

Dealing with femicide

RATHER THAN striking at the roots of the female foeticide problem, there is of late an increasing trend to render superficial legal remedies and lip service to deep-rooted socio-economic challenges.

Female foeticide is the result of extremely adverse social and economic milieu stunting the normal life of females in our society. Age-old economic dependence has degenerated into a chronic social deficiency, which has infected even the religious domain across the board. Gender dis-equilibrium is rampant in almost all economic activities, including the ones carried out by the State.

There is a stunning gender bias in the state employment, except perhaps only in case of school teachers, where recruitment rules prescribe 50 per cent reservation for women. To understand the extent of gender bias in state employment, a look at the dismal ratio of women amongst engineers in the service of State/State PSUs, doctors in government hospitals, police force, including Home Guards, SPOs, etc, of the State, university faculty, subordinate and higher judiciary, chairpersons of boards/corporations, ministers, chief parliamentary secretaries, IAS and IPS officers in State, members of State Public Service Commission, Advocate General and law officers in AG Office, State Civil Services and police officers is a sufficient reality check.

Can economic and social problems be eradicated by passing laws alone? For example, can poverty be eradicated by passing a law, howsoever stringent may the punishment for being poor be? Similarly, there has been a recent law prescribing a legally enforceable duty upon the successor generation to fend for the elder generation's subsistence. Interestingly, there is a rat race on the populist tracks advocating subsidies for the poor, but there is no serious effort for even a reasonable upward revision of minimum wages for men and women across the government and private sector, which could automatically silence the clamour for subsidies and afford a decent living to the workers and their families. One month of minimum wage of an industrial worker, which is meant for subsistence of four to five members of his family, is more or less equal to the cost of one dinner for four to five persons in a restaurant at Chandigarh. Are the wages suppressed just to provide an indirect cost subsidy to the manufacturers? Further, there is no effective mechanism in place to ensure proper wages for women in the unor-



Guest Column

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ganised sector, particularly the ones employed in domestic households. Have the elitist planners ever experimented feeding their families on the paltry minimum wage they have prescribed?

Another short-cut to heaven is the law banning child labour, without providing for a realistic alternative economic wherewithal for the poor boys and girls labouring for their own subsistence, as also contributing to the subsistence of their family. These issues are somewhat gender neutral, but considering that women face discrimination even vis-a-vis men, these issues hit them the hardest.

Coming back to the worst manifestation of gender inequality, i.e. female foeticide; lack of a level playfield for females cannot be compensated by the lip service of so-called 'awareness campaigns'. In a highly adverse opportunity paradigm, parents opting for selective termination of pregnancy are fully aware of what an average female has in store in this world.

Female foeticide is not because of any lack of awareness or knowledge. On the other hand, knowledge of ground realities that women face induces female foeticide. A few female icons referred to as examples of

women's success stories are nothing but very isolated exceptions to the general rule.

There is a prevailing myth that the rich going in for female foeticide indicates that economic factor is not significant. The reality, however, is that even the rich parents of a girl have to spend, for the sake of social vanity within their strata, far in excess of what the groom's side may have to. Worse still, rare exceptions apart, even the rich do not wish to bestow inheritance rights of the family assets upon their daughters. They disinherit them by one legal means or the other and emotionally exploit the daughters to accept that injustice without a murmur. It is not surprising for such rich to go in for female foeticide to nip the 'evil' in the bud.

Female foeticide symbolises the first stage rejection of the prospect of females losing traumatic battles of survival, subsistence and equality of opportunity in the present socio-economic milieu. Solution to the problem lies in sincere, committed and consistent affirmative action to provide the women the ladder to get across the barriers of economic, social and even administrative dependence.

Women-related laws can't be effective when all the implementing and watchdog agencies — legislature, police, administration, financial and planning institutions and judiciary — have virtually no worthwhile representation of the women.

A systemic correction of economic processes leading to employability and employment of women is the basic solution to eradicate the social evil of female foeticide. Affirmative action, gender budgeting, education funding and health insurance, employment facilitation and support services like crèches, etc; employment reservation, prevention of disinheritance of women by law, old-age social security are some of the immediate measures which need to be taken under stern eyes of statutory watchdogs.

In an age of ethical dilution, the role of statutory 'third party watchdogs' cannot be underestimated. Unless the goals are not clearly outlined in terms of quantity, quality and time frame; and unless there is continuous ongoing strict performance audit by the statutory watchdogs, nothing tangible is likely to be achieved in the near future. Transparency should be an inescapable legal obligation as well as the essence of the social sector governance.

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