necessary corrections were made before the questionnaire was finalised. The required samples were chosen by adopting a three stage stratified sample design with colleges as the first stage, subjects learnt as the second stage and gender as the third stage sample unit. The required information was collected from the under graduate and post graduate students studying in Colleges affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University in Madurai District. The questionnaire was distributed to the students, after explaining the purpose and nature of the research. The collected questionnaires were edited for ambiguity and completeness. The incomplete questionnaires were removed from the analysis and responses of 450 students (228 girls and 222 boys) were considered.

**3.2 Tools of Data Analysis**

An abortion attitude scale was developed and standardized with the help of an expert in order to perceive the levels of knowledge and convictions regarding abortions in general and sex selective abortions in particular. Equal number of statements (4) on different areas (viz) general facts on abortion, laws related to abortion, abortion and health and social practises related to abortion were framed to estimate the knowledge levels of the students. Gender differences in knowledge and attitude towards abortion was analysed by taking the Median value and categorising the counts above Median as High and below as Low. The counts were then converted into percentages to enable comparison.

Equal number of statements (4) on various aspects such as Technology, Health, Human Rights, Status of the girl child, Religion, General Opinion, Female Infanticide and Sex Selective Abortion were given and inclination towards abortion was estimated with the help of scores. Gender differences in attitudes were studied taking deviations from the scale median.

The perceived status was given by the students as low, medium and high which were given scores as 1,2 and 3 respectively.

The actual status of the student was computed by assigning scores as 1,2,3 and 4 for high, medium, low and Nil respectively to the different activities listed here. The various activities included for ascertaining the actual status of the student are: studies, study tours, going out with friends, visiting friend's home, choice of career, use of phone, watching TV, reading story books, use of Internet, use of computer, playing outside with friends, use of leisure time, choice of food, choice of dress, choice of life partner, socialising with opposite sex, going to movies with friends, choice of friends , extracurricular interests like dance, music, sports and shopping

Multiple regression analysis was applied to find out the influence of select variables on the attitude of the respondents towards abortion and infanticide.

**4. Results and Discussion**

**4.1 Gender differences in knowledge on abortion**

Gender differences in knowledge on abortion was analysed by taking the percentage counts above the Median value as High and below Median as Low. The knowledge levels on abortion thus computed for male and female students are presented in Table 3.

**Table 2. Knowledge levels on Abortion by Sex in Percentages**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Areas | Male | Female | Overall |
| Low | High | Total | Low | High | Total | Low | High | Total |
| General | 56 | 44 | 100 | 48 | 52 | 100 | 51 | 49 | 100 |
| Social Practises | 89 | 11 | 100 | 78 | 22 | 100 | 83 | 17 | 100 |
| Law and Abortion | 69 | 31 | 100 | 74 | 26 | 100 | 72 | 28 | 100 |
| Health and Abortion | 100 | 0 | 100 | 100 | 0 | 100 | 100 | 0 | 100 |

Source: Compiled from Primary Data

Irrespective of gender, the overall knowledge levels on abortion and related aspects are low. Both male and female students exhibit total ignorance regarding implications of abortion on the health of individuals (ie) they seem to lack knowledge on the biological aspects whereas they are more familiar with the legal aspects related to this. This is probably due to the fact that most Science and Arts colleges in Tamil Nadu have Human Rights in their curriculum.

The girls reveal a higher level of awareness of social practices related to abortion as such things that happen within the family are done quietly as female foeticide is not seen as an act appreciable in others’ eyes, but committed for the welfare of the family. The girls become aware of such things when they are made to step in to perform household duties and to care for the women who had undergone such a procedure while the boys are kept in the dark even though it happens in a gendered structure with the male in authority. Male students know more information related to laws as compared to their female counterparts, though not significantly.

**4.2 Gender differences in attitudes towards abortion:**

The scores in favour of abortion when viewed from different perspectives like health, human rights, religion, technology and status of the girl child as well as their attitudinal scores towards female infanticide and female foeticide have been added for each individual and then categorised as high and low based on the median score. The **g**ender differences perceived in attitude towards abortion is furnished in Table No. 4.

**Table 3. Attitude towards Abortion by Sex in percentages**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Variables** | **Sex** | **Low** | **High** | **Total** |
| Overall | Male  | 43 | 57 | 100 |
| Female | 60 | 40 | 100 |
| General | Male  | 59 | 41 | 100 |
| Female | 63 | 37 | 100 |
| Human Rights | Male  | 39 | 61 | 100 |
| Female | 62 | 38 | 100 |
| Religion | Male  | 53 | 47 | 100 |
| Female | 56 | 44 | 100 |
| Female Foeticide | Male  | 53 | 47 | 100 |
| Female | 54 | 46 | 100 |
| Female Infanticide | Male  | 48 | 52 | 100 |
| Female | 64 | 36 | 100 |
| Status of girl child | Male  | 61 | 39 | 100 |
| Female | 48 | 52 | 100 |
| Health | Male  | 64 | 36 | 100 |
| Female | 53 | 47 | 100 |
| Technology | Male  | 59 | 41 | 100 |
| Female | 58 | 42 | 100 |

Source: Compiled from Primary Data

The overall attitude in favour of abortion is higher among the males as their scores are higher in five out of the eight different variables taken for study. They are inclined towards abortion as they perceive a lower status for the girl child and are also less influenced by religious values and hence higher scores towards female infanticide and female foeticide while compared to the girls. The male students are very strongly oriented towards abortion when it is looked at in the perspective of human rights. They feel that just as a person / couple has the right to decide on the number of children in the family, the gender composition of the family unit is also a family decision and depends on individuals.

The female students are in favour of abortion while perceived from the standpoint of health and technology compared to their male counterparts. This is because they feel that technological developments in medicine have removed the risk to health and hence the health aspect is not a deterrent to abortion.

**Diagram 1. Extent of Influence of Chosen Aspects on Attitude towards Female Foeticide**

Source: Compiled from Primary Data

Taking deviations from the scale median, it is clear that though the overall attitude towards abortion is negative, the attitude of students show that they are positively oriented towards using technology and female foeticide.

The perceived status of the girl child justifying sex selective abortions is balanced as the positive scores equal the negative scores. This is a determining factor as it will influence these future parents in their decision to have more than one daughter and could turn the tables in favour of sex selective abortions, even though at this point of time they may feel negatively inclined towards it. It could be taken to mean that 50% of the sample belong to the cat on the wall category and if nature puts them to the test, will seek the aid of modern technology to determine the gender composition of their families.

In order to find out the combined effect of the different variables on attitude of the College students towards abortion, multiple regression coefficients were computed. Since one of the main ideas underlying the present study is to examine whether the determinants vary by chosen factors, 7 models of Multiple Regression have been estimated considering the following aspects:

1. Human rights

2. Religion

3. Sex selective abortion

4. Status of the girl child

5. Health

6. Technology

7. Overall to have an idea about the combined effect.

The estimated abortion model is given as follows:

Y = β0 + β1X1 + β2X2 + β3X3 + β4X4 + β5X5 + β6X6 + β7X7 + β8X8 + β9X9 + β10X10 + U

Where the dependent variable

Y = Abortion

The Explanatory variables for the model were

X1  = Age in completed years

X2  = Sex (Male and Female)

X3  = Branch of study (Humanities and Sciences)

X4 = Family Residence (Urban/ Rural)

X5  = Religion (Hindus/Non-Hindus)

X6  = Monthly Family Expenditure

X7  = Mother’s Education (Years of Schooling)

X8  = College Type (Women’s College and Co-education)

X9 = Perceived Status (low = 1. Medium = 2, High = 3)

X10  = Actual Status – (Total Scores given for various activities)

U = Random error term

 The results of all the above regression models are presented in Table 4 below.

**Table No. 4. Regression results showing the effect of selected variables on Attitude towards Abortion**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Dependent Variable** | **Independent Variable** | **B** | **t** | **Sig.** |
| **Model I****OVERALL** | **Religion (**Hindu / Non Hindu) | -5.313 | -2.436 | .016 |
| **Family Residence (U / R)** | -3.151 | -2.147 | .033 |
| **Mother's Education** | -0.339 | -2.084 | .039 |
| **Model II****STATUS OF GIRL CHILD** | **Religion**  | -1.664 | -2.536 | .012 |
| **Family Expenditure** | -0.00004 | -1.869 | .063 |
| **Model III****HUMAN RIGHTS** | **Religion**  | -0.920 | -1.735 | .085 |
| **Mother's Education** | -0.077 | -1.954 | .052 |
| **Sex (M / F)** | -0.890 | -1.719 | .087 |
| **Branch (H / S)** | -0.720 | -1.824 | .070 |
| **Model IV****RELIGION** | **Religion**  | -1.694 | -2.747 | .007 |
| **Family Residence** | -0.787 | -1.895 | .060 |
| **Model V****SEX SELECTIVE ABORTION** | **Religion** | 1.434 | 2.605 | .010 |
| **Family Residence** | -1.146 | -3.092 | .002 |
| **Actual Status** | -0.028 | -1.987 | .049 |
| **Model VI****HEALTH** | **Family Residence** | -1.013 | -2.427 | .016 |
| **Actual Status** | 0.044 | 2.805 | .006 |
| **Age** | 0.217 | 1.686 | .094 |
| **Model VII****TECHNOLOGY** | **Mother's Education** | -.0095 | -1.872 | .063 |

**4.3 Religion**

The analysis of the impact of the chosen socio-economic variables on the attitude of the students towards abortion clearly reveals that the non-Hindu students have a lower inclination towards abortion because of their religious beliefs and the belief on the right of the child to live. Thus it is evident from the analysis that the non-Hindu students are against abortion compared to their Hindu counterparts. However, when sex selective abortion is taken as the dependant variable, non-Hindu students are more inclined towards abortion compared to the Hindu students. Therefore, it could be inferred that though the socio-cultural and religious beliefs prevent the non-Hindu students from favouring abortion while compared to the Hindu students, they directly favour sex-selective abortion. So, it can be stated that the phenomenon of sex selective abortion spreads across religious boundaries. Only the cause and hence the extent of the practice may vary.

**4.4 Place of Residence**

The attitude of students hailing from rural areas is negatively inclined to abortion as compared to their urban counterparts. This is mainly due to strong disapproval to abortion that exists in rural areas – a sort of taboo with a religious flavour, which condemn the recourse to abortion even for victims of rape. The reason behind such a taboo is not that they are against snuffing out a life in its formative stages. If that were so, female infanticide would not be practiced. Abortion is not acceptable to rural people because the traditional techniques – practiced by local midwives are fraught with risks to health and hence considered equivalent to committing suicide. It is the lack of modern medical facilities in rural areas which does not give them any option but to opt for female infanticide. This is supported by the fact that the overall attitude towards abortion is mainly influenced by the sub-groups of health, religion and sex selective abortions.

**4.5 Mother’s Education**

There is a negative relationship between the mother’s education and the attitude of the students towards abortion. i.e. When mother’s education increases, the inclination towards abortion decreases and vice versa. Children get better exposure and knowledge on the economic, health and legal implications from the educated mothers. The economic implications will guide them to control their family size. The health implications will steer them against abortion and the legal implications makes them aware that prevention of pregnancy and not abortion is a matter of right.

**4.6 Actual Status of the student**

As the actual status of the student increases, which can be considered as an indicator for maturity and responsibility, the inclination towards abortion increases but towards sex selective abortion decreases. This reveals that these students are against gender discrimination but that the health aspect should not be a hindrance in carrying on with an unwanted pregnancy.

**4.7 Branch of Study**

Humanities students, especially male students reveal a positive attitude to abortion as being a part of a patrilineal society, they are very particular about their role in decision making and hence are inclined to be more conscious of their rights. Liberty and value for human life are integral principles within the context of human rights. In the domain of female foeticide, these principles conflict. While pro-life supporters condemn as immoral the practise of female foeticide, the parents assert their right to have a family of a particular sex composition (Wertz and Fletcher, 1993). Legal support to discriminatory elimination of life is stated in the PNDT Act. Yet the principle of liberty, voiced as a parental choice to desire a small and sex-defined constituent family, falls in the gambit of criminal choice. Can one human rights principle be privileged over the other when all human rights are inalienable?

**4.8 Family Expenditure**

Family expenditure comes out as a significant variable along with religion only while taking status of the girl child as the dependant variable. As family expenditure increases, inclination towards abortion decreases. This is because those families with higher expenditure/incomes are the ones in which the mother is an educated employed person. Hence, it has the same relation as that of mother’s education to abortion.

Moreover, as family income rises, modern technology becomes affordable which can help to identify the sex of the foetus and eliminate it, if so desired. Thus, it is the desire (attitude) which plays a determining role in sex selective abortions among those who have the purchasing power. Female foeticide is being substituted for female infanticide for whoever can scrounge the finances to avoid having many daughters.

**4.9 Attitude of the current users**

Existing studies reveal that the unwantedness of girl children due to emotional, social, economic costs and a low cultural value manifests itself in selective abortion of the female foetus. This is because a female foetus involves emotional cost such as fear of violence in married life, bride burning, wife beating, divorce and the ensuing stigma. A female child is perceived as an economic and social burden due to dowry and other demands made by her conjugal family as well as having a low cultural value.

Family planning in the official formal jargon means controlling fertility. At the level of the people, it means controlling the number of daughters that the couple has. In most parts of India, two sons constitute the cut-off point for accepting sterilisation. The people seem to be quite puzzled that the government wants the small family norm to be practised and yet opposes the conduct of these tests and subsequent abortions. The people argue that since every family wants at least one son, if not two, the best way to ensure a small family is to go for the test and act according to the results[[2]](#footnote-2)

**4.10 Attitude of the future users**

 The perceived status of the girl child justifying sex selective abortions is balanced. It means that half of the sample population is inclined towards abortion as the youth feel that technology should be used to reduce the future financial burden and thus enhance their standards of living. The male students express that a couple has the right to decide for themselves on the size as well as the gender composition of their families and that anything contrary will be an infringement on their rights. As the principle of liberty and value for human life conflict with each other, there is more than a 50% probability for the principle of liberty to supersede the other value enshrined in human rights as the society gives approval for such a decision by its silence.

**5. Conclusion**

The overall picture that emerges out of this study is that the declining trend in child sex ratio is set to continue as both male and female students exhibit a positive attitude towards female foeticide. There is variation only in their perspectives. The boys are justifying it from the human rights perspective while the girls do it from the health perspective. As a girl child is unwelcome in the Indian society, the current trend of falling sex ratios is set to continue unless there is a reversal in the value of the girl child which has been deeply embedded in the minds of people through repeated affirmations in the form of various religious rituals and practices. A change in attitude can be brought about only if the law of inheritance is in favour of daughters and not sons.

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