

Born Oppressed: Women in Low- Income Countries

While discrimination on the basis of gender is virtually a cultural universal, legitimate complaints of women in the high-income countries pale to insignificance when compared with the lot of poor women in the less developed nations, especially in Asia.

Oppression begins, literally, in the womb. Each year many thousands of abortions are performed in nations like India and Bangladesh simply because an amniocentesis has shown that the fetus is female. At one clinic in Bombay, of 8000 abortions performed following this procedure, 7999 were female fetuses. In rural areas where amniocentesis is unavailable, female infanticide is widespread. This practice is both cultural-killing an infant daughter is widely believed to increase the chances that one's next child will be male-and practical- many families cannot afford a large enough dowry to allow a daughter to contract a good marriage.

No one really knows how many female fetuses are aborted or baby girls are killed, but census figures strongly imply that the numbers are enormous. "Bangladesh and Afghanistan, for instance, have only 94 women for every 100 men; India has 93 women per 100 men, and Pakistan only 92. Official Chinese figures show that in 1990 there were 113 boys for every 100 girls under age 1...The five countries combined are now missing at least 77 million females"- more than twice the population of Canada. Some of this gap may be because census takers, sharing the cultural view that women are unimportant, are probably less diligent in enumerating women, but much of the variance can be attributed to darker causes.

If a girl survives her first year of life, she faces a much more difficult path to adulthood than do her brothers. Female children are weaned earlier than males, and often receive a protein deficient diet. If ill, they are rarely hospitalized: "A 1990 study of patient records at Islamabad Children's Hospital in Pakistan found that 71 percent of the babies admitted under age 2 were boys" As a result, more females die than males. "Almost one in every five girls born in Nepal and Bangladesh dies before age 5. In India, about one fourth of the 12 million girls born each year die by age 15."

Few girls receive an education. Only one-third of Pakistan's sex-segregated schools are set aside for girls. Typically, young women are withdrawn from school years before their brothers. The girls remain at home carrying water and firewood, working the fields, and helping to rear their younger siblings. By the time they are 10 or 12, many are putting in eight-hour work days.

Arranged marriage often comes early. "In Bangladesh... 738 of girls are married by age 15 and 21% have had at least one child." Across South Asia, one out of 18 women dies of a pregnancy-related cause, often from conditions which could have been remedies if poor women had better access to proper medical care.

"The Indian woman on average has eight to nine pregnancies, resulting in a little over six live births, of which four of five survive. She is estimated to spend 80% of her reproductive years in pregnancy and lactation. Because of poor

nutrition and a hard workload, she puts on around [4 kilograms] during pregnancy, compared to [10 kilograms] for a typical pregnant women in a developed country.”

Throughout their lives, adult women in developing countries work tremendously hard. One study of a North Indian village found that women did 59% of the total work, often labouring 14 hours a day and carrying burdens one and one-half times their body weight.

They also suffer extensive legal discrimination. “In Kenya and Tanzania, laws prohibit women from owning homes. In Pakistan, a daughter is legally entitled to half the inheritance that a son gets when their parents die. In some criminal cases, testimony by women is legally given half the weight of a man’s testimony and compensation for the wrongful death of a woman is half that for the wrongful death of a man.”

As a result of all these factors, women in developing nations die disproportionately young. In rich nations, women typically outlive men by seven years; in the developing world, their advantage shrinks to two or three years. And if a woman does outlive her husband, her status as a widow is extremely low. The mortality rate of Indian widows over the age of 60 is three times that of married women their age.

Source

Anderson, John Ward and Molly Moore. “Born Oppressed,” Washington Post, February 14, 1993.

Discussion Question

What approaches do you think would be most effective in improving the living standards of women in the developing nations? What role could Canada play in this process?