

**When the Unborn Speaks: Female Infanticide and the
Politics of Silence**

By

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Abstract

From the dawn of civilization, societies across the world have been marked by persistent gender-based discrimination, most notably reflected in the rejection of the female unborn. The chapter title, “When the Unborn Speaks: Female Infanticide and the Politics of Silence”, symbolically represents the silenced existence of countless unborn girls whose lives are judged even before birth. Patriarchal ideologies have long fostered dissatisfaction toward the birth of a female child, despite her essential role in sustaining familial and social continuity. Society’s tendency to perceive the female child as a burden rather than a blessing results in abandonment, neglect, and denial of dignity, thereby stripping her of voice and autonomy even before her entry into the world (Sen, 2001).

This silencing is closely intertwined with the lived experience of the mother, who develops an emotional and biological bond with the unborn child from the moment of conception. Mothers frequently endure psychological distress and coercion within oppressive domestic environments shaped by regressive beliefs upheld by senior family members. Such conditions reinforce gender bias within the private sphere, rendering the unborn girl voiceless within the womb itself (UNICEF, 2020). Disturbingly, these practices extend beyond economically disadvantaged groups, as gender-based discrimination is also prevalent among educated and socially privileged sections of society. This persistence underscores that the marginalization of the unwanted unborn is not merely a consequence of poverty but a manifestation of deeply entrenched cultural ideologies that necessitate sustained ethical, educational, and social reform (Kabeer, 2016).

Key words

(Infanticide, Gender Bias, Maternal Trauma, Patriarchy, Demographic Imbalance, Sex-Selective Abortion)

Introduction

In India, across diverse cultural contexts, it is common to hear blessings bestowed upon pregnant women for the birth of a “chand sa beta”, a son likened to the moon for his perceived beauty and value. Such expressions reveal deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes that privilege male offspring while marginalizing the female child. Ironically, while the moon is idealized as flawless, it too bears imperfections, a reality often overlooked in gendered cultural

symbolism. As Virginia Woolf aptly observes, “No need to hurry, no need to sparkle, no need to be anybody but oneself” (*A Room of One’s Own*), a statement that underscores the intrinsic worth of individual existence irrespective of gender (Woolf, 1929).

The persistent imbalance in the female population raises critical questions about how societies systematically marginalize women even before birth. If the foundational roots of society, namely mothers and daughters, are undermined, the aspiration to achieve social progress becomes inherently flawed. The mother, who forms an emotional and biological connection with the child from conception, understands the unborn life long before it enters the world. Yet, society paradoxically demands the birth of sons while simultaneously depending on daughters to sustain lineage and continuity through motherhood. This contradiction reflects a broader socio-cultural crisis, wherein gender bias is normalized and perpetuated across generations, contributing to demographic imbalance and structural inequality (Sen, 2001; Guilмото, 2015). In the form of poetic lines I, the researcher, would like to reveal the voice of an unborn who says to her mother:

“Let me be born in the world

And see the radiant world through your eyes

Let me be in your laps and intensely gaze your happiness in your glamouring eyes

Let not the malicious feelings of the world effect my growth in your enclosed belly

Let me build myself in your natural constructive zone

To your surprise, I would be really beautiful and acute”
(Begum, self composed poem, n.d)

She is the creator and sustainer of life; therefore, her existence must be protected rather than destroyed. Just as sunshine is essential for flowers to bloom, girls are vital to the continuity and humanity of society. This ethical responsibility is strongly emphasized in religious teachings. The Holy Quran explicitly condemns the killing of children due to fear of poverty, stating, “Kill not your children on a plea of want; We provide sustenance for you,” and further declares that such an act is a grave sin (Quran, 6:151). These moral injunctions highlight the sanctity of life and the collective duty to safeguard the unborn.

The mother, who perceives the presence and curiosity of the unborn child from within the womb, becomes the first witness to the child’s desire to experience the beauty of the world. Denying this life is both painful and unjust, as no individual possesses the authority to determine another’s fate. As Arundhati Roy aptly states, “There is really no such thing as the voiceless; there are only the deliberately silenced” (Roy, 2004).

This issue demands serious reflection, as gender-based discrimination significantly obstructs India’s progress toward sustainable and inclusive development goals. Empirical evidence indicates that a disproportionate number of female child deaths occur in northern Indian states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh (Jha et al., 2016). A study published in ‘The Lancet Global Health’ reports that approximately 239,000 girls under the age of five die annually in India due to gender-based neglect and discrimination

(Jha et al., 2016). Gender equality, as emphasized by Guilmoto, extends beyond education and political representation to include care, nutrition, security, and the fundamental protection of girls' lives (Guilmoto, 2015).

Objectives of the Study

- To examine and challenge the continuing practice of female infanticide, with the aim of motivating social change.
- To highlight the intrinsic value and purpose of the girl child in creating a balanced and complete society, recognizing that societal development is incomplete without women.
- To transform public perceptions regarding the education of girls, emphasizing the importance of empowering them to achieve independence and social equality.

Literature review

A review of historical and literary scholarship reveals that female infanticide is an age-old practice rooted in complex and often contradictory social attitudes toward infants, women, and motherhood. Existing literature demonstrates that responsibility for infanticide cannot be attributed to individuals alone, as the practice is frequently shaped and sustained by broader social, economic, and cultural pressures. While historical records often identify unwed women as primary perpetrators, scholars emphasize that local communities,

including both men and women, have played a significant role in enabling and normalizing such practices (Harrington, 2019).

Comparative historical studies further illustrate how infanticide and selective abortion were employed as mechanisms of population regulation. In 'One Quarter of Humanity', Lee and Feng (1999) examine Chinese demographic practices between 1700 and 2000, arguing that population growth was effectively controlled through socially sanctioned practices of infanticide and abortion. Their work highlights the institutional and cultural dimensions of reproductive control rather than framing infanticide solely as an individual moral failure.

Anthropological literature from West Africa offers additional insight into culturally specific interpretations of childhood and infanticide. In certain communities, infants and toddlers are believed to be "spirit children," non-human entities thought to bring misfortune to families. Denham (2018), in 'Spirit Children', provides ethnographic accounts of families confronting life-and-death decisions within these belief systems, revealing the moral complexity surrounding such practices.

Historical literary narratives also document the marginalization of unwanted children in early modern Europe. Harrington's 'The Unwanted Child' presents a poignant portrayal of neglected and abandoned children five centuries ago, demonstrating that unwanted children were perceived as a social problem not only for families but also for governments and society at large (Harrington, 2019).

Analysis of the Chapter

Report on Sex Ratio

Recent policy reports reveal a persistent and troubling decline in the sex ratio in several Indian states. The NITI Aayog report highlights that Gujarat recorded a sex ratio of 907 females per 1,000 males, raising serious concerns about the unequal distribution of female births and its long-term demographic implications (NITI Aayog, 2021). Such imbalances prompt critical questions regarding social sustainability and gender justice.

Further insights are provided by studies conducted by the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), which focus on excess female mortality under the age of five at the district level. Based on data from the 2011 Census, the study reports approximately 2.4 million excess female deaths across 29 states and union territories over a decade, largely attributed to neglect and discriminatory childbearing practices (IIASA, 2018).

Gender Mortality and Missing Females

According to national estimates, the female child mortality rate in India in 2019 stood at 34.9 deaths per 1,000 live births (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner of India, 2020). Persistent practices of sex-selective abortion and post-birth discrimination have resulted in a significant demographic deficit. It is estimated that nearly 45.8 million females were missing from India's population in 2020 due

to pre- and post-natal sex selection, thereby intensifying gender inequality (UNFPA, 2020).

‘The State of World Population Report 2020’, themed *Against My Will*, emphasizes that the rise in missing females is closely linked to easy access to reproductive technologies and the global preference for smaller families. The report further notes that between 2015 and 2020, India lost an annual average of approximately 360,000 females due to excess female deaths and about 590,000 female births due to prenatal sex selection (UNFPA, 2020).

Trends in Infant Mortality in India (2009–2019)

The data on infant mortality rates in India from 2009 to 2019 indicate a consistent and notable decline over the decade. In 2009, the infant mortality rate stood at 47.3 deaths per 1,000 live births. This figure gradually decreased each year, falling to 45.1 in 2010, 43.0 in 2011, and 40.9 in 2012. The downward trend continued through the following years, with rates declining to 38.8 in 2013, 36.9 in 2014, and 34.9 in 2015. By 2019, the infant mortality rate had reduced significantly to 28.3 deaths per 1,000 live births (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner of India, 2020).

This steady decline reflects improvements in maternal healthcare services, immunization coverage, nutrition, and institutional deliveries across the country. However, despite this positive trend, the persistence of gender-based discrimination remains a critical concern. The reduction in overall infant mortality does not necessarily translate into gender equality in survival, as female infants continue to face

higher risks due to neglect, unequal access to nutrition, and discriminatory care practices. Consequently, while statistical indicators show progress, underlying social practices such as sex-selective abortion and postnatal discrimination continue to contribute to demographic imbalance and social inequality. Therefore, the data highlight the need for policy interventions that not only reduce infant mortality but also address the structural and cultural factors that disadvantage the girl child.

Infant mortality rate from 2009-2019 in india

Characteristic	Death for 1000 live births
2019	28.3
2018	29.7
2017	31.4
2016	33.1
2015	34.9
2014	36.9
2013	38.8
2012	40.9
2011	43
2010	45.1
2009	47.3

Between 2009 and 2019, female infant mortality in India declined substantially, from 47.3 to 28.3 deaths per 1,000 live births. Despite this progress, persistent harmful practices such as gender-based

neglect and selective abortion continue to threaten the survival of female children. These practices not only constitute serious ethical violations but also contribute to demographic imbalance, which in turn exacerbates broader social and structural issues (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner of India, 2020).

Socio-Economic Perspectives from Underprivileged Communities

Field-based discussions among underprivileged communities reveal that the birth of a girl child is often met with dissatisfaction and anxiety, particularly among daily wage earners. Economic insecurity and fear of long-term financial obligations, especially related to the dowry system, contribute significantly to this response. Feminist scholar Kamala Bhasin argues that such attitudes arise from deeply rooted patriarchal and capitalist mindsets that commodify women and reinforce gender discrimination (Bhasin, 2003). For economically disadvantaged families, nurturing a child from birth to marriage without adequate state support is perceived as an overwhelming burden, further reinforcing harmful social practices.

Root Causes of Harmful Practices and Efforts for Elimination

Indian leaders have historically undertaken significant efforts to eradicate social evils such as sati and untouchability, achieving progress to varying degrees (Forbes, 1996). However, female infanticide continues to persist in some regions, driven largely by lack of education, entrenched conservative ideologies, and cultural preferences for male heirs (Sen, 2001). As Bucchianeri (n.d.) observes, abortion of female fetuses can be framed as “a weapon of mass

destruction against the voiceless,” highlighting the ethical urgency of addressing these practices. Traditional patriarchal values, including son preference for property inheritance and family lineage, continue to reinforce gendered discrimination, particularly in communities with strong adherence to orthodox beliefs (Guilmoto, 2015).

Historical analyses reveal that during the British Raj, local high-caste communities often managed social practices such as female infanticide independently, while colonial administrators were largely reluctant to intervene, in part because these crimes were clandestine and difficult to prove in court (Cohn, 1987). Additional factors contributing to female mortality include the inability of families to bear the financial burden of daughters and the persistent dowry system (Danton-Hill et al., 2002). Nutritional deficiencies, particularly in micronutrients and vitamins, disproportionately affect female infants, compounding the risk of mortality (Danton-Hill et al., 2002).

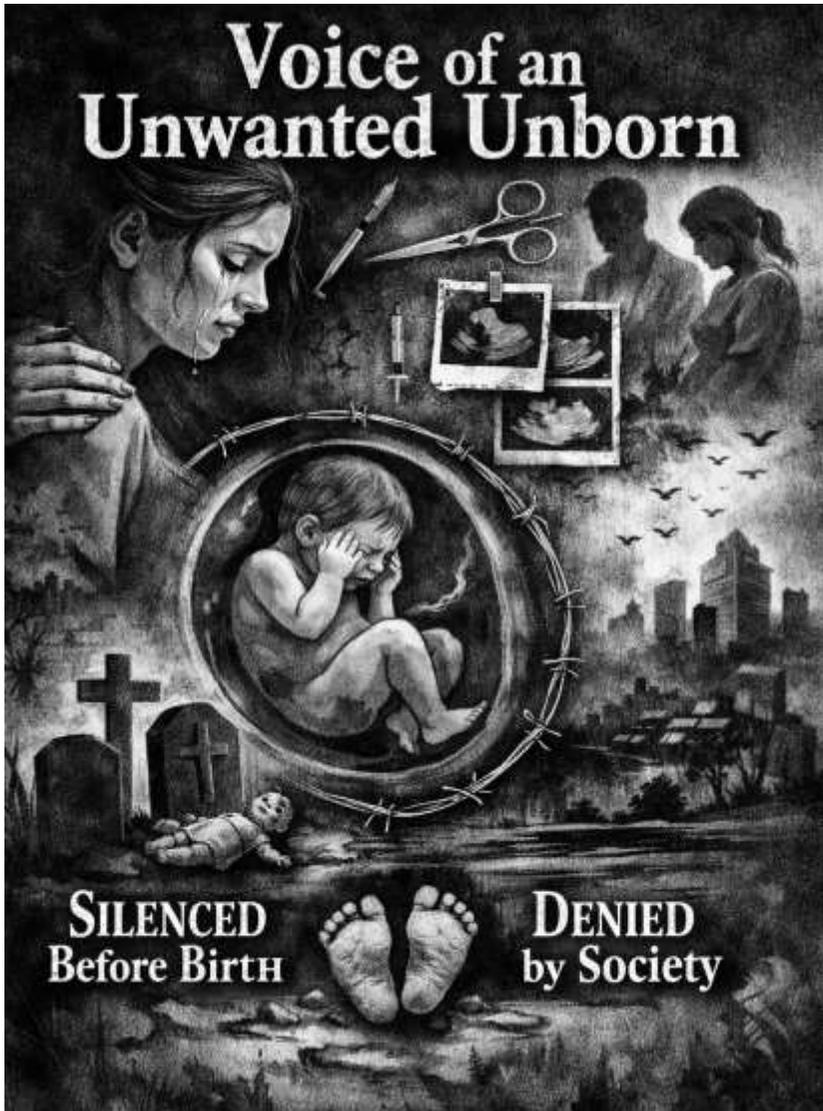
Holy books and scriptures

Religious and moral teachings across major faiths emphasize the sanctity of human life. The Quran, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Bible all highlight the moral imperative to protect life and condemn the destruction of innocent beings (Quran, n.d.; Bible, n.d.; Bhagavad Gita, n.d.). This raises critical ethical questions: don't we need to ponder for a moment that a foetus is a living organism with a fundamental right to life? Can the slogans of protecting animals such as cows, oxen, or goats hold any moral weight if human fetuses are simultaneously being terminated? Is such a practice justified within the frameworks of ethics and social responsibility? Awareness campaigns

and leadership initiatives have also played a role in addressing gender-biased practices. For instance, former President Pratibha Patil implemented measures to prevent the misuse of diagnostic technologies for gender identification, while Meira Kumar, as the first female Speaker of the Lok Sabha, advocated for the empowerment of women, asserting that “women have great power hidden within them” (Patil, 2011; Kumar, 2017).

Self-Respect Concept

Maya Angelou (1993) emphasizes the importance of self-respect in personal and social conduct, stating, “I respect myself and insist upon it from everybody and because I do it, I then respect everybody too” (p. 112). This principle underscores the significance of empowering women through education, enabling them to recognize their intrinsic worth and to challenge the deeply entrenched societal norms that create a melancholic and oppressive environment surrounding the birth of a female child. Beyond women, men also need to cultivate enlightened perspectives to resist pre- and misconceived opinions passed down through generations. Addressing such ingrained social injustices requires collective moral responsibility, ensuring that harmful practices and discriminatory mindsets are recognized, corrected, and ultimately eradicated from society.



(OpenAI, 2026)

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need to address

gender-based discrimination against the unborn, particularly female fetuses, which remains a persistent social and ethical challenge in India. Despite observable improvements in overall infant mortality and maternal healthcare over the past decade (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner of India, 2020), deeply entrenched patriarchal ideologies, cultural son preference, and socio-economic pressures continue to marginalize the female child. This persistent marginalization not only deprives girls of their fundamental right to life but also perpetuates demographic imbalances, thereby exacerbating broader social inequalities and undermining sustainable development goals (Guilmoto, 2015; UNFPA, 2020).

The study highlights that the root causes of these harmful practices are not confined to poverty or lack of resources but are deeply embedded in socio-cultural norms, orthodox beliefs, and historical practices such as dowry, son preference, and selective abortion (Bhasin, 2003; Cohn, 1987). Ethical and religious frameworks, as reflected in the Quran, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Bible, advocate for the sanctity of life and offer moral guidance against the destruction of the unborn (Quran, n.d.; Bhagavad Gita, n.d.; Bible, n.d.).

From a policy perspective, the findings call for a multipronged approach to safeguard the rights of the girl child. This includes stricter enforcement of laws prohibiting sex-selective abortion, enhanced public awareness campaigns to challenge patriarchal norms, educational initiatives to empower women and men, and targeted socio-economic support for underprivileged families. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the ethical responsibility of society to recognize the

intrinsic value of female life and to nurture a cultural climate that promotes equality, respect, and social justice (Angelou, 1993; Patil, 2011; Kumar, 2017).

Overall, the research underscores that eradicating gender-based discrimination against the unborn is not only a moral imperative but also essential for achieving demographic balance, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

Conclusion

The findings of this study illuminate the persistent and deeply rooted nature of gender-based discrimination in India, particularly as it manifests in the rejection and silencing of the female unborn. From historical practices to contemporary socio-cultural norms, the female child has long been devalued, despite her essential role in sustaining families, communities, and society at large. This devaluation not only infringes upon the fundamental right to life but also perpetuates demographic imbalances, ethical violations, and intergenerational cycles of inequality.

While significant improvements have been observed in overall infant mortality rates and maternal health over the past decade, gender-based neglect, selective abortion, and socio-cultural son preference continue to pose serious challenges. These practices transcend economic and educational boundaries, revealing that structural patriarchy, orthodox beliefs, and entrenched social norms, rather than mere poverty, are at the heart of the problem (Bhasin, 2003; Guilmoto, 2015; Cohn, 1987).

The ethical and moral imperatives highlighted in religious and philosophical teachings—across the Quran, the Bhagavad Gita, the Bible, and modern feminist thought—emphasize the sanctity of life and the collective responsibility to protect the voiceless (Quran, n.d.; Bhagavad Gita, n.d.; Bible, n.d.; Angelou, 1993). This study reinforces that societal transformation requires a multipronged approach: strict enforcement of legal safeguards, public awareness campaigns to challenge patriarchal ideologies, education that empowers both women and men, and socio-economic support for vulnerable families.

Eventually, addressing female infanticide and gender-based discrimination is not merely a policy or legal issue but a profound ethical challenge. Recognizing the intrinsic value of every girl child, nurturing her potential, and eradicating harmful practices are essential steps toward demographic balance, social justice, and sustainable development. The voices of the unborn, silenced for centuries, must be heard, respected, and protected—ensuring that society fulfills its moral and social responsibility to all its members.

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