

Case Study: Female Infanticide

Focus:

- (1) India
- (2) China

Summary

The phenomenon of female infanticide is as old as many cultures, and has likely accounted for millions of gender-selective deaths throughout history. It remains a critical concern in a number of "Third World" countries today, notably the two most populous countries on earth, China and India. In all cases, specifically female infanticide reflects the low status accorded to women in most parts of the world; it is arguably the most brutal and destructive manifestation of the anti-female bias that pervades "patriarchal" societies. It is closely linked to the phenomena of sex-selective abortion, which targets female fetuses almost exclusively, and neglect of girl children.



The background

"Female infanticide is the intentional killing of baby girls due to the preference for male babies and from the low value associated with the birth of females." (Marina Porras, "[Female Infanticide and Foeticide](#)".) It should be seen as a subset of the broader phenomenon of infanticide, which has also targeted the physically or mentally handicapped, and infant males (alongside infant females or, occasionally, on a gender-selective basis). As with [maternal mortality](#), some would dispute the assigning of infanticide or female infanticide to the category of "genocide" or, as here, "gendercide." Nonetheless, the argument advanced in the maternal mortality case-study holds true in this case as well: governments and other actors can be just as guilty of mass killing by neglect or tacit encouragement, as by direct murder. R.J. Rummel buttresses this view, referring to infanticide as

another type of government killing whose victims may total millions ... In many cultures, government permitted, if not encouraged, the killing of handicapped or female infants or otherwise unwanted children. In the Greece of 200 B.C., for example, the murder of female infants was so common that among 6,000 families living in Delphi no more than 1 percent had two daughters. Among 79 families, nearly as many had one child as two. Among all there were only 28 daughters to 118 sons. ... But classical Greece was not unusual. In eighty-four societies spanning the Renaissance to our time, "defective" children have been killed in one-third of them. In India, for example, because of Hindu beliefs and the rigid caste system, young girls were murdered as a matter of course. When demographic statistics were first collected in the nineteenth century, it was discovered that in "some villages, no girl babies were found at all; in a total of thirty others, there were 343 boys to 54 girls. ... [I]n Bombay, the number of girls alive in 1834 was 603."

Rummel adds: "Instances of infanticide ... are usually singular events; they do not happen en masse. But the accumulation of such officially sanctioned or demanded murders comprises, in effect, serial massacre. Since such practices were so pervasive in some cultures, I suspect that the death toll from infanticide must exceed that from mass sacrifice and perhaps even outright mass murder." (Rummel, *Death by Government*, pp. 65-66.)

Focus (1): India

As John-Thor Dahlburg points out, "in rural India, the centuries-old practice of female infanticide can still be considered a wise course of action." (Dahlburg, "Where killing baby girls 'is no big sin'," *The Los Angeles Times* [in *The Toronto Star*, February 28, 1994.]) According to census statistics, "From 972 females for every 1,000 males in 1901 ... the gender imbalance has tilted to 929 females per 1,000 males. ... In the nearly 300 poor hamlets of the Usilampatti area of Tamil Nadu [state], as many as 196 girls died under suspicious circumstances [in 1993] ... Some were fed dry, unhulled rice that punctured their windpipes, or were made to swallow poisonous powdered fertilizer. Others were smothered with a wet towel, strangled or allowed to starve to death." Dahlburg profiles one disturbing case from Tamil Nadu:

Lakshmi already had one daughter, so when she gave birth to a second girl, she killed her. For the three days of her second child's short life, Lakshmi admits, she refused to nurse her. To silence the infant's famished cries, the impoverished village woman squeezed the milky sap from an oleander shrub, mixed it with castor oil, and forced the poisonous potion down the newborn's throat. The baby bled from the nose, then died soon afterward. Female neighbors buried her in a small hole near Lakshmi's square thatched hut of sunbaked mud. They sympathized with Lakshmi, and in the same circumstances, some would probably have done what she did. For despite the risk of execution by hanging and about 16 months of a much-ballyhooed government scheme to assist families with daughters, in some hamlets of ... Tamil Nadu, murdering girls is still sometimes believed to be a wiser course than raising them. "A daughter is always liabilities. How can I bring up a second?" Lakshmi, 28, answered firmly when asked by a visitor how she could have taken her own child's life eight years ago. "Instead of her suffering the way I do, I thought it was better to get rid of her." (All quotes from Dahlburg, "Where killing baby girls 'is no big sin'.")

A study of Tamil Nadu by the Community Service Guild of Madras similarly found that "female infanticide is rampant" in the state, though only among Hindu (rather than Moslem or Christian) families. "Of the 1,250 families covered by the study, 740 had only one girl child and 249 agreed directly that they had done away with the unwanted girl child. More than 213 of the families had more than one male child whereas half the respondents had only one daughter." (Malavika Karlekar, "The girl child in India: does she have any rights?," *Canadian Woman Studies*, March 1995.)

The bias against females in India is related to the fact that "Sons are called upon to provide the income; they are the ones who do most of the work in the fields. In this way sons are looked to as a type of insurance. With this perspective, it becomes clearer that the high value given to males decreases the value given to females." (Marina Porrás, "[Female Infanticide and Foeticide](#)".) The problem is also intimately tied to the institution of **dowry**, in which the family of a prospective bride must pay enormous sums of money to the family in which the woman will live after marriage. Though formally outlawed, the institution is still pervasive. "The combination of dowry and wedding expenses usually add up to more than a million rupees ([US] \$35,000). In India the average civil servant earns about 100,000 rupees (\$3,500) a year. Given these figures combined with the low status of women, it seems not so illogical that the poorer Indian families would want only male children." (Porrás, "[Female Infanticide and Foeticide](#)".) Murders of women whose families are deemed to have paid insufficient dowry have become increasingly common, and receive separate **case-study treatment** on this site.

India is also the heartland of sex-selective abortion. Amniocentesis was introduced in 1974 "to ascertain birth defects in a sample population," but "was quickly appropriated by medical entrepreneurs. A spate of sex-selective abortions followed." (Karlekar, "The girl child in India.") Karlekar points out that "those women who undergo sex determination tests and abort on knowing that the foetus is female are actively taking a decision against equality and the right to life for girls. In many cases, of course, the women are not independent agents but merely victims of a dominant family ideology based on preference for male children."

Dahlburg notes that "In Jaipur, capital of the western state of Rajasthan, prenatal sex determination tests result in an estimated 3,500 abortions of female fetuses annually," according to a medical-college study. (Dahlburg, "Where killing baby girls 'is no big sin'.") Most strikingly, according to UNICEF, "A report from Bombay in 1984 on abortions after prenatal sex determination stated that 7,999 out of 8,000 of the aborted fetuses were females. Sex determination has become a lucrative business." (Zeng Yi *et al.*, "Causes and Implications of the Recent Increase in the Reported Sex Ratio at Birth in China," *Population and Development Review*, 19: 2 [June 1993], p. 297.)

Deficits in nutrition and health-care also overwhelmingly target female children. Karlekar cites research

indicat[ing] a definite bias in feeding boys milk and milk products and eggs ... In Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh [states], it is usual for girls and women to eat less than men and boys and to have their meal after the men and boys had finished eating. Greater mobility outside the home provides boys with the opportunity to eat sweets and fruit from saved-up pocket money or from money given to buy articles for food consumption. In case of illness, it is usually boys who have preference in health care. ... More is spent on clothing for boys than for girls[,] which also affects morbidity. (Karlekar, "The girl child in India.")

Sunita Kishor reports "another disturbing finding," namely "that, despite the increased ability to command essential food and medical resources associated with development, female children [in India] do not improve their survival chances relative to male children with gains in development. Relatively high levels of agricultural development decrease the life chances of females while leaving males' life chances unaffected; urbanization increases the life chances of males more than females. ... Clearly, gender-based discrimination in the allocation of resources persists and even increases, even when availability of resources is not a constraint." (Kishor, "May God Give Sons to All': Gender and Child Mortality in India," *American Sociological Review*, 58: 2 [April 1993], p. 262.)

Indian state governments have sometimes taken measures to diminish the slaughter of infant girls and abortions of female fetuses. "The leaders of Tamil Nadu are holding out a tempting carrot to couples in the state with one or two daughters and no sons: if one parent undergoes sterilization, the government will give the family [U.S.] \$160 in aid per child. The money will be paid in instalments as the girl goes through school. She will also get a small gold ring and on her 20th birthday, a lump sum of \$650 to serve as her dowry or defray the expenses of higher education. Four thousand families enrolled in the first year," with 6,000 to 8,000 expected to join annually (as of 1994) (Dahlburg, "Where killing baby girls 'is no big sin'.") Such programs have, however, barely begun to address the scale of the catastrophe.

Focus (2): China

"A tradition of infanticide and abandonment, especially of females, existed in China before the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949," note Zeng *et al.* ("Causes and Implications," p. 294.) According to Ansley J. Coale and Judith Banister, "A missionary (and naturalist) observer in [China in] the late nineteenth century interviewed 40 women over age 50 who reported having

borne 183 sons and 175 daughters, of whom 126 sons but only 53 daughters survived to age 10; by their account, the women had destroyed 78 of their daughters." (Coale and Banister, "Five Decades of Missing Females in China," *Demography*, 31: 3 [August 1994], p. 472.)

According to Zeng *et al.*, "The practice was largely forsaken in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s." (Zeng *et al.*, "Causes and Implications," p. 294.) Coale and Banister likewise acknowledge a "decline of excess female mortality after the establishment of the People's Republic ... assisted by the action of a strong government, which tried to modify this custom as well as other traditional practices that it viewed as harmful." (Coale and Banister, "Five Decades," p. 472.) But the number of "missing" women showed a sharp upward trend in the 1980s, linked by almost all scholars to the "one-child policy" introduced by the Chinese government in 1979 to control spiralling population growth. Couples are penalized by wage-cuts and reduced access to social services when children are born "outside the plan." Johansson and Nygren found that while "sex ratios [were] generally within or fairly near the expected range of 105 to 106 boys per 100 girls for live births within the plan ... they are, in contrast, clearly far above normal for children born outside the plan, even as high as 115 to 118 for 1984-87. That the phenomenon of missing girls in China in the 1980s is related to the government's population policy is thus conclusively shown." (Sten Johansson and Ola Nygren, "The Missing Girls of China: A New Demographic Account," *Population and Development Review*, 17: 1 [March 1991], pp. 40-41.)

The Chinese government appeared to recognize the linkage by allowing families in rural areas (where anti-female bias is stronger) a second child if the first was a girl. Nonetheless, in September 1997, the World Health Organization's Regional Committee for the Western Pacific issued a report claiming that "more than 50 million women were estimated to be 'missing' in China because of the institutionalized killing and neglect of girls due to Beijing's population control program that limits parents to one child." (See Joseph Farah, "[Cover-up of China's gender-cide](#)", Western Journalism Center/FreeRepublic, September 29, 1997.) Farah referred to the gendercide as "the biggest single holocaust in human history."

According to Peter Stockland, "Years of population engineering, including virtual extermination of 'surplus' baby girls, has created a nightmarish imbalance in China's male and female populations." (Stockland, "China's baby-slaughter overlooked," *The Calgary Sun*, June 11, 1997.) In 1999, Jonathan Manthorpe reported a study by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, claiming that "the imbalance between the sexes is now so distorted that there are 111 million men in China -- more than three times the population of Canada -- who will not be able to find a wife." As a result, the kidnapping and slave-trading of women has increased: "Since 1990, say official Chinese figures, 64,000 women -- 8,000 a year on average -- have been rescued by authorities from forced 'marriages'. The number who have not been saved can only be guessed at. ... The thirst for women is so acute that the slave trader gangs are even reaching outside China to find merchandise. There are regular reports of women being abducted in such places as northern Vietnam to feed the demand in China." (Jonathan Manthorpe, "China battles slave trading in women: Female infanticide fuels a brisk trade in wives," *The Vancouver Sun*, January 11, 1999.)

Since the first allegations of widespread female infanticide in China connected to the government's "one-child" policy, controversy has raged over the number of deaths that can be ascribed to infanticide as opposed to other causes. Zeng *et al.* argued in 1993 that "underreporting of female births, an increase in prenatal sex identification by ultrasound and other diagnostic methods for the illegal purpose of gender-specific birth control, and [only] very low-level incidence of female infanticide are the causes of the increase in the reported sex ratio at birth in China." (Zeng *et al.*, "Causes and Implications," p. 285.) They add: "Underreporting of female births accounts for about 43 percent to 75 percent of the difference between the reported sex ratio at birth during the second half of the 1980s and the normal value of the true sex ratio at birth" (p. 289). The authors contended that "sex-differential underreporting of births and induced abortion after prenatal sex determination together explain almost all of the increase in the reported sex ratio at birth during the late 1980s," and thus "the omission ... of victims of female

infanticide cannot be a significant factor." Moreover, "Both the social and administrative structure and the close bond among neighbors in China make it difficult to conceal a serious crime such as infanticide," while additionally "Infanticide is not a cost-effective method of sex selection. The psychological and moral costs are so high that people are unlikely to take such a step except under extreme circumstances" (p. 295). They stress, however, that "even small numbers of cases of female infanticide, abandonment, and neglect are a serious violation of the fundamental human rights of women and children" (p. 296). **(2002 update:** A recent article by John Gittings of the UK *Guardian* cites national census results released in May 2002 that show that "more than 116 male births were recorded for every 100 female births," but claims the cause is overwhelmingly sex-selective abortion: "Female infanticide, notorious in China's past as a primitive method of sex selection, is now thought to be infrequent." See Gittings, ["Growing Sex Imbalance Shocks China"](#), *The Guardian*, May 13, 2002.)

In a similar vein, in April 2000, *The New York Times* reported that "many 'illegal' children are born in secret, their births never officially registered." And "as more women move around the country to work, it is increasingly hard to monitor pregnancies ... Unannounced spot checks by the State Statistics Bureau have discovered undercounts of up to 40 percent in some villages, Chinese demographers say." (See Elisabeth Rosenthal, ["China's Widely Flouted One-Child Policy Undercuts Its Census"](#), *The New York Times*, April 14, 2000.)

Johansson and Nygren attracted considerable notice with a somewhat different claim: "that adoptions (which often go unreported) account for a large proportion of the missing girls. ... If adopted children are added to the live births ... the sex ratio at birth becomes much closer to normal for most years in the 1980s. ... Adding the adopted children to live births reduces the number of missing girls by about half." (Johansson and Nygren, "The Missing Girls of China," pp. 43, 46.) They add (p. 50): "That female infanticide does occur on some scale is evidenced by reports in the Chinese press, but the available statistical evidence does not help us to determine whether it takes place on a large or a small scale."

Even if millions of Chinese infant girls are unregistered rather than directly murdered, however, the pattern of discrimination is one that will severely reduce their opportunities in life. "If parents do hide the birth of a baby girl, she will go unregistered and therefore will not have any legal existence. The child may have difficulty receiving medical attention, going to school, and [accessing] other state services." (Porras, ["Female Infanticide and Foeticide"](#).)

Likewise, if a Chinese infant girl is turned over for adoption rather than being killed, she risks being placed in one of the notorious "Dying Rooms" unveiled in a British TV documentary. Chinese state orphanages have come in for heavy criticism as a result of the degrading and unsanitary conditions that usually pervade them. In one orphanage, documentary producer Brian Woods found that "every single baby ... was a girl, and as we moved on this pattern was repeated. The only boys were mentally or physically disabled. 95% of the babies we saw were able-bodied girls. We also discovered that, although they are described as orphans, very few of them actually are; the overwhelming majority do have parents, but their parents have abandoned them, simply because they were born the wrong sex." Woods estimated that "up to a million baby girls every year" were victims of this "mass desertion," deriving from "the complex collision of [China's] notorious One Child Policy and its traditional preference for sons." (See Brian Woods, ["The Dying Rooms Trust"](#).)

The phenomenon of neglect of girl children is also dramatically evident in China. According to the World Health Organization, "In many cases, mothers are more likely to bring their male children to health centers -- particularly to private physicians -- and they may be treated at an earlier stage of disease than girls." (Cited in Farah, ["Cover-up of China's gender-cide"](#).)

The Chinese government has taken some energetic steps to combat the practice of female infanticide and sex-selective abortion of female fetuses. It "has employed the Marriage Law and

Women's Protection Law which both prohibit female infanticide. The Women's Protection Law also prohibits discrimination against 'women who give birth to female babies.' ... The Maternal Health Care Law of 1994 'strictly prohibits' the use of technology to identify the gender of a fetus." However, "although the government has outlawed the use of ultrasound machines, physicians continue to use them to determine the gender of fetuses, especially in rural areas." (Porras, ["Female Infanticide and Foeticide"](#).)

How many die?

Gendercide Watch is aware of no overall statistics on the numbers of girls who die annually from infanticide. Calculations are further clouded by the unreliability and ambiguity of much of the data. Nonetheless, a minimum estimate would place the casualties in the the hundreds of thousands, especially when one takes into consideration that the phenomenon is most prevalent in the world's two most populous countries. Sex-selective abortions likely account for an even higher number of "missing" girls.

Who is responsible?

As already noted, female infanticide reflects the low status accorded to women in many societies around the world. The "burden" of taking a woman into the family accounts for the high dowry rates in India which, in turn, have led to an epidemic female infanticide. Typical also is China, where

culture dictates that when a girl marries she leaves her family and becomes part of her husband's family. For this reason Chinese peasants have for many centuries wanted a son to ensure there is someone to look after them in their old age -- having a boy child is the best pension a Chinese peasant can get. Baby girls are even called "maggots in the rice" ... ("[The Dying Rooms Trust](#)")

Infanticide is a crime overwhelmingly committed by women, both in the Third and First Worlds. (This contrasts markedly with "infanticide in nonhuman primates," which "is carried out primarily by migrant males who are unrelated to the infant or its parents and is a manifestation of reproductive competition among males." [Glenn Hausfater, "Infanticide: Comparative and Evolutionary Perspectives," *Current Anthropology*, 25: 4 (1984), p. 501.] It also serves as a reminder that gendercide may be implemented by those of the same gender.) In India, according to John-Thor Dahlburg, "many births take place in isolated villages, with only female friends and the midwife present. If a child dies, the women can always blame natural causes." (Dahlburg, "Where killing baby girls 'is no big sin'.") In the United States, "every year hundreds of women commit neonaticide [the killing of newborns] ... Prosecutors sometimes don't prosecute; juries rarely convict; those found guilty almost never go to jail. Barbara Kirwin, a forensic psychologist, reports that in nearly 300 cases of women charged with neonaticide in the United States and Britain, no woman spent more than a night in jail." Much of "the leniency shown to neonaticidal mothers" reflects the fact that they are standardly "young, poor, unmarried and socially isolated," although it is notable that similar leniency is rarely extended to young, poor, and socially isolated male murderers. (Steven Pinker, "[Why They Kill Their Newborns](#)", *The New York Times*, November 2, 1997.)

A number of strategies have been proposed and implemented to try to address the problem of female infanticide, along with the related phenomena of sex-selective abortion and abandonment and neglect of girl children. Zeng *et al.*'s prescriptions for Chinese policymakers can easily be generalized to other countries where female infanticide is rife:

The principle of equality between men and women should be more widely promoted through the news media to change the attitude of son preference and improve the awareness of the general

public on this issue; the principle should also be reflected in specific social and economic policies to protect the basic rights of women and children, especially female children. ... Government regulations prohibiting the use of prenatal sex identification techniques for non-medical purposes should be strictly enforced, and violators should be punished accordingly. The laws that punish people who commit infanticide, abandonment, and neglect of female children, and the laws and regulations on the protection of women and children[,] should be strictly enforced. The campaigns to protect women and children from being kidnapped or sold into servitude should be effectively strengthened. Family planning programs should focus on effective public education, good counseling and service delivery, and the fully voluntary participation of the community and individuals to increase contraceptive prevalence, reduce unplanned pregnancies, and minimize the need for an induced abortion. (Zeng, *et al.*, p. 298.)

http://www.gendercide.org/case_infanticide.html
