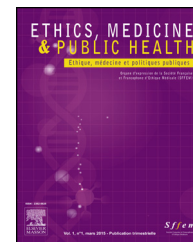




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PRACTICES AND CONCEPTS

Ending discrimination at the womb: Ethical perspectives on tackling female feticide in Asian countries



Mettre fin à la discrimination dès la grossesse : perspective éthique sur la lutte contre l'infanticide féminin dans les pays asiatiques

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Summary Female feticide has been increasingly reported in recent years in many of the Asian countries. Female feticide is associated with several demographic, sociological, and ethical challenges. Due to the advancement of the latest medical technology to screen for sex detection, female feticide has become an even bigger problem, resulting in various serious and unprecedented sex-ratio imbalances. This has helped to perpetuate gender discrimination against women, contribute to poor health in women and disrupt social and familial networks. The aim of this paper is to review and discuss the context of sex-selective abortion, control policies, and practices in Asia through the eyes of public health ethics approaches. Moreover, the paper also provides possible recommendations to mitigate the issue based on the findings and best available practices.

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MOTS CLÉS

Avortement ;
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Paternalisme ;
Ratio entre sexes

Résumé Les cas d'infanticide féminin ont augmenté ces dernières années dans de nombreux pays asiatiques. L'infanticide féminin est associé à plusieurs défis démographiques, sociologiques et éthiques. En raison de l'avancement des technologies médicales pour la détection du sexe, l'infanticide féminin est devenu un problème encore plus important, entraînant de nombreux déséquilibres graves et sans précédent au niveau du ratio entre les deux sexes. Cela aide à perpétuer la discrimination à l'égard des femmes, contribue à la mauvaise santé des femmes et perturbe les réseaux sociaux et familiaux. L'objectif de cet article est d'examiner et de discuter le contexte de l'avortement sélectif lié au sexe, des politiques de contrôle et des pratiques en Asie à travers une approche en éthique de la santé publique. Ce texte fournit également des recommandations possibles pour améliorer ce problème en se fondant sur les constatations soulignées dans cet article et les meilleures pratiques disponibles.

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Introduction

Female feticide (the deliberate act of aborting a female fetus) has in recent years emerged as a profound social problem in Asian countries [1]. Anthropologist Barbara D. Miller contends that female feticide is being practiced predominantly but not entirely in parts of Asia, particularly in India, Pakistan, China, South Korea, Taiwan, and also among Asian diasporas living outside Asia, such as in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States [2]. A recent study from Nepal also showed an issue of female feticide: sex-selective abortion (SSA) presence, and that the practice is becoming increasingly prevalent in the country [3]. India and China are emerging as the world's top economies; yet, they are still struggling or failing to save their unborn daughters. Female feticide, in these settings, is observed regardless of the socioeconomic status of families, for instance, female fetuses are found lying in farms, wrapped in jute bags, and floating in water [4].

The United Nations' unofficial calculations stated that "200 million females are missing in the world; women who should have been born and grown up, were killed by infanticide or selective abortion" [5]. Another study assembles findings from various countries to conclude that the number of missing females already reached around 126 million in 2010, with a steep rise in the last decades; the authors further projected SSA to peak at up to 150 million by 2035 [6]. This study also finds that more than 3 million females throughout the world will be missing every year until 2050. Female feticide in India alone outnumbers any genocide in the world [7].

Evidence suggests that female feticide is a result of son preference, and traditionally it was noticeable postnatally through female infanticide [8]. However, these days discrimination starts in the womb in the form of female feticide, which raises many public health, and ethical concerns.

This article aims to review and discuss the context of sex-selective abortion, control policies, and practices in Asia through the eyes of public health ethics approaches. Moreover, the paper also provides possible recommendations to

mitigate the issue based on the findings and best available practices.

Son preferences: why?

For any healthy society, men and women should have equal worth. The sole reason behind sex selection appears to be a preference for a male child because of several deep-seated customs favoring men, especially in East and South Asian countries. Males are more valued because of their long-standing dominance in economic, political and social dimensions [9]. Countries in these regions are governed by patriarchal communities with male control over economic, political, social and ideological domains [2]. In particular, India, China, Pakistan, and Nepal have a deep-rooted preference for sons over daughters, because of various religious, cultural, social and economic reasons, which continue to make males more socially and economically valuable than females. Religious lore in these countries, for instance, promotes son preferences, such as the Confucian tradition of ancestor worship by son. In addition, men are needed to perform death rites in Hinduism [10,11]. These religious conditions incline community members towards the necessity of having a male child, regardless of an economic position of the family. Economic reasons for son preference may include male requirements in agrarian economies, property inheritance by sons, and old age support for parents because of the absence of secure state-sponsored schemes. Social factors which reinforce the desire for sons over daughters are associated with lineage continuity, payment of a large sum of dowry on a daughter's marriage, and a male-dominated breadwinner role in traditional families. Table 1 outlines various control policies, causes and prevalence of SSA in Asian countries adapted from [11,12].

The social impacts of son preference are clearly seen in several studies. One study in India reported declining fertility as a driving force for a son preference, i.e., small families choose to have more sons [13]. In China too, the recently abolished one-child policy affected cultural and

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