

Fighting the baby girls foeticide and infanticide in Rajasthan.

The goal of this project is simple in principle: reduce to nil the foeticide and infanticide of baby girls by making women as well as men realise the value and importance of girls and women in Indian society and understand the dangers of gender imbalance.

However, it is not easy to ascertain whether the various strategies and actions undertaken move towards reaching this goal. It is a dilemma thus, to establish which actions are better than the others and should be implemented? And there is also a challenge - how to quantify the results of such an enterprise? This is a project that poses huge, never ending challenges, making us wonder whether we are doing the right thing. This is indeed an overwhelming project but to which we want to contribute.

Let us first try and understand the reasons for these infanticides:

- The dowry, though prohibited by law since 1961, is still practiced in various covert and overt forms. It weighs heavily on the budget of an Indian family. The daughters are seen as liabilities while boys as assets as they bring dowry to their families in the form of cash and gifts at the time of their marriage. The boys inherit the family property (land, house etc) from their parents and so the girls are compensated by being given dowry that goes to the groom's family at the time of the wedding.
- Last rites of cremation among Hindus dictate that the eldest male child sets fire to the pyre of the deceased and thus allows the soul to be liberated from the body and reincarnation.
- Security to the parents, because a boy is expected to take care of his parents in their old age. In the joint family system, even now, in many families the daughter-in-law goes to live with her husband's family in a shared household.
- Deeply ingrained mind-sets that considers girls as inferior to the boy, a liability to get rid of by getting her married as soon as possible and sending her away to the husband's family

Based on these facts, our program, present in two areas – Alwar (Kot Kasim) and Sawai Madhopur (Khandar), each with eight villages – is endeavouring to:

- a) Improve the image of the girl child right from her birth: In the project villages the birth of girl children is celebrated by beating the metal plate, a celebration hitherto reserved for boys. Today birthdays of girl children are also celebrated, whereas earlier only birthdays of boy children were celebrated.
- b) In a number of Indian states, the government has got involved in this fight against discrimination of girl children. It awards cash under a scheme to promote the value of the girl child, committing to pay the parents in several instalments... this is to ensure that the amount contributes to the development of the girl child at various stages in life. The money is not transacted in one single instalment as it is likely to be misused and may not benefit the girl child at all. A first instalment is paid at the birth of the daughter, then when the girl is one year old, followed by another instalment when she begins school and finally when she reaches the legal age of marriage (18 years). This scheme definitely encourages parents to bring up their girls so that they do not seem a burden.
- c) Improve the standing and status of teenage girls in society by offering her ways to build her skills like getting an education in computer science, sewing or aesthetic cares.

This better status benefits the girl in two ways: in the eyes of the world around her, she gains a skill and in her own eyes she realises that she has a future, that she can do something worthwhile with her life, and that she has got a self esteem of her own.

d) Tackle issues related to their future lives as women. The project attempts to make them



aware of the fact that sex selection of the foetus is illegal, that unsafe abortions in unsanitary and unhygienic conditions are also illegal and can be dangerous and may lead to sterility.

e) Heighten the awareness of the entire village, the men and boys, the teenagers and future husbands, mothers-in-law and grandfathers to the value of daughters.

We are talking about a program taking care of the newborn baby girls as well as of babies to be born in the coming years through the education of their parents.

Happy Kids is supporting this project through the NGOs SURE and Dignity of Girl Child Foundation. Our representative on the spot is Doctor Meeta Singh who devotes all her energy to the work in the field to ensure that every aspect of the project is developing well and to “rescue” little girls who, instead of going to school, spend their day carrying heavy water containers from the well to the village.

Dr Meeta had organised the travel of 18 teenage girls, between 16 and 19 years from their villages in Alwar to the city of Jaipur. It was their first trip to the city even though Alwar is located just two to three hours away from the state capital. Half of these girls arrived extremely pale as it was their first time on a train and they had developed motion sickness en route. The reunion event was held in a three star hotel and the girls were ecstatic to be there, saying that they had seen such places only in the movies.

The first contact was a round of introductions where initially, the girls were very shy. After the mutual introductions, a meal was offered to them followed by the screening of a film. The film narrated the life of a pregnant young woman who was forced by her husband and even more so, by her mother-in-law to submit to an ultrasound scan to determine the gender of her baby. The young woman hit back, declaring to the doctor that she would not undergo the sex detection test. She said that such a test was useless because she would not keep the baby whatever its gender since she was unwilling to live with such in-laws. In passing, she also pointed to the doctor that what he was doing was illegal and punishable by the law. And therefore she had already informed the police about his crime. The doctor was seen to react in fury and the young woman was shown walking away with her head held high. She eventually keeps the child whom she would bring up alone.

The movie screening led to the initiation of a discussion that made me realise that, even though 16 years old or more, these teenagers had no idea whatsoever of what to expect in their future life as a wife and mother. The movie made them aware of some part of the future they may face ahead.



Then Dr Meeta inquired from them regarding the knowledge they had acquired from the courses that they had attended during their holidays and for me it was a very emotional moment when the first one stood up and said: "I was very distressed, I thought that I would not be able to do it, but today I am aware that I am worth something. I discovered that I had a future". And afterwards many of them expressed more or less the same thoughts. Some related that at school there was a computer but they had not used it, not knowing how to

proceed. Others said that they would transmit their new knowledge to their mother, brothers and sisters. The afternoon ended up on the hotel terrace talking with our hands in sign language - my Hindi being limited and their English too! There was a lot of curiosity, respect and sweetness in the conversation.

The following morning we left Jaipur by train at half past five for Sawai Madhopur where we arrived at 8 o'clock and then travelled two hours by car. This drive was necessary to reach the place of our



second project, not without having seen a black cobra crossing the road.

Dr Meeta had, together with the Director of the school, in charge of this project, organised the gathering of 250 children and teenagers benefitting from this project. They presented an Indian

dance show with songs specially written to illustrate the spirit of the project dear to our heart. The students then staged a play which underscored the importance of education for the girls (being in Hindi, it was a bit difficult for us to follow the action but many scenes were hilarious both for the spectators and the actors) and finally there were some more dance performances. The two hour show ended with the handing out of small gifts to each pupil. There was a lot of smiling, initially shy to begin with and then becoming warmer, in short: we experienced beautiful moments of sharing.



We ended the day drinking tea at the Director's place and I was surprised to notice how the men who get involved in this campaign are passionate fighters for the cause of dignity for the girls and very committed to give to the Indian woman a place in a society which gives them so little.