

FIGHTING FEMALE FOETICIDE

72 year old Sardarni Kuldeep Kaur has been working tirelessly within the community to stop sex selective abortions in Rajasthan. Her work is a source of inspiration to all young women. As a section of Punjab is celebrating the birth of the girl child this Lohri, World Sikh News presents here an interview with her by Dr. Meeta Singh, who heads International Foundation of Electoral Systems's Dignity of the Girl Child programme in Rajasthan, with the hope that many more Kuldeep Kaur will emerge to undo the harm done by the scourge of killing the girl child.



By Dr. Meeta Singh

Meeta Singh: When did you first hear about the issue of female foeticide?
Kuldeep Kaur: Though I have been aware that sex selection and female foeticide do happen all around us, it was only at the Rajasthan University Women's Association (RUWA) Workshop on 26 October 2005 that I really woke up to the issue. The film "Kukh Vich Katal" [Murder in the Womb] shown at the workshop left an indelible impact on my mind. The other speakers also highlighted the problem in a manner that I was quite shaken.

MS: Why did this issue resonate with you personally? Why did you feel a need to get involved?
KK: That day the issue took me back in time to my own childhood. I was a little girl; we lived in Ferozepur, a small town in Punjab. My little sister was just born and a neighbor dropped in and asked my father whether he would keep the girl or get rid of her. My father was livid and asked the neighbor to leave and never mention something like this ever again. He pampered us so much. I remember that incident to this day. Somehow the workshop was the beginning of a calling. A voice told me that I must do something. We can't simply allow our unborn daughters to die like this.

MS: Why is female foeticide so prevalent in the Sikh community?
KK: I think Female Foeticide is a problem with the Sikh community because of land holdings in the Punjab. The smaller farmers do not want daughters because it means selling off land to pay dowry; the bigger farmers do not want daughters because they would rather have sons who will till the land than daughters who will have to be married off. Also there is the question of honor, bowing down before the groom's family is hurtful to the ego. Then the security of the girls is another problem.

MS: Tell me about the activities you are organizing in support of the campaign against female foeticide.
KK: I started this campaign with the women of the Sikh community in Jaipur. I formed ladies' groups and called them Samooh Stree Satsang [women's group of worshippers] with women who come regularly to the gurudwara [Sikh place of worship].

MS: Where do these activities



take place? What is the scope of your activities so far?
KK: We have 20 gurudwaras in Jaipur so we formed 20 groups in areas where the gurudwaras are located. Every month, we have a meeting in one of the gurudwaras by rotation. We sing hymns and religious songs, and we pray but between the hymns we also discuss the problem of female foeticide. I tell the women to discuss the issue in their own homes and neighborhoods and get as many people as possible to sign oath papers saying they will never indulge in female foeticide themselves, and they will never allow it to happen. So far we have interacted with 1,780 peo-

ਮਾਸੀ ਨੂੰ ਤਰਸੋਗੇ!

ਗਰਭ ਵਿਚਲੇ ਬੱਚੇ ਦੇ ਲਿੰਗ ਦੀ ਜਾਂਚ ਕਰਨਾ ਕਾਨੂੰਨੀ ਗੁਨਾਹ ਹੈ!
ਗਰਭ ਵਿਚਲੇ ਬੱਚੇ ਨੂੰ ਮਾਰਨਾ ਵੇਸ਼ੀਆਨਾ ਕਤਲ ਹੈ!
ਕੀ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਨਸਾਨ ਅਤੇ ਇਨਸਾਨੀਅਤ ਦੇ ਕਾਤਲ ਬਣੋਗੇ?
ਕੀ ਕਤਲ ਕਰਨ ਤੋਂ ਬਾਅਦ ਆਪਣੇ ਆਪ ਨੂੰ ਬਖਸ਼ ਸਕੋਗੇ?

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ple, of which 479 are men. We also invite speakers from outside to explain the issue. We are trying to involve the men with the issue. We are working at the district level and the state level but we do need to reach out to the villages as well. We will need much more time for that.

MS: Can you give me a specific example of how your work has been received by a particular person, maybe another woman, community leader or members of a particular community?
KK: Many important people who come to the gurudwara give me a lot of respect for my work. One person who I would like to especially mention is Sardar Jasbir Singh, who is the Chairperson of the Minorities Commission in Rajasthan. He is interested in sensitizing other minority communities on this issue as well. In Sri Ganganagar, Timma and Harpreet, who are the youth leaders there, have also been very enthusiastic in taking up the issue with the Sikh community.

MS: What is the hardest part

about your work?
KK: The hardest part...well, mobility is a problem, and I am not getting any younger. Of course, changing mindsets is never easy.

MS: Have you received criticism/threats for working on this issue?
KK: No, fortunately my community respects me a lot and is quite appreciative of my work.

MS: Tell me about something that happened that inspired you to keep working on this issue.
KK: I was invited to attend a national consultation on female foeticide in Pune. It had been organized by the Centre for Youth Development and Action and the United Nations Population Fund. It was a national-level platform, but people there listened to me carefully when I shared my experiences with them. They asked me for my suggestions and gave me respect. That recognition spurred me on to work harder. I was happy that so much confidence had been reposed in me. I told them that Guru Nanak had

advocated social ostracism for people who kill their daughters.

MS: What can people, both internationals and Indians, do to help you?
KK: People at the international level as well as Indians can do so much. Discuss the issue, hold conferences and discussions—big and small. Don't be afraid to talk about it, condemn female foeticide when it happens, and try and stop it whenever you can. Also, they can help with vocational training for girls so that they can be economically independent.

MS: How did the idea of tying female foeticide to a wedding in Sri Ganganagar come about?
KK: I had gone to Sri Ganganagar to initiate the Samooh Stree Satsang there and to address a camp of adolescent girls and sensitize them to the issue of female foeticide. I also held meetings with the leaders of the Sikh Sangat [community]. There, I learnt that a community wedding was in the offing. I suggested that they could dedicate the event to the cause of saving the girl child. My suggestion received a good response. I also met with Timma and Harpreet, who I found very enthusiastic. They were the main organizers and they took it forward from there. I felt that if the couples would start their lives with a mindset that condemns female foeticide, it would be helpful.

MS: Did you attend the wedding? What do you remember most?
KK: Yes I did attend the wedding. What I remember most is the collective oath that was administered by the priests who performed the weddings to the newlywed couples and nearly a thousand people present. This, I think, is significant because people listen to the priests and holy men, and the commitment becomes public so they become accountable in many ways. When you commit in front of so many people, you can't go and commit sex selection and female foeticide so easily. What I also remember is the way a woman of the Sikh community was honored. This woman had decided to go against her hus-

India kills 10 million girls in 20 years

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band and, at the cost of being abandoned by him, did not agree to abort her baby girl, her third daughter. This is a strong example of courage. And I am happy that the Sikh community decided to honor her.

MS: Are there other weddings like this planned?
KK: Yes, we are planning a similar community wedding in Jaipur. The date has not been decided yet. But we have spoken with the Gianiji [Sikh priest]

regarding administering the oath against female foeticide, and he has agreed.

MS: Have there been opportunities to work with people from other communities affected by female foeticide?
KK: Yes we have worked with other communities, especially the Jains. The inter-community cell in RUWA also brings together leaders from various communities once every few months. We share our experiences, our

problems and try and find solutions. We also draw inspiration from one another. We all need to work together if we have to stop female foeticide in this country and give dignity to our daughters. RUWA is carrying forward what they started almost two years ago.

MS: What do people need to remember most about this issue and your work in the Sikh community?
KK: What people need to remember about me and my work is that they must STOP sex selection and female foeticide. They need to remember that girls are to be valued, loved and cared for and not killed in the womb.

MS: What is the state of women's leadership in the NGO community and broader Indian community?
KK: Women's leadership is emerging. Girls are very capable and do so well when they get opportunities. But more women need to come forward. They need to provide support to each other.

MS: What challenges do you face as a grassroots activist?
KK: My greatest challenge is to try and change mindsets. To keep working until female foeticide comes to an end.

MS: How can we have breakthroughs in the area of female foeticide?
KK: The value and dignity of the girl child needs to be established. Dowry must stop, through laws, public opinion, whatever. Girls must get equal opportunities. It is sad when girls are thrown out of their marital homes for not bringing dowry and subjected to violence. I feel pained [when I hear about that].

MS: What advice would you offer to younger women?
KK: My advice to younger women is that they must understand that women can change the world. They need to discover their strength and power from within themselves and work together to break silences. Even our scriptures say that 'Why should we talk ill of her, she who gives birth to kings?'

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Girl Child festivity marks Lohri in Punjab

By Harjinder Singh

IN the backdrop of the infamy brought about by the decreasing sex ratio in Punjab and neighboring Haryana, a large number of governmental and non-governmental organizations celebrated the Lohri festival by honouring girls and their families. What was till recently an all-male affair, with the festival becoming a joyous occasion in houses where boys are born, the Chandigarh administration, the Kalpana Chawla Pragatisheel Society in Tarn Taran and Upkar in Nawanshahr celebrated the girl child with as

much enthusiasm as is observed with the birth of a baby boy. This augurs well for Punjab and the manner in which the media has highlighted this will go a long way in reinforcing the need for respecting the girl child. It is however feared that such fanfare generally gets restricted to festivals and does not enter the psyche and thinking of those who are biased against the girl child. Let us hope and pray that it is a sure first step in letting go a big blot on the society in Punjab, which acknowledges the call of Guru Nanak to respect women, but in practice, kills thousands of to-be born baby girls.