

Report:
**‘Where Have All the Girls
Gone?’**
Event on Gender Foeticide
Sikh Human Rights Group
28th February 2013
SOAS, University of London



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I. Event Timetable

19.00 Chairperson's introduction

_____Jaswant Kaur, asst. South Asia Director

19.10 An introduction to gender foeticide and SHRG

_____Dr Jasdev Rai & Alysha Khambay

19.30 A Sikh perspective on son preference and gender foeticide

_____Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal

19.45 Anecdotal evidence from Ealing & Southall

_____Virendra Sharma MP

19.55 Ethical considerations of sex selection for social reasons

_____Dr. Francoise Shenfield*

20.10 Panel Discussion

_____Speakers & Dr Parvinder Garcha

20.40 Food provided by Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha, [Southall](#)

*Slides presented by Dr. Rai in Dr. Shenfield's absence.

II. Aims of Event

Female foeticide, the practice of killing an unwanted girl child during the foetal stage through abortion, is prevalent in many parts of the world, particularly in Asia where son preference has deep social, economic and cultural roots. It is estimated that 200 million women are missing in the world today due to the practice of female foeticide. Worryingly, the phenomenon of female foeticide is no longer confined to parts of Asia but has also spread with migrant communities and is now emerging as a significant problem in the UK.

This public event sought to:

- Create awareness of female foeticide as a problem in the UK as well as in India
- Examine the issues that influence the practice
- Attempt to explore ways in which to address the problem

SHRG believes that by engaging civil society organisations, the issue of gender foeticide can be addressed to a great extent.

III. Summaries of Speakers

'An introduction to gender foeticide'

Alysha Khambay, SHRG

Alysha Khambay is the project assistant for the SHRG 'Gender Foeticide' project.

- Female foeticide has become an increasing problem with the advancement of prenatal diagnostic techniques, despite being in violation of both the 1979 international convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Girls are considered to be a bad investment due to the negative return on raising and educating female children, along with dowry practice. The 2011 Census in India shows the child sex ratio stands at just 914 females for every 1000 males, a decline from 927 females in 2001, suggesting that the low social status of women in India has not improved. This is in spite of laws preventing female foeticide such as the MTP Act of 1971 and the PC & PNDT Act of 1994. Poor law enforcement and corrupt and unethical practices within the medical community has led to between 4.2 and 12.1 million selectively aborted girls in India from 1980 to 2010 (Jha et al, 2011).
- Certain state administrations have taken steps to tackle foeticide eg. 'Nanhi Chaan', a high profile initiative from the SGPC led by Harsimrat Kaur Badal MP and combines attempts at raising awareness of foeticide with environmental concerns.
- In 2012, SHRG member Jasleen Kaur went to India to map the work of organisations that work on gender foeticide in Punjab and Delhi. Overall her findings suggested no coordinated effort between organisations to tackle the problem and efforts were mainly focused on short-term strategies. The 'naming and shaming' model Jasleen came across has proven to be successful in decreasing the incidence of female foeticide however it is potentially harming to women who often take the brunt of the blame and penalizes those who may be acting under societal and familial pressures.
- A study conducted by Oxford University has revealed an abnormal increase in the proportion of boys over girls in the Indian community in England and Wales since 1990, indicating that the Indian migrant community practices sex-selective abortion (Coleman & Dubuc, 2007).
- Female foeticide has an immediate impact on a woman's physical and mental health, but also has long-term effects for society as a whole. A high proportion of young, single men can lead to an increase in violent crime and gender based violence.
- The Indian state could learn from Bangladesh, where the 'missing women' phenomenon is declining. Kabeer (2012) has noted a marked shift away from son preference in Bangladesh, as women are better-educated and earning higher incomes than previously, thus increasing their value in society. Parents are now turning to their daughters to look after them in their old age.

'SHRG Approach to Social Issues'

Dr. Jasdev Rai

Dr Jasdev Rai is a medical doctor and Director of SHRG.

- In Indian communities, cultural and religious organisations are important in leading social change; they can compliment legal and state policies.
- SHRG held a major conference with SGPC ([Shromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee](#)) on gender foeticide in Amritsar, India in 2004 where SHRG proposed that rather than relying solely on the State to tackle the issue, religious and community organisations need to take the issue up. In meetings the SGPC President pointed out that: families do not have money to educate all their children so girls suffer and families do not have money to pay large dowries so they commit foeticide.
- The conference led to some initiatives. SGPC [recognised that just talking about the issue will not result in change](#); people refuse to listen. So the President announced a policy for free education for girls in SGPC schools and 10,000 Rupees for marriage.
- SHRG have continued to engage religious individuals and have also started a small movement where religious individuals are asked to raise the issue with a couple of talks by some eminent people. Time will tell if these initiatives will work.

‘A Sikh perspective on son preference and gender foeticide’

Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal

Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal is a lecturer in Sikh Studies at the University of Birmingham. She is also author of the book, 'Sikhism Today', which introduces Sikhism through the lens of contemporary issues.

- Sikh teachings do not support female foeticide, however it is undeniable that with the advent of scientific technology, members of the Sikh community engage in the practices of foeticide (evidenced by male to female ratio in Punjab). Despite the Hukumnama¹ the practice continues evidenced by conference held in Amritsar in 2006 by [SHRG along with](#) SGPC and UNESCO titled 'Basic Human Dignity: Foeticide and Violence Against Women' and Dr Dubuc's study (2007) showing that Indian women in the UK are aborting unborn daughters. In Sikh families if the first-born child is a girl, there is immense pressure for the 2nd to be a boy. Although the younger generation are less worried about the sex of their child they are confronted by pressure from the older generation.
- Growing economic prosperity and education levels have not led to reducing female foeticide. Dr. Jhutti-Johal has encountered many educated women who are choosing to abort their unborn daughters, in the UK, Canada and the United States, revealing that increased education does not prevent gender foeticide. Having a son elevates a woman's status and position in the family and in particular with the mother-in-law.
- The consequences of female foeticide for the Sikh community are a shortage of marriageable women in the future, which will lead to people marrying out of their religion and caste. Thus the bloodline of the Sikhs will become diluted and this is what the Sikh community wants to prevent. There is an argument that a 'reverse dowry' system will emerge and inadvertently a long-term consequence of foeticide may be an improvement in the quality of life for women.
- [It is evident](#) from research that complete equality for women has not been achieved for the Sikh religious community. Some have suggested that this is because the Gurus were all men and thus were supporting a patriarchal system. The Gurus' religious ideal has also not been achieved due to Indian traditional and cultural practices, which have become merged with religious practice and enforce gender inequality.

'Anecdotal evidence from Ealing & Southall'

¹ [An order to Sikhs given by Sri Akal Takhat Sahib against female foeticide.](#)

Virendra Sharma MP

Virendra Sharma has been Labour MP for Ealing Southall since 2007. He is a member of the parliamentary select committees on Health, Human Rights and International Development and has raised the issue of foeticide in the UK and in India.

- Doctors in the UK have spoken to Mr. Sharma off the record about female foeticide and acknowledge that it does occur here amongst migrant communities.
- On a trip to India last year, Mr. Sharma raised the issue of gender foeticide but was challenged by medical professionals who denied that it is a concern in India and denied that British Indians visit India to obtain sex-selective abortions. The Indian media subsequently picked up on it to prove that there is a widespread problem. In India foeticide is a political issue; if the State wanted to stop it, they could. For instance, in Nawanshahr in Punjab, the deputy commissioner started rewarding villages where the sex ratio improved. He was successful in combatting the issue however a year later he was suddenly transferred to a different department. Certain people disliked the changes he was making therefore the authorities took action.
- In the UK Mr. Sharma speaks out against all 'social evils' within Asian society, such as: the caste system, domestic violence, honour killings, forced marriage and forced/pressured abortions. He believes these issues are all due to the bias against the girl, who is still considered a burden in the UK. Dowry and economic factors are not the main reasons for female foeticide in the UK as women work here and receive a free education and thus are not a huge financial burden. Instead, the problem is the mindset of the Asian community and pressure from the family and mother-in-law.
- To tackle the issue of female foeticide in the UK emphasis must be placed on educating girls and their parents whilst awareness must be created to make foeticide a social evil. The Asian community is reluctant to confront the issue. The mindset of Asian society needs to be challenged, although Mr. Sharma believes that it is slowly changing – for instance men have started to speak out against these issues.
- There are no specific groups in his constituency that exist to help women who are under pressure to have a girl; thus more needs to be done.
- Mr. Sharma initiated the Jeena International female foeticide project - Jeena speak at meetings and travel round the world to raise awareness of foeticide. Recently they undertook a trip to India and produced a report on their findings of the extent of female foeticide.

'Ethical considerations of sex selection for social reasons'

Dr. Francoise Shenfield

Dr. Francoise Shenfield is a clinician at the Reproductive Medicine Unit at University College London Hospital. Unfortunately Dr. Shenfield was unable to attend the event due to laryngitis. Dr. Rai presented her slides in her absence.

- Exerts from the British Medical Journal and newspapers shown in the presentation indicate that with the development of technologies the issue of sex selection for social reasons needs to be seriously considered as it can potentially have drastic consequences.
- Methods of sex selection were explained along with embryo biopsy.
- Evidence was provided that sex-selective abortions can dramatically alter the sex ratio of a community, e.g Amartya Sen estimated 100 million women were missing in 1989.
- The American Society of Reproductive Medicine concluded that pre-implantation genetic diagnosis for sex selection for non-medical reasons should be discouraged because it poses a risk of unwarranted gender bias, social harm, and results in the diversion of medical resources from genuine medical need.
- International justice: what limits of “cultural differences” are relevant? History of Human Rights: political reaction against injustice by discrimination (Dworkin)
- International Professional Resolution, FIGO 2006 urges member societies to:
 - Ensure that techniques for sex selection are employed only for medical indications or purposes that do not contribute to social discrimination on the basis of sex or gender
 - Work with their governments to assure that sex selection is strictly regulated to contribute to the elimination of sex and gender discrimination
 - Advocate and promote strategies that will encourage and facilitate the achievement of gender equality

IV. Panel Discussion

The panel consisted of all speakers present at the event, as well as Ranjit Bilkhu, Director of Jeena International and Dr. Parvinder Garcha, Secretary General of Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha, [Southall](#).

- During the panel discussion several female members of the audience shared personal experiences of gender bias and even personal experiences of pressure from the Asian community and families to have sex-selective abortions in the UK.
- In a couple of instances, female members of the audience had been in a situation where in their family, an individual male had gone against the norm and had valued his girls as equal to his sons, but they acknowledged that this was rare. They felt that more men needed to adopt this attitude.
- Several women felt it was up to prominent males in the community to do more to promote women and set an example of valuing women as equals.
- Dr. Garcha felt that Sikh women needed to be more active in participating at the Gurdwara especially amongst temple committees, however Ms. Bilku and Dr. Jhutti-Johal believed that in reality temple committees are male dominated and it is easier said than done for women to take an active role.
- A main focus of the discussion was on promoting women, for instance the suggestion of having a pink holi day to promote females was discussed.

V. Concluding Remarks

The SHRG event at SOAS, University of London should overall be considered as a success. The following was achieved as a direct result of the event:

- Dr. Garcha made a commitment to raise awareness in the congregations at Gurdwara Sri Singh Sabha, one of the largest Sikh temples in Europe.
- Awareness of gender foeticide was raised, especially amongst London University students who attended.
- A dialogue was created around the issue amongst a variety of academics and prominent figures who spoke at the event and joined the panel discussion.
- Jeena International, a woman's organisation based in Slough has requested to work collaboratively with SHRG in the future on the issue of female foeticide.