India: The Missing Girls

>> Frontline World. Stories From a Small Planet.

>>Neil Samson Katz: This is modern India. You are witnessing the largest population explosion in human history. 41,000 new Indians are born every day. 1.1 billion and counting. At this rate, India will surpass China as the most populous nation in the world by 2030. It's this frenetic energy that drew my wife and me to India in early 2006. I came to work at an Indian newspaper, and she as a nutritionist specializing in HIV. But we soon discovered something disturbing about India's baby boom. There are far more boys than girls.

Last year in New Delhi, experts estimate that 22,000 girls that should have been born simply don't exist. Where have they gone? And across this vast country, how many more are missing?

To find some answers, we visited Dr. Punit Bedi, a New Delhi based gynecologist and a leading crusader for India's missing girls. According to Bedi, the girls we seek are not missing at all. They were never born.

>> Dr. Punit Bedi: I think all kind of famines and epidemics and wars are nothing compared to this. Practically, in some parts of India, one in every five girls have been eliminated at the fetal stage. The sex ratios are dropping. It is a genocidal situation.

>>Neil Samson Katz: Bedi says immense societal pressure for male heirs is pushing Indian women to abort their female fetuses in record numbers. As many as half a million each year, according to British Medical Journal "The Lancet."

The practice is called female feticide or sex selection.

>>Dr. Punit Bedi: Basically, the men want a son. They don't care about your morality or theirs, they just want a son. If you refuse doing sex-selection abortion, you lose a good 50 percent of your clientele.

>>Neil Samson Katz: In India, abortion is both legal and accessible, but aborting a fetus because of its gender is not legal. Still, the process is rampant and virtually an open secret.

We wanted to see for ourselves the effect that feticide is having on this country, so we traveled to the prosperous state of Punjab, India's great agriculture heartland.

Here we found village after village with some of the worst sex ratios in the entire country. What secrets do these towns keep? Villages like Chakli Sujait, which is being monitored by the Indian government for its skewed sex ratio, when we asked the village mid-wife about female feticide, we get this angry reply.

>> Woman (as captioned): No. It's not like that. I know about all the women that live here. Such things are not performed here. In our village, no one at all. Everything here goes through me. Whether or not anyone wants an abortion, it just doesn't happen here.

>>Neil Samson Katz: But later, the village health worker quietly shows us the official numbers.

>> Total childs are 53. Out of them, 34 male and 19 female.

>>Neil Samson Katz: And as we leave, village leaders put on a strange show for us, rounding up all of the town's girls for a staged photo op.

>> Eleven. Eleven girls.

>>Neil Samson Katz: In neighboring Nai Majara, we found this first grade classroom with almost no girls.

>> Total 17 students in there in this class. And out of these 17 students, four girl students are there.

>>Neil Samson Katz: The teacher told us that there are other classes where the girls outnumber the boys. And experts are quick to point out that the small number of children born in these villages makes it hard to draw statistical conclusions. But the government's own records show that
for every two boys born here last year, there was only one girl. And Nawanshahr's top government official, Krishan Kumar, says the problem goes far beyond small villages like this one.

>>Krishan Kumar: This is not a particular problem only of the district. This is very much in the society in general.

>>Neil Samson Katz: And Kumar fears that as the problem gets worse, it's the younger generation that will pay.

>>Krishan Kumar: The girl who is 16 years old today or 18 years old today or the boy who is 16, 18, 20 years old today, these people are likely to face problems. First problem they are likely to face immediately is that they may not get married, some of them, the boys. And if even if they get married and continue with this female feticide and they only produce boys subsequently, then one thing is very certain, that there boys, their sons, they are not likely to get married.

>>Neil Samson Katz: Then why do parents continue aborting girls? Partly, it's practical. In a country with no social security, it is the son's duty to care for his ailing parents, and many parents feel that only a son can light their funeral pyres and carry on the name.

But more than anything, feticide is about dowries, the high price families must pay to marry off their daughters.

To understand the devastating effect the dowry can have on the poor and middle classes, we traveled back to India's capital where more than 3 million people live on less than $2 a day.

Here in the poor and middle class neighborhood of Khichripur, sex selection is an economic reality. In order for many young women to marry here, their parents must pay a dowry. That often means taking on debts that can devastate the family. And while it's technically illegal to demand a dowry payment, few families follow that rule.

Premlata Mudartha lives in this middle-class housing block with her son and his family. They sew clothes to get by. But several years ago, Premlata and her family were forced out of their home and plunged into debt after she had to pay dowry for both of her daughters.

>>Premlata Mudartha (as captioned): We weren't able to afford much for my second daughter's wedding. Because my husband was very ill at the time, we could only afford food for the wedding party. We only gave her a little gold jewelry, a gift from her relatives.

>>Neil Samson Katz: The wedding and the dowry cost Premlata as much as 40,000 rupees, around $1,000. She had to take a loan for half that amount and today is still struggling to pay it pack. I asked Premlata if it's better to have sons or daughters.

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>>Premlata Mudartha (as captioned): Society doesn't let you live either way. If you don't have a son, everyone says you must have one.

>>Premlata Mudartha (as captioned): Yes, I know it all. Twice I helped my elder daughter abort her unborn child.

Interpreter (as captioned): You went with her?

>>Premlata Mudartha (as captioned): Her in-laws took her and asked me to come along. It was a girl.

>>Interpreter (as captioned): So they aborted it?

>>Premlata Mudartha (as captioned): Yes. The first time it was 3,000 rupees ($70). The second time I didn't go with them. I told them it was a sin.

>>Neil Samson Katz: As we soon found out, Premlata's story was far
from unique. Back in the busy alleys of Khichripur are the offices of an NGO called Datamation which counsels young women away from female feticide. Manjula Thomas is a village health worker with the organization who says stories like Premlata's are all too common.

>> Manjula Thomas (as captioned): Out of every 100 women, there are around 45 who already have two or three daughters. The only thing they want to know is whether it (fetus) is a girl. And if so, they get it aborted.

>> Neil Samson Katz: Manjula explains that feticide is not necessarily about poverty.

>> Manjula Thomas (as captioned): The people who mostly live here belong to the middle class. Even the poor who want two or three daughters get it done. A middle class woman also wants this because she wants to bring up her children on her terms and doesn't want to add to the expense by having more children.

>> Neil Samson Katz: One of the women that Manjula counsel's is Radhika Devi, a poor mother of two girls who is five months pregnant with what she desperately hopes will be a son. She asked that we not show her face.

>> Radhika Devi (as captioned): We are very poor. There is nothing in my house.

>> Neil Samson Katz: We asked if she will have to pay dowry for both of her daughters.

>> Radhika Devi (as captioned): Yes. When you marry a daughter, you have to give one. One has to. We will have to take a loan.

>> Neil Samson Katz: I inquire about her new pregnancy.

>> Radhika Devi (as captioned): I want a boy. We already have two daughters and we don't earn that much money. When we don't have enough money, how will we educate our daughters? It would be better if it's a boy.

>> Neil Samson Katz: What will you do if it's a girl, I ask.

>> Radhika Devi (as captioned): If it's a girl, I will get it aborted.

>> Neil Samson Katz: If it's illegal to abort a fetus because of it's gender, where do women like Radhika get them done? According to Dr. Bedi, it's not hard to find willing doctors.

>> Dr. Punit Bedi: As soon as a woman gets pregnant, she either finds -- she finds a contact. She goes to her best friend or some women she knows has, after many abortions, got a son and goes to her doctor, who may be a general practitioner or just a peripheral health worker, who sends her to the right ultrasound place, an unethical doctor willing to tell the gender for money. And at each step they got commission pad in this referral food chain.

>> Neil Samson Katz: In an effort to stop this referral food chain, the Indian government put tight controls on ultrasound machines and made it illegal for a doctor to reveal the gender of a fetus. But that hasn't stopped the practice, and ultrasound clinics have sprouted up almost everywhere.

We asked Dr. Bedi if there was any way to uncover which clinics were performing illegal abortions. He told us to follow the medical records.

>> Dr. Punit Bedi: What the law has done is it has made it mandatory to submit records -- all records, including names, ages of the patients, and address and referring doctors, et cetera. So somebody needs to audit these records to see what's going on.

>> Neil Samson Katz: So we trekked back to Nawanshahr hoping to find an ultrasound clinic and gynecologist who would allow us to look at their books.

This is the clinic of Dr. Gurmaj Saini, one of the most respected doctors in Nawanshahr. She is vice president of the local chapter of the Indian Medical Association and has delivered babies her for more than 20 years.
Saini invited us to look at her records for baby deliveries last year.

We were shocked by what we heard.


>>Neil Samson Katz: All told, Saini's clinic delivered 60 boys and only 35 girls last year.

>>Neil Samson Katz: Does that number surprise you?
>>Dr. Gurmaj Saini: Very surprising.
>>Neil Samson Katz: There's nearly double --
>>Dr. Gurmaj Saini: Almost double. The boys are double.
>>Neil Samson Katz: But you didn't realize it?
>>Dr. Gurmaj Saini: Of course we realize, but what can we do?

>>Neil Samson Katz: In her defense, Saini says mothers who know they're having sons will use her clinic to ensure the deliveries are safe. Girls are delivered at home. But if there's one thing that is really surprising, it's the location of Saini's office, right across the street from the government hospital and the agency assigned to prevent female feticide.

We asked the district's top health officials how this could happen.

>>Neil Samson Katz: This clinic is right across the street from your office. Is it surprising that the sex ratio at a clinic across the street from your office is this skewed?
>>Dr. Dilip Kumar: You see the way we are enforcing this thing over here. We are enforcing, that is why she is making some human cry.

>>Neil Samson Katz: Justice at the state or federal level is no better. As of early 2007, only one doctor in India has ever been convicted of performing female feticide.

In the end, India's girls face an uphill battle. Changing societal values will be hard and slow. And the government is doing little to prevent doctors from aborting India's future.

It's now up to the next generation of Indian mothers to care for their daughters as much as they revere their sons.

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