

Why Infanticide Happens Almost Exclusively to Girls and Not Boys

Written by Mohammed Adel Chowdhury

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Female infanticide is a form of gendered violence described as part of the “worldwide phenomenon of the devaluation of women” (Bhatnagar and Dube 2005. P.ix). Many definitions exist for the practice of infanticide, with many sharing the view that it is the deliberate killing of a born child within its first twelve months, and much of the variation beyond that refers to the method by which it is done. Tandon and Sharma refer to the use of poisonous chemicals or “deliberate neglect” (2006) in their definition whilst others have mentioned “throat splitting, starvation, smothering and drowning” as common methods of infanticide (Working Group on the Girl Child 2007. P.8). Furthermore, Ryznar seeks to differentiate infanticide with neonaticide by stating the former takes place after the first twenty-four hours of the child’s birth, with the latter taking place within that time-frame (2013. P.459). The definitional nuances are of less importance to the question at hand as they usually refer to the methods and timings related to the killing, whereas the focus of this paper is to explore the reasons why infants, and in particular girls, are killed in the first place. Hence this question transcends the definitional debate and methodological or logistical discrepancies. For the purpose of this paper, however, the definition put forward by Kolloor seems most apt due to its simplicity, describing infanticide as the “killing of an entirely dependent child under “one year of age” who is killed by mother, parents or others in whose care the child is entrusted” (1990).

Warren states that there are “very few cultures in which male infants are more apt to be killed than females” (1985, P.32). In terms of scale Roberts writes that at least “half a million girl children are killed every year because of their sex” (2008. P.80) which has given birth to the notion of ‘missing women’ where over “100 million women are now missing in Asia” (Working Group on the Girl Child 2007. P.22). In India alone, the number of ‘missing women’ totals 40 million (Gill and Mitra-Khan 2009. P.686) whilst Venkatramani writes that “India is one of a handful of countries where female infant mortality exceeds that of the male- notwithstanding the fact that the female child is biologically stronger at birth” (1986. P.125). Female infanticide is argued to reflect the “social attitudes to the relative economic value of females” within a “context of the restriction of female roles to the home/private sphere” (2008.P.80). Hom writes that “infanticide has satisfied important familial, economic and societal needs” (2001. P.139) and this is typified through marital practices such as ‘dowry’ and ideas such as ‘son-preference’ which will both be expounded upon later in this paper. The attitude behind female infanticide is “rooted in a complex set of social, cultural, and economic factors” and each area will be discussed throughout the paper (Tandon and Sharma 2006). A key aim of this paper is to explore this interplay of various levels of explanation as to why it is girls that are killed instead of boys, beginning with the economic circumstances infanticide is most commonly practiced under and the economic implications of killing a girl over a boy. Thereafter the paper will explore the societal structures and policies behind this and how they dictate the economic worth of each sex, whilst later exploring the attitudes that have been embedded in societies where there is a clear gender disparity. While infanticide has “been practiced on every continent and by people on every level of cultural complexity” (Williamson 1978. P.61), this paper will use examples from India and China in developing its analysis as these are the places within which the practise is most commonly associated with (Roberts 2008. P.79). However, upon exploring the ideas and structures behind the gender-preference itself, it will be shown that such attitudes are far more pervasive and evident across the world including more economically developed countries and more advanced western states.

The economic context is a fundamental element in framing the discussion around the causes of female infanticide.

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Infanticide happens in a context of poverty, a primarily economic inhibitor, and hence the choice of killing a female is seen as an economic choice. Mungello writes that “severe poverty and the inability to feed the child” is the primary reason for such an act (2008. P.10). A study by Tandon and Sharma in India found that poverty was one of the main reasons for female infanticide (2006). Roberts corroborates this viewpoint by arguing that infanticide “occurs in India and China because extremes of devaluation of females collude with severe poverty” (2008. P.84). In a state of dire poverty, a couple may have to choose between children or even a female newborn versus the prospect of a son further down the line. With the perception that the family will be unable to accommodate both sexes due to financial cost, a decision is usually then made according to the relative opportunity cost of killing, or rather inhibiting the life, of a boy or a girl. A climate of poverty forces this choice to take place, hence the higher rates of sex-selective infanticide in these places compared with wealthier or further economically developed states where extreme poverty is less common, and basic financial support from the state is afforded along with support mechanisms to parents of children regardless of gender. The defining factor upon which separates the boy from the girl is then viewed through a lens of economic gain and expenditure. Roberts write that the “socially determined roles of females in the home do not easily attract visible revenue” whilst their male counterparts are seen as having far greater earning potential through work and also receipt of dowry upon marriage to a female later in his life (2008. P.81). On the other hand, girls are not seen to earn “cash or other tradeable commodities” and in fact are only seen to “subtract from the sum total of household income” due to their consumption of food and clothing needs (Roberts 2008. P.81). In fact, Tandon and Sharma’s research have revealed a number of instances where husbands force their wives to kill the female child because she is seen as “an economic burden”(2006). This is an example of the female child being “resented for the financial burden she imposes on her parents” and as such, “faces the risk of infanticide” (Penn and Nardos 2003. P.100). This primary assumption of economic burden associated with women is further exacerbated by the perceived “net value (both economic and cultural) of boys” (Gill and Mitra-Khan 2009. P.687) surpassing that of daughters and hence, in a climate of poverty or famine, girls “were the main, if not exclusive victims of infanticide” (Croll 1980. P.24).

Additionally, marriage practices and the role of dowry also sheds light on the perceived economic worth of girls in scenarios such as those mentioned. A dowry is a monetary or valuable-asset based transaction from the family of the bride to that of the groom. Gill and Mitra-Khan state that the “putative purpose of dowry is to compensate the groom’s family for the acquisition of a non-productive dependant” (2009. P.687). Hence it exacerbates the notion that the woman is a financial burden or debt, and in order to balance the debt, a dowry is given to mitigate the lack of earning power associated with the female. Penn and Nardos use the dowry example to illustrate that the “the value of the bride is often measured by how much her parents are willing to pay for her” (2003. P.100). Thus in equating a female with a monetary figure, her value as a human is negated and stripped to that of a commodity or asset, one that is disposable. Hence Bhatnagar and Dube explain dowry to be a “patriarchal capitalist means of devaluing daughters and daughters-in-law as worthless objects, a means by which the natal family rids itself of a female claimant on family wealth, and a quick and easy way of acquiring capital for the marital family” (2005. P.4). This view highlights the predominance of the perception of females being viewed solely in monetary or economic terms, hence explaining their infanticide becomes better understood as an economic decision in the eyes of the perpetrators of the killing. Even historically, “colonial administrators” in the 19th Century understood that the cost of marriage was “the primary cause of infanticide in peasant society” (Sen 2002. P.64), and with the brunt of the costs placed on the family of the female, so too was she the victim in what can be seen as a pre-emptive safeguarding of a family’s, often scarce, wealth. The perception of a female representing a diminishing investment is epitomised by the Chinese phrase labelling daughters as “goods on which money is lost” (Mungello 2008. P.10). Yet for the reasons mentioned, “the crime of female infanticide came to be aligned and associated with the dowry system and continues to be read off as an unfortunate consequence of the dowry system” (Bhatnagar and Dube 2005. P.x). Furthermore, Penn and Nardos found that the majority of families carrying out female infanticide, attempted to justify the practice by arguing that it was “the only possible way to escape the burdens of finding a husband, paying a dowry, and bringing a girl child into a male-craving society where she is not welcome” (2003. P.100). These justifications all contribute to the daughter’s devaluation to such an extent that a girl’s life is of less worth than the finances and effort required by the marriage process.

In addition to daughter devaluation, the notion of ‘son-preference’ is also present amongst societies where female infanticide is commonly practiced. Female infanticide is a manifestation of a deliberate choice to raise sons in lieu of daughters due to the “economic disincentives for having girls” whilst boys “offer greater financial and social benefits

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within kinship structures that are characterized by dowry and patrilinear structures” (Gill and Mitra-Khan 2009. P.693). Furthermore, boys are expected to remain with their parents in old age and assume financial responsibility over them. When the boy marries, his wife then also becomes a means of immediate income via her dowry that can further secure the economic wellbeing of the son’s parents. Hence, it becomes far more lucrative to raise and invest in sons rather than daughters in line with what has been discussed thus far already.

In summary with regards to the economic arguments of why girls suffer the fate of infanticide far more often than boys, practices such as dowry embeds the idea that women are seen as economically burdensome by the new family (hence are compensated for taking her in), whilst the girl is burdensome on her parents who are obliged to provide the dowry itself. So in this case there is economic burden from both sides where a woman is seen as a cost that can, and is ‘accounted for’ within the institution of marriage via a dowry. This dehumanisation of the woman to the level of a commodity, debt, or asset feeds the devaluation of women in light of the perceived economic value of sons. This in turn, manifests itself in a higher perceived value in the birth of boys, and hence the cost of raising females could yield greater return if spent on raising a male. Investment into boys is seen as a secured pension rather than investment into another family by spending on a female. The woman’s diminished economic capacity and earning potential further inhibits her value as an earning agent within the family structure whereas men are able to work to earn for their parents, themselves, and facilitate an injection of capital through marriage. Hence, Venkatramani writes that “a woman is still considered a burdensome appendage. She is an economic drain. She must be exploited or dispensed with as a non-person. Because she crushes her family with marriage and dowry expenses she must be raised- from childhood- in financial and physical neglect” (1986. P.125). In light of this, with morality aside, female infanticide in a situation of dire poverty or uncertain future financial welfare, is a result of economic planning and a rational decision with regards to investment purposes for the parents. The issue however is that the economic devaluation of females cannot comprehensively provide a fair answer to the question at hand in this paper, as it must be taken further to deduce why females are seen as economically incompetent and unable to act as a positive income generator for the families involved. In order to address this, one must assess the state of the societal structures in place as to whether they inhibit the potential of women to earn and hold a status closer to males with regards to financial independence.

The wider societal structure plays a key role in denoting the female as economically incompetent relative to the male which in turn renders the former less worthy of investment and more at-risk to infanticide due to the economic concerns raised thus far attributed to women in poorer societies where infanticide occurs. What is referred to by Kent as ‘structural violence’, “is not visible in specific events” such as the moments of child killing, but rather it contributes to “systematic shortfalls in the quality of life of certain groups of people”, and in this case, women (2006. P.55). Wage discrimination in the labour force as “female participation in the labour force of South Asia is often discussed in studies of daughter devaluation” (Gill and Mitra-Khan 2009. P.689). However in addition to this, Gill and Mitra-Khan argue that “when most rural South Asian women contribute to the labour force, their contributions are undervalued, which serves to further entrench the devaluation of daughters” (2009. P.690). Examples they give are that of the Bangladeshi textiles and clothing industries where twice as many woman are engaged in this type of work than men; however their salaries are “22-30 percent less than those of their male colleagues” (Gill and Mitra-Khan 2009. P.690). Therefore even if women did enter the labour force, industries like this would continue to perpetuate the notion that they are comparatively deficient in earning potential and thus the opportunity cost of raising a daughter instead of a son is still greater than investing in a son at the expense of a daughter, in economic terms. Although the example used was that of Bangladesh, a relatively poor South Asian country where, similar to India, exhibits a significant number of ‘missing girls’ (as a result of gender-based violence such as infanticide), the gender pay-gap is a global phenomenon present in even the most developed economies in the world. Countries such as Italy and Australia exhibit “greater unpaid workloads for girls than for boys” (Penn and Nardos 2003. P.24) whilst globally, females “work many more hours daily than men” but “own almost none of the world’s wealth” (Penn and Nardos 2003.P.24).

Looking specifically at policies within the Chinese context, it is claimed that the “one-child rule in China appears to be intensifying the problem of abortion, infanticide, and orphanage as parents struggle to fill their one-child quota with a son” (Penn and Nardos 2003. P.27). In coastal areas of China, “40% of couples are permitted a second child if their first is a girl” (Economist 2010). This tacitly implies that due to the devalued nature of the female in the familial system, parents are allowed to ‘try again’ in the hope of having a son who could provide more economic benefit in the

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long-run, which further perpetuates notions of son-preference, and an unwillingness to give birth to daughters. This is an example of what Penn and Nardos argue to be the negative perception of “the legal, social, and economic status of women worldwide” when compared to boys, and as such “many institutions continue to be structured in ways that automatically replicate the unequal treatment and disparate outcomes” (2003. P.28-29).

Globally, girls are faced with far greater barriers to education, a pre-cursor to greater economic independence, than their male counterparts. In fact, the “World Bank reports that two-thirds of the 960 million illiterate people in the world are women” whilst out of the “130 million children who received no primary education in 1990, 81 million were girls” (Penn and Nardos 2003. P.25). Issues such as this both nationally and globally, illustrate the structural violence against women, and have further exacerbated the notion that women are economically inferior to men lending credence to arguments in favour of sons, and ultimately the devaluation of daughters to such a level that in poorer societies female infanticide becomes a seemingly justifiable option. However the structures alone are merely constructs that have arisen from embedded attitudes within society and hence in order to understand the existence of the structures and their role in promoting the assumptions held by those justifying infanticide, these attitudes or ideologies around the role of women and son-preference must be explored. In view of this, we see the role of “structural determinism in the elevation of men above women” and that “there are human-constructed barriers to women’s progression towards inequality” (Roberts 2008. P.85). Structures cannot be solely responsible for the issue of female infanticide as even when practices such as dowries have been made illegal, the practice continued. Hence the attitudes and what Galtung describes as ‘cultural violence’ comes to the fore and continue to perpetuate the assumptions aligned with the practice.

‘Cultural violence’ is described by Galtung as “those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology... that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence” (1990. P.291). In the case of the question at hand, direct violence refers to the act of female infanticide whilst structural violence refers to the same phenomenon as Kent referred to earlier in the paper. One such example of this is the belief that for women, the home is “ideologically and materially the expected focus of their everyday lives” (Bowlby, Gregory and McKie 1997. P.344). Hence this further devalues female input in economic terms and strips them of the right to have access to the earning potential of males, further exacerbating the economic risk-benefit trade-off exhibited by parents who participate in infanticide. In fact, Hom argues that “female infanticide may operate as a terrorist practice of control over women to keep them in their prescribed reproductive role as the bearer of sons” (2001. P.141). This limits their role in society to solely focus on motherhood and as a reproductive entity rather than focussing on the pursuit of monetary gain or greater economic independence. Furthermore, even within this role, at the “familial and societal level, the mother was often subjected to enormous pressure to bear a son or face abuse and humiliation” (Hom 2001. P.141). This is further emphasised by the belief that the “son extends the lineage, enlarges the family tree, provides protection safety and security to the family” (Tandon and Sharma 2006). In addition to this, in Hindu tradition the belief is that he “is necessary for salvation as he alone can light the funeral pyre and perform other death related rites and rituals” of the parents, further embedding the desire for sons over daughters within the psyche of parents (Tandon and Sharma 2006). Along with the diminished economic value of females already discussed in this paper, the role of the son, and exclusive to him, in death rites further reduces the socio-religious perception of females, with the prevalence of the belief that “having only girls in the family amounts to being condemned to a lower caste in the next world” (Working Group on the Girl Child 2007. P.11). With this in mind, Miller claims that “the problem is that son preference is so strong in some areas of India and amongst some classes that daughters must suffer in order that a family’s personal and culturally mandated needs are fulfilled” (1981. P.25).

In conclusion, within a climate of poverty which is where infanticide is most prevalent, the primary decision-making factor in killing girls over boys is an economic choice based on cost-benefit analysis and comparison between the two sexes. In societies where the practise is rife, such as India and China, this leads to the girls being killed in favour of sons. This is done in the face of daughter devaluation, son-preference and socio-economic burdens such as dowry or the one-child policy. These assumptions are a result of societal structures that perpetuate a gender-biased perception of public roles, whilst the structures themselves are products of attitudes towards the female role in familial and public life. However the very perception of a lack of earning power of females, and economic burden is due to the societal structures at play. It is the issues of a lack of female participation and pay disparity, which embed a perception of the economic burden placed upon females. Furthermore these societal issues which cause economic

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disadvantages for females are resonant of attitudes around female roles in society. Hence this paper argues that these attitudes are embedded in the societal structures that influence the cost-benefit analysis of new-born girls leading to their demise as an economically inferior gender. The delicate interplay of attitudes, structures and economics within a context of poverty, is presented by this paper as a comprehensive explanation as to why females, rather than males, are almost exclusively the victims of infanticide.

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