

THE ROLE OF NURSES IN COMBATING FEMALE FOETICIDE IN INDIA: CHALLENGES AND INTERVENTIONS

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Abstract

Female foeticide, the selective abortion of female foetuses, remains a critical issue in India, where deep-rooted gender bias prevails. This unethical practice has severe social, demographic, and health implications. Obstetric and gynaecologic (OB-GYN) nurses play a crucial role in preventing female foeticide through patient education, ethical counselling, and community advocacy. This paper explores the causes and consequences of female foeticide in India, the role of nurses in combating this practice, and the challenges they face in ensuring gender equality and ethical maternal care.

Introduction

Female foeticide is one of the most pressing socio-medical issues in India, where the preference for male children has historically led to skewed sex ratios and significant demographic challenges. This practice, fuelled by patriarchal norms, economic considerations, and the dowry system, has led to millions of missing girls over the past decades. Although India has enacted laws such as the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act to curb sex-selective abortions, enforcement remains weak in many regions, and female foeticide continues to persist through illegal means.

The declining sex ratio at birth is a concerning trend, reflecting deep-seated gender discrimination. Census data and research studies have consistently shown

that certain regions of India have significantly fewer female births compared to male births, indicating the persistence of sex-selective abortion practices. This imbalance has far-reaching consequences, including increased violence against women, human trafficking, and social instability. Addressing female foeticide requires a multidimensional approach, integrating legal frameworks, public awareness, and medical ethics.

Nurses, especially those working in obstetrics and gynaecology, play a pivotal role in preventing female foeticide. As frontline healthcare providers, they have direct interactions with pregnant women and their families, making them well-positioned to educate, counsel, and advocate for ethical prenatal care. Their responsibilities extend beyond medical care to include moral and legal obligations in preventing unethical practices related to sex-selective abortion.

This paper aims to highlight the crucial role of nurses in combating female foeticide in India. It discusses the impact of female foeticide, the ethical and legal responsibilities of nurses, the challenges they encounter, and strategies to strengthen nursing interventions. By equipping nurses with the necessary knowledge and skills, and by fostering a more gender-sensitive healthcare system, it is possible to reduce

the prevalence of female foeticide and promote gender equality in Indian society.

The Role of Nurses in Combating Female Foeticide in India

1. Ethical Counselling and Patient Education

Ethical counselling and patient education play a crucial role in preventing female foeticide by influencing attitudes, dispelling myths, and promoting gender equality. Nurses, as primary healthcare providers, are well-positioned to educate expectant parents and their families about the ethical, legal, and social implications of sex-selective abortion. Through targeted interventions, nurses can create awareness and encourage positive behavioural changes in society.

a. Promoting Gender Equality and Awareness

- Nurses can conduct awareness sessions highlighting the equal value of female and male children.
- They can educate families about the long-term consequences of gender imbalances, such as increased violence against women and societal instability.
- Addressing misconceptions and cultural biases that favor male children can lead to a shift in societal attitudes.

b. Providing Legal and Ethical Guidance

- Nurses must inform patients and their families about the legal

ramifications of female foeticide under the PCPNDT Act.

- They should emphasize that sex determination and selective abortion are punishable offenses, reinforcing the importance of ethical prenatal care.
- Educating healthcare professionals about their ethical obligations can ensure compliance with anti-foeticide laws.

c. Encouraging Positive Decision-Making

- Counselling sessions should focus on empowering women to make autonomous reproductive choices without external pressure.
- Nurses can provide emotional support to women facing coercion from family members to undergo sex-selective abortions.
- Creating safe spaces where women feel supported and respected in their pregnancy decisions can help prevent unethical practices.

d. Engaging Men in Gender Sensitization

- Fathers and male family members play a significant role in reproductive decisions; involving them in counselling can help challenge patriarchal mindsets.
- Nurses can organize educational programs targeted at men, emphasizing shared responsibility in parenting and family planning.
- Promoting positive role models of empowered women can help dismantle harmful gender norms.

By integrating ethical counselling and patient education into prenatal care, nurses can contribute to the eradication of female foeticide. These efforts, when combined with strict legal enforcement and community advocacy, can bring about a significant change in societal attitudes towards gender equality.

2. Ensuring Ethical and Legal Compliance

Nurses are responsible for ensuring that medical professionals adhere to ethical standards by:

- **Monitoring ultrasound and prenatal diagnostic procedures:** Nurses play a critical role in supervising and ensuring that ultrasound scans and other prenatal diagnostic tests are not misused for sex determination. By maintaining vigilance in healthcare settings, they can prevent the illegal practice of revealing fetal sex to parents.
- **Reporting unethical medical practices:** Nurses must be trained to identify and report any suspected cases of sex-selective abortion. This includes documenting suspicious activities and collaborating with legal and healthcare authorities to take necessary action against violators.
- **Advocating for strict implementation of laws:** The Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act prohibits sex determination and sex-selective abortions. Nurses should actively support the enforcement of this law by educating patients and healthcare

providers about its provisions and encouraging adherence to legal requirements.

- **Training and sensitizing healthcare professionals:** Nurses should participate in training programs that focus on gender sensitization, ethical medical practices, and legal regulations. By fostering an ethical work environment, they can help discourage unlawful medical activities.
- **Collaborating with policymakers and law enforcement agencies:** Nurses can work alongside government bodies, NGOs, and legal authorities to strengthen efforts in combating female foeticide. They can provide valuable insights into the challenges faced in clinical settings and advocate for policy reforms that enhance legal enforcement.

By ensuring ethical and legal compliance in medical settings, nurses can play a decisive role in curbing female foeticide. Their active participation in monitoring, reporting, and advocating for strict adherence to anti-foeticide laws can help create a more just and gender-equitable society.

3. Community Outreach and Advocacy

Nurses extend their influence beyond hospitals and clinics by engaging in community outreach programs that:

- Educate Communities About the Negative Consequences of Gender Discrimination**

- Nurses play a vital role in raising awareness about the harmful effects of gender discrimination and female foeticide on society.
- They educate families about the long-term demographic consequences of gender imbalance, such as reduced female population leading to social issues like forced marriages and trafficking.
- By conducting interactive sessions, nurses help communities understand the importance of valuing both male and female children equally.
- They address myths and misconceptions regarding gender roles and emphasize the contributions of women in all spheres of life.

b. Conduct Workshops and Seminars Promoting Women's Rights and Gender Equality

- Nurses organize workshops in schools, colleges, and community centers to promote awareness about women's rights.
- These sessions focus on the significance of gender equality in education, employment, and healthcare.
- By collaborating with educators and social workers, nurses help foster a mindset shift towards accepting and respecting women in society.
- They invite legal experts and activists to discuss laws protecting women's rights and legal consequences of female foeticide.

c. Collaborate With NGOs and Government Agencies to Implement Awareness Campaigns Against Female Foeticide

- Nurses work closely with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government agencies to develop and execute campaigns focused on preventing female foeticide.
- They participate in door-to-door campaigns, distributing educational materials and engaging directly with families.
- Collaborations with law enforcement ensure that reports of illegal sex determination and abortions are taken seriously and investigated.
- Nurses help create helplines and support systems for women facing pressure to undergo sex-selective abortions.
- Through mass media campaigns, including radio, television, and social media, they amplify messages about gender equality and the importance of protecting female children.

By actively engaging in community outreach and advocacy, nurses contribute to changing societal perceptions and promoting gender equity. Their efforts not only help curb female foeticide but also empower women and families to make informed, ethical decisions regarding childbirth.

4. Psychosocial Support for Women

Many women in India face immense pressure to undergo sex-selective abortions

due to societal and familial expectations.

Nurses provide psychosocial support by:

- Offering confidential counselling to women experiencing coercion.
- Connecting them with legal and social resources for protection.
- Encouraging them to make informed and autonomous decisions about their pregnancies.

Challenges Faced by Nurses in Addressing Female Foeticide in India

1. Cultural and Social Barriers

- Deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs continue to drive the preference for male children, making it difficult for nurses to change societal attitudes.
- Families, especially in rural areas, may resist counselling on gender equality and the value of female children.
- Traditional customs and societal norms reinforce the pressure on women to bear male offspring, making it challenging for nurses to advocate for unbiased reproductive choices.

2. Lack of Awareness and Resistance to Change

Many families are unaware of the legal restrictions on sex-selective abortion and the consequences of female foeticide.

- Despite legal measures, some healthcare professionals may still engage in unethical practices due to financial incentives or social pressure.

- Resistance to educational interventions from conservative community members limits the effectiveness of awareness programs.

3. Limited Legal Enforcement and Support

- Although laws such as the PCPNDT Act exist, inadequate enforcement and loopholes allow illegal sex determination and selective abortions to persist.
- Nurses may face obstacles in reporting unethical practices due to fear of retaliation or lack of institutional support.
- Weak implementation of protective measures for whistleblowers discourages nurses from taking active roles in combating female foeticide.

4. Emotional and Psychological Challenges for Nurses

- Nurses often encounter ethical dilemmas when dealing with families pressuring women into sex-selective abortions.
- Witnessing the emotional distress of women coerced into terminating female foetuses can lead to burnout and compassion fatigue among healthcare providers.
- The fear of being ostracized by colleagues or communities may deter nurses from actively intervening against unethical practices.

5. Insufficient Training and Resources

- Many nurses lack specialized training in ethical counselling, gender sensitization, and legal aspects of female foeticide prevention.
- Limited availability of support services, such as psychological counselling for pregnant women and affected families, weakens the impact of nursing interventions.
- Resource constraints in healthcare settings, especially in rural areas, prevent effective outreach and awareness campaigns.

6. Workplace and Institutional Challenges

- Nurses may face resistance from colleagues or superiors when advocating against unethical medical practices.
- Institutional policies may not provide adequate protection or encouragement for nurses to actively report and prevent female foeticide.
- The hierarchical nature of medical institutions can limit the decision-making power of nurses, reducing their ability to influence change.

Conclusion

OB-GYN nurses are essential in the fight against female foeticide in India through education, ethical enforcement, and community engagement. Addressing societal attitudes and ensuring adherence to legal and medical ethics can significantly reduce the prevalence of this harmful practice. Continued efforts in policy advocacy, training, and resource allocation will empower nurses to combat

female foeticide effectively and promote gender equality in maternal care.

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