

All Those Little Faces': Elizabeth Vargas Explores India's 'Gendercide'

Six months ago, I traveled to India to see firsthand what the prime minister of that country calls a national shame. It is the systematic, widespread, shocking elimination of India's baby girls. Some 50,000 female fetuses are aborted every month in India. Baby girls are often killed at birth, either thrown into rivers, or left to die in garbage dumps. It is estimated that one million girls in India "disappear" every year.

I traveled first to Delhi, where I met a woman who is a member of the privileged, educated class. Her name is Mitu and she is a pediatrician, married to a doctor. When she became pregnant, she said her husband's family pressured her to have an illegal ultrasound to see if her twins were girls or boys. There are clinics everywhere in India, offering ultrasounds. We walked down street after street and saw signs everywhere advertising ultrasound services. There are even technicians who pack portable ultrasounds and travel to villages offering their services. The dirty little secret is that many couples use the ultrasound to find out the sex of their baby. If they find it's a girl, hundreds of thousands of mothers-to-be abort the fetus. 50,000 girl fetuses are aborted every month in India. It is a staggering number. And it has created whole villages where there are hardly any women. We went to one such village in the province of Haryana. Everywhere we looked, we saw boys, young men, old men, but very, very few women. It was unsettling, especially because we knew this was not some freak of nature, but a result of the deliberate extermination of girls.

The reason so many Indians do this is financial. A family with a girl will pay a dowry to her husband's family when she marries. It is a long cultural tradition in India that new laws cannot seem to break. So a girl means the family will lose money, property, or cattle on the wedding day. A boy means the family will gain those things. The illegal ultrasounds and the illegal gender abortions are used by India's middle class to guarantee they get sons.

Poor women who cannot afford these services will simply kill or abandon their babies. Some will take their newborn girls to a drop box, usually in the middle of the night, and leave the baby there. One drop box is at a place called the Unique Orphanage in Punjab. We went from the village with no women, to the orphanage with no boys. There are only girls here...60 of them...all cared for by a wonderful woman who will raise each and every one. It is striking to see all those little faces, some two days old, others teenagers, all unwanted by their biological families. They are actually the lucky ones. Their parents didn't kill them. They now have someone who loves them.

The orphanage is crowded – I counted three, sometimes four girls in each bed – but also immaculate. No one knows their real birth date, so once a year they have one giant birthday party for everyone. As we left the orphanage, I thought back to a temple I visited days earlier where newlyweds make a pilgrimage, to kneel and pray. Not for wealth, or long lives, or success. They pray for a baby boy, and not for a girl. Some of them are willing to kill to make that wish come true.