

LITERACY AND INFANTICIDE -

a discussion exploring the relationship between a rights-based approach to literacy learning and female infanticide in Bihar, northern India, led by Dr Priti Chopra, Senior Lecturer in Education, University of Greenwich.

19th November 2015



The above painting by Rani Jha is reproduced by kind permission of Peter Zirnis and the Ethnic Arts Foundation.

PRESENTATION

The Lancet Commission (2010) review of the MDG for gender equality and empowerment problematised, amongst other aspects, gaps in the international and national prioritisation of concerns regarding reproductive health rights and violence against women. Matters of equity and ownership consistently emerge as significant challenges in applying a rights-based approach to issues of justice for women through education. According to Sen (2001) gender-based mortality inequalities is a global reality, especially, in Asia and North Africa.

Female infanticide and feticide are not restricted to the rural areas of India or solely linked to literacy and poverty. They persist across many binary divisions

such as rich/poor, educated/uneducated and urban/rural. Over three hundred thousand unborn girls have died through female infanticide and feticide in India since independence in 1947. This is only an estimate as there are thousands of unrecorded deaths. The Census of India reveals that there is a growing imbalance in the child sex ratio between male and female children 0-6 years (1991-2011 census data).

This presentation draws on ethnographic research, with different dais (traditional midwives) practicing and resisting female infanticide, in two villages in Bihar. Rather than establishing a correlation between illiteracy and female infanticide in the rural areas of India, this presentation explores the circumstances under which literacy programmes with dais could create a difference. Through ethnographic vignettes the presentation explores ways in which gender-based mortality inequalities are intertwined with socio-economic and cultural relations, within the institution of family and in the wider society, creating collusion between dais, families and patriarchal roles and values that perpetuate the practice of female infanticide. Examining the multifaceted dimensions of moral and critical agency, in research consultation with those who are impacted at all levels, may begin to render visible possibilities for collectively generated spaces that may contribute to social transformation in the practice of female infanticide. The findings of this study suggest that complexities presented by health, social, cultural, economic and education challenges require holistic and integrated policy approaches underpinned by an ethical commitment to social justice, at all levels, in processes of education.

Priti Chopra has worked in the UK and in India as an education practitioner and researcher for more than eighteen years. Currently, she is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Education and Community Studies, University of Greenwich. Her research interests include: borderless HE; intercultural learning; technology enhanced learning; global education policy and practice; and widening participation and social justice in education.