These words reflect a society where girls have no recognition.

This way of looking at girls, prevalent since centuries, surfaced as a huge social problem in the 19th century when it was found that there were fewer number of females in society compared to males. When explored it was found that in some areas and communities, girls were being killed soon after birth. Others brought them up in such a way that the girls did not survive for long and those who survived, had to suffer all their life for being girls.

Many changes were seen in the 20th century. India became independent of British rule and the Indian Constitution guaranteed equal rights to men and women. It guaranteed freedom from all kinds of discrepancies. However, after a few years, figures showed that our attitude towards girls was still not liberal. There was no major change in our thinking about women. They were unwanted earlier and were unwanted now too. In a major part of society, their birth did not bring happiness for the family.

To assess the condition of girls one of the methods is to evaluate the sex ratio. Sex ratio meaning the number of females per 1,000 males. The Census of India informs us about this number. One after the other, all the Census carried out regularly have found that the sex ratio is becoming worse day by day.

With time, clever patriarchal norms also changed. To unmask their cleverness even the sex ratio is being examined from three different directions. All three narrate different stories of a woman’s life - in the total population what is the number of females per 1,000 males; child sex ratio meaning number of girl children to male children in the 0-6 age group; and sex ratio at birth meaning of the children born every year, how many are girls and how many boys. Many a time the total sex ratio creates confusion and hence to look into discrepancies against women or to know their actual population, the child sex ratio or sex ratio at birth is looked at.

We get to see the facts by having a look at the child sex ratio of the last three Census. In 1991, there were 945 girls per 1,000 boys; in 2001, it came down to 927; and in 2011, it declined further to 918 girls per 1,000 boys. In every new Census the population of girls is declining. Compared to the last Census, in 2011, the child sex ratio worsened in 21 states and union territories. There has been decline by three to 79 digits in these states (See sex ratio table of the country).
The child sex ratio states the condition of children in the age group of 0-6. It is clear from this that the number of girls is less. But there could be several reasons for it. It is not clear if the number of girls declined after birth or if lesser numbers of girls were born.

It was found that more boys are born compared to girls. It was also found that more percentage of boys died. This is how nature creates a balance in the number of girls and boys in different periods of life. Based on this, every year the number of girls born per 1,000 boys should be between 943 and 962. According to specialists, the sex ratio at birth in the country should be 948.7; meaning if the sex ratio is less than this, there would be an imbalance in the society and population. The office of India's Registrar General and Census Commission through Sample Registration System (SRS) provides information about sex ratio at birth every three years.

In 2000-2002, the sex ratio at birth was 892 and in 2003-2005 it had declined to 880. However, after 2008 it has been continuously above 900. According to the latest SRS Report, in 2011-2013 the sex ratio at birth meaning the number of girls born per 1,000 boys born was only 909. Two things are clear from this; the first is that the figure of the total number of girls born is unnatural. As this imbalance is not natural, it is clear that there is some unnatural or human interference in it. And this human interference is nothing else other than sex selection.

Technological development gave wings to differences based on gender. In the 1980s, certain technological innovations helped in determining the sex of the foetus in the womb. Following this, it could be decided whether a male child or a female child would be born. There were several techniques available, but the most popular, accessible and low-cost was ultrasound. This technology reached the nooks and corners of the country. Be it in a village in Uttar Pradesh or Bihar, today people know that through this technology the sex of the foetus can be determined. People are spending money to find this out. And those who have more money are now playing with chromosomes too. They are taking the help of medical technology to ensure male chromosomes only, meaning girls are disappearing even before birth and before pregnancy. It is chromosomes of the man-woman (partners/couple) that determines the sex of the child.

According to a United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Report, in 2001-2012, 4.56 lakh girls disappeared at the time of birth almost every year. Although in recent years there has been a decrease in the number of missing girls, yet it is not enough. If we divide the 2001-2012 period into two parts, we get a different picture. Every year in the 2001-2006 period, 5.83 lakh girls disappeared while in the 2007-2012 period, 3.3 lakh girls disappeared. This means approximately four per cent girls are disappearing every year from our population. This figure indicates the number of girls who should have been born naturally. The number of disappearing girls is not the same in all the states. Seventy per cent of the total number of disappearing girls in the period 2001-2012, were from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Maharashtra. (See table on disappearing girls)

Reasons for sex selection

It is not that sex selection started because of technological growth and that if there were was no technology, girls would not have disappeared. But it is true that technology has helped increase the pace of girls disappearing from society. In a patriarchal society where females play second fiddle, certain factors like the lower social significance of women as human beings, decrease in social value of women, utmost desire for a son, giving more importance to boys as compared to girls, religious beliefs giving importance to sons and males etc. make women unwanted in society and are the main reasons for sex selection. In today's time, a reason for sex selection is also the need for fewer number of children by parents. In the desire for less number of children, it is always the desire for male children that rules. Therefore, the technology for sex determination helped in making a designer family- one son or one son and one daughter or two sons. There is much pressure on women also to give birth to sons. This also determines the woman’s status in society and family.

Sex selection is also related to the social milieu. In the state, community and family which is financially stronger, the percentage of disappearing girls is more. Even within a state, sex selection is more prevalent in the area which is more prosperous. The falling sex ratio in these areas is a testimony to this.

The social influence of sex selection is also visible now. In states where the sex ratio is very unequal, violence against women is increasing. As there is a shortage of girls in these states, for the purpose of marriage girls are being bought or trafficked from the poorer states. At times one woman has many husbands. Their social status is reduced to being worse than animals.
Law to stop sex selection

To stop the misuse of technology against women, a law, - the Prenatal Diagnostics Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) (PNDT) Act, came into force in 1994. The objective of the law was to monitor and stop misuse of all those technologies which were being used for sex determination. However, within a few years it was found that technological growth had provided another advantage to those who did not want the birth of girls. It was possible to start deciding whether to have a girl or a boy even before conception. Seeing this, in 2003 a major amendment was made in the PNDT Act. The law now also included those techniques which determined the sex of the child even before conception and it was titled as the Pre-Conception and Prenatal Diagnostics Technique Act (Prohibition of Sex Selection) or PCPNDT Act. According to the law, conducting sex determination tests or getting it conducted, declaring the sex of the foetus or advertising about any kind of such facilities, or sex selection with the use of technology even before conception are an offence.

Despite this law, the business of sex determination has not stopped. One of the reasons for this is society's way of looking at girls as a burden still. Another big reason is that the business of sex determination is keen-witted. While Rs 300-400 is charged for a normal ultrasound, for sex determination tests the charge is between Rs 4,000 to Rs 10,000. If we look at the figures of girls disappearing at birth, it seems as if it is an Rs 2-5 billion business/industry. When the business brings so much money, why would one care for the girls who are disappearing? In a society which is against women, anything can be bargained to earn profit.

Sex selection and abortion

When the issue of sex determination is raised, it somehow gets connected with abortion. A large section of people raises the issue in such a manner that it appears gender-based sex determination is conducted because of abortions being carried out. And they project that because of this the number of girls is reducing. From this argument we get an indication that sex
selection is completely illegal. But at the same time it appears that abortion is also a crime. Hence, often when voices are raised against sex selection, voices against abortion are also raised. Though this mostly happens unintentionally, but still many a time it is found that both the issues are linked with each other.

The fact is that abortion is legal in India since four and a half decades now but there are certain limitations to carrying out abortions. In order to stop deaths and medical problems caused due to unsafe abortions, in 1971 the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act came into force. According to this law, women can safely abort a foetus till 20 weeks of pregnancy. Therefore, we have to first remove from our minds the mistaken belief that abortion is illegal in the country.

Despite it being legal, many women do not have access to safe abortions. Even today, unsafe abortion is the main reason for maternal deaths. About eight per cent of maternal deaths are because of unsafe abortions. According to an estimate, every year, there are 64 lakh abortions taking place in the country. Of this, 36 lakh meaning 56 per cent are unsafe abortions. The right to abortion is closely connected with the health of women and their reproductive rights. Because of sex selection, restrictions have been placed on access to abortions which is in fact putting the lives of women in danger. Their right over their body is being violated.

Now the question is, have sex selective abortions increased with abortions being made legal? The figures do not support this. The number of girls disappearing at birth is only 4.5 per cent of the total abortions happening every year. It means that a large percentage of women go in for abortions because of many other reasons.

It is important here to highlight that this does not mean sex selective abortions should take place. They should stop. However, along with abortion, terms like ‘female foeticide’ and ‘killing in the womb’ should not be used. These terms, though they sway people emotionally, increase other difficulties associated with this issue. Therefore, it is necessary to differentiate between abortions on the one hand and gender-based sex selection and sex selective abortions on the other. The irresponsible use of these words or their commutation, gives rise to many problems.

In a patriarchal family, a woman mostly does not have the right to decide when she should get pregnant and when she should not get pregnant. It is the husband or the elders of the family who decide for her. Therefore, the decision of sex determination and sex selective abortion is also not taken by the woman.

Sex determination and the issue of unwanted girls are related to other issues in a woman’s life. It is associated with the patriarchal thought that women should not have any freedom. As in a patriarchal society women do not have the right to decide on many things, the role of men in sex selection and sex selective abortion becomes very important. It is only with the participation of men that a gender sensitive society can be created where sex selection will be unwelcome.

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