

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST THE GIRL CHILD

FEMALE INFANTICIDE,
FEMALE GENITAL
CUTTING AND
HONOR KILLING



BOOKLET No. 6 IN A SERIES ON INTERNATIONAL YOUTH ISSUES
YOUTH ADVOCATE PROGRAM INTERNATIONAL

DISCRIMINATION
AGAINST THE
GIRL CHILD

FEMALE INFANTICIDE,
FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING
AND HONOR KILLING

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ABOUT YOUTH ADVOCATE PROGRAM INTERNATIONAL

The mission of Youth Advocate Program International is to promote the rights and well-being of the world's youth, giving particular attention to the plight of troubled and needy youth and to those victimized by conflict, exploitation, and state and personal violence.

The Youth Advocate Program International was incorporated in 1994 and is an affiliate organization of the National Youth Advocate Program, Inc. (NYAP). NYAP is a private, nonprofit youth advocacy organization that develops and implements community-based services for troubled and needy youth. It is the parent organization of eight state affiliate programs that offer services in their respective states: Ohio, West Virginia, Indiana, South Carolina, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas and Arizona. Youth Advocate Program International is registered in the United States as a 501(c)(3) organization.

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About This Series

Youth Advocate Program International carries out research and publishes material on international youth issues as part of its mission to improve the lives of children. Booklets are published periodically to introduce readers to issues that demand world attention.

Booklet #1 Child Soldiers: Youth who Participate in Armed Conflict

Booklet #2 Child Labor: Exploited and Abused Youth at Work

Booklet #3 Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children:
Youth Involved in Prostitution, Pornography and Sex Trafficking

Booklet #4 Children Behind Bars: Youth who are Detained,
Incarcerated and Executed

Booklet #5 Children and the HIV/AIDS Crisis: Youth who are
Infected and Affected

Booklet #6 Discrimination Against the Girl Child: Female Infanticide,
Female Genital Cutting and Honor Killing

INTRODUCTION

Since Youth Advocate Program International (YAP-I) began producing its series on international youth issues three years ago, one topic has emerged in the research again and again. Gender discrimination is evident in every issue area, found in every geographic region, and permeates every culture. Recognizing that it would be impossible to examine fully the general subject of discrimination against the girl child in the format of this booklet series, we have decided to examine three of the most heinous manifestations.

Infanticide, female genital cutting, and honor killing are three practices that are carried out in several regions of the world. This booklet details the economic, cultural, and religious reasons that are given by those who perform and try to justify these acts. It is the position of YAP-I, however, that no act that threatens or takes the life of a child can be deemed an acceptable tradition.

Some of the subjects in this booklet may be new and perhaps shocking to some readers. We would remind you that the extreme acts of gender discrimination described here are part of a continuum that begins with the devaluing of girls and women in all societies. The response to this subject should not be just to seek change in someone else. It is to give proper respect and value to women and girls everywhere.

Nancy Nye
Director
Youth Advocate Program International

WHY IS THERE CONCERN ABOUT THE GIRL CHILD?

- Girls lag behind boys in many indicators used to measure well-being.
- Girls are discriminated against because of son preference and the desire to control female sexuality.
- Discrimination against girls does not end when they become adults.

As the 21st century begins it is clear that children do not fully enjoy their human rights for many material, societal and political reasons. However, girl children in particular lag behind boy children in many of the indicators used to measure well-being. United Nations (UN) statistics, national reports and studies initiated by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) show over and over again that girls, as a group, have lower literacy rates, receive less health care, and are more often impoverished than boys.¹

In addition to the typical markers of discrimination, girls also are subject to outright abuse and exploitation because of their gender. Although the preference for sons and the desire to control the sexuality of girls and women exists worldwide, cultures manifest the discrimination in various ways. This booklet examines three life-threatening practices that impact the lives of millions of girl children—female infanticide and selective abortion, female genital cutting and honor killing.

In an era when identifying the human rights of children has never before experienced more international agreement, these issues pose dramatic human rights problems that are present and pervasive in multiple countries. The task is to understand the impact of these practices on girls and their societies, why these practices persist, and how these practices may be challenged successfully.

How these forms of gender discrimination should be addressed is still being debated. Many believe that international intervention is an affront to national sovereignty and cultural practices. Others believe that the rights of girl children can be secured only with the support of the international community. This booklet will look at responses on several levels because gender discrimination crosses all cultural, racial, religious and political boundaries.

Who is a child?

Besides gender identification, the only other common feature related to these human rights abuses is that these abuses impact children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines a child as a person under the age of 18 unless national laws recognize the age of majority earlier. Because every country in the world has ratified the CRC except the United States and Somalia, 18 is accepted as the worldwide standard and is used throughout this booklet. The CRC stipulates that national governments have an obligation to protect the rights of children, as a vulnerable part of the human population, from abuses such as those described in this booklet. However, there is insufficient information about the discrimination against girl children. Women and girls often are lumped together because in many parts of the world girls are counted as women both legally and informally when it comes to issues of sexuality. While this booklet places its emphasis on girls, it is clear that efforts to end gender discrimination must include strategies that can continue to support women when they reach and pass age 18.

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WHAT IS FEMALE INFANTICIDE AND SELECTIVE ABORTION?

- Female infanticide may occur as the deliberate murder of a girl infant or young girl child or as the result of neglect.
- Selective abortion appears to be increasing as a result of new sex-detecting, prenatal technologies.
- Worldwide, there are several cultural and economic reasons for the preference of sons over daughters.

Female infanticide is the murder of a young girl child.² Selective abortion—also called gender-selective abortion, sex-selective abortion, or female feticide—is the abortion of a fetus because it is female. These practices are among the forms of gender discrimination against women and girl children where sexual roles outweigh the value of human life. Female infanticide and selective abortion are most often practiced in societies where it is believed that having a girl child is culturally and economically less advantageous than having a boy child. Parents who strongly prefer sons but who can support only a small family may choose to murder or abort a girl and attempt to have a boy instead.

Female infanticide

“Female infanticide,” writes law professor Sharon K. Hom, “is no less than a gender-based discriminatory judgment about who will survive.”³ Female infanticide may be committed deliberately or through neglect. In some cultures, female infanticide is so widely known as a traditional practice that the methods are part of community lore. In parts of India, for example, traditional methods include choking a girl infant with rice grains that swell in her mouth and throat or feeding her poisonous oleander berries.

Neglect that results in female infanticide is more widespread and insidious. There often is a correlation between a strong son preference and a health disadvantage for females,⁴ a disadvantage exacerbated when resources are scarce. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that men and boys often receive preference within households, including higher expenditures on medicines and health care. Among humans, females are biologically stronger than males, yet data on mortality and nutrition for girls suggest that in many settings their social disadvantages outweigh their biological advantages.⁵

Selective Abortion

Medical technology makes it easier for parents to discover the sex of a fetus at earlier and earlier stages of pregnancy. Such techniques have been developed to check a fetus for genetic or birth disorders, but in societies where son preference is strong, parents are eager to discover the sex of a fetus as soon as possible. As this technology spreads around the world, many women from communities with a preference for boys practice selective abortion, and abort fetuses solely because they are female. Acting on son preference at an even earlier stage, clinics that offer pre-pregnancy sex-selective technology are doing a booming business despite laws against sex-discriminatory techniques.⁶

In countries where female fetuses are aborted in favor of male fetuses, there has been a steady decline in the number of female births over the past decade. Coupled with a higher mortality rate for girl children due to neglect or murder, the ratio of women to men has noticeably fallen in comparison to countries where female infanticide and selective abortion are not practiced. (See the graph on page 9.)

Where does female infanticide and selective abortion occur?

Cases of female infanticide have been reported the world over. Numerous cases have been reported in China, South Asia

(Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan), the Middle East (Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Morocco, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, Turkey) and parts of Africa (Cameroon, Liberia, Madagascar, Senegal). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) says many of these areas are affected by son preference and daughter neglect — root causes of female infanticide.⁷

Although female infanticide and selective abortion are not traditional practices in the following countries, there also is evidence of abnormal sex ratios in mortality figures from Ecuador, Mexico, Peru and Paraguay. Most of these countries, as well as Bolivia, Colombia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Saudi Arabia have been subjects of reports of discrimination in the care of female infants and/or higher female infant death rates and malnutrition.

The world's two most populous nations, India and China, provide most of the information available today about these practices.

There is over a century's worth of research and social policy about female infanticide in India. The Indian Commissioner for Maternal and Child Health and Welfare has described female infanticide as a phenomenon that was initially confined to a specific geographical area and caste group. However, female infanticide recently has spread to other areas and caste groups,⁸ and selective abortion appears to be increasing throughout the country with the availability of sex-determining, prenatal technologies.

China, too, is a country much discussed by researchers dealing with these practices. A rise in female infanticide and selective abortion is directly attributable to relatively recent social policies designed to slow China's massive population growth. In the 1970s the Chinese government imposed a single-child family policy in most areas of the country, believing itself faced with a threatening population explosion, and hoping to foster political stability by raising the standard of living.⁹ Parents were pressured to limit their families to only one child. They were offered economic incentives to comply and penalized if they did not. This policy, coupled with a strong son preference, is believed to have caused a wave of female infanticide and selective abortion.

Why are boys more valued than girls?

Traditional cultural practices reflect deeply rooted values and beliefs. Son preference is exhibited in many cultures and is not unique to developing countries or rural areas, although it is stronger in countries where patriarchy and patriliney are prevalent. Societies that expect women to live and express themselves within narrowly defined gender roles also often exhibit cultural practices that benefit men and harm women and girl children.

Lineage: Family lineage and the family name are carried on by male children in many societies, leading parents concerned about their family's future generations to hope for a son and possibly murder or abort girl children in order to get an heir.¹⁰

Care for the Elderly: In many countries, parents rely upon their children to care for and support them in old age. The People's Republic of China, for example, has very limited pension plans and publicly-funded assistance for the elderly,¹¹ and it is commonly believed that parents without a son will have no one to care for them after a daughter marries. Traditionally, a Chinese daughter becomes her husband's "property" and moves away from her home when she marries. Her parents are left without any income or home labor she may have provided, and the groom's family receives a worker that they did not have to support through childhood.

Why are girls valued less than boys?

The preference for sons, however, is not the only reason for the practice of female infanticide and selective abortion. There are actual disincentives and costs associated with raising girl children that influence choices made in communities where this abuse is practiced. The same social practices reflect a community's low estimation of women in general.

Economics: In general, girls still have lower economic earning potential than boys. A poor family may not want the added expense of another child unless that child will someday bring economic wealth back to the family. "Compared with men, women have fewer opportunities for paid employment and less access to skill training that would make such employment possible," according to a re-

IN MOST SOCIETIES GIRLS STILL HAVE LOWER EARNING POTENTIAL THAN BOYS AND ARE OF LESS ECONOMIC BENEFIT TO POOR FAMILIES.

port by the UNHCHR.¹² In China, even if a daughter is educated, employed and able to send money to her parents, the amount is less than what a son would provide, because a woman has less earning potential and must first offer her income to her husband, to whom she is subordinate.¹³

Social Custom: Some societies practice rigid social customs that make girls much more expensive to raise than boys. In parts of India, for example, families are expected to hold religious or social ceremonies for a girl that would not be held for a boy. These ceremonies can be very expensive—often requiring a family to provide a feast or gifts for everyone in their village. “Proper” ceremonies for even one girl can ruin an already poor family, and inadequate ceremonies

are grave social disgraces. A family may choose to kill a girl child rather than take on the expense, indicating the belief that a family’s social status outweighs the value of a girl child’s life.

Throughout India, many families participate in the dowry system,¹⁴ where the bride’s family must pay a large sum of money to the groom’s family so he will marry her. The practice is illegal but nonetheless widespread. Paying a dowry for even one girl can bankrupt a poor family, whereas a son will bring wealth to his family when he marries. Furthermore, in order to disguise the illegal outright payment of dowry, the bride’s family often is expected to give their daughter several large gifts to help her establish her new household. Demands may continue to be made by the son-in-law or his family for a long period of time.

Female infanticide and selective abortion reflect the lack of value for female life

People who determine the value of a girl child only in terms of wealth have little regard for her value as a person. Her only value

is material. If tradition determines that she can only materially benefit her husband's family when she is grown, and her family lost wealth spent on her upbringing, then her value is slight. A common saying in some parts of India is, "Bringing up a girl is like watering the neighbor's plant."¹⁵ In China: "A married daughter is like splashed water."¹⁶

Women who live in societies where they are made miserable through injustice and inequality may not want to raise daughters who will live lives as unhappy as their own. Women have used this excuse as a rationale for killing their girl children. "[M]any women in feudal areas [of India] don't want to have a daughter who would go through the same misery, humiliation and dependence that seemed to define their own lives," said Vibha Parthasarathy, president of India's National Commission for Women.¹⁷

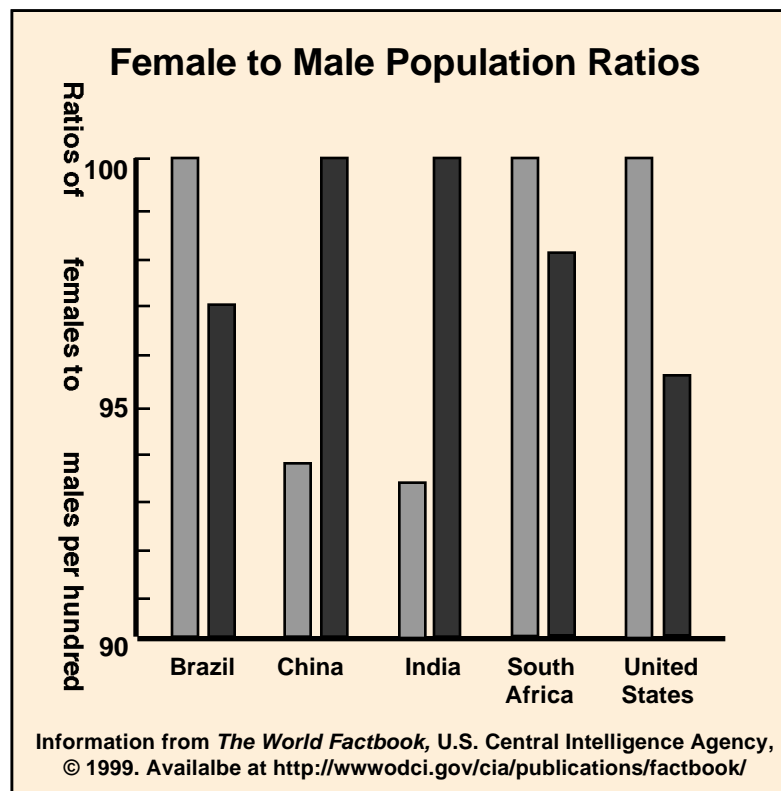
In China, women are routinely abused for giving birth to girls. Many Chinese believe women are responsible for the gender of children. Because of son preference, "unsuccessful wives have been poisoned, strangled, bludgeoned and socially ostracized....," according to law professor Hom. "[Some have been driven] to suicide, others into mental institutions.... The pressure on women is so great that many openly weep on learning they have given birth to a girl."¹⁸ This abuse not only shows the low value given the girl child, but that the mother herself is valued more for her reproductive role than as a person.

The consequences of these practices

It is difficult to determine how many girl children have been lost to female infanticide and selective abortion. More than two thirds of the world's population, according to the UNHCHR, live in countries where death rates are not published by sex.¹⁹ However, the population numbers in countries where female infanticide and selective abortion are practiced often show a disproportionate ratio of women to men. For example, as shown on the graph on page 9, India's latest census figures show a population ratio of 93.4 females to every 100 males. According to the latest census figures from China, its ratio is 93.6 females to every 100 males. These ratios contrast with other countries where these abuses are not practiced and the female population is slightly larger than the male population.

Researchers sometimes disagree as to the precise causes of gender skews in population ratios,²⁰ but evidence from smaller geographic areas where sex-selective practices are known to occur is very convincing. Population figures from particular Indian states show even greater numbers of males to females. A 1997 survey, for example, showed a population ratio of 75 females to 100 males in Punjab and Haryana, states noted for the prevalence of female infanticide and selective abortion.²¹ In a district of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu a population ratio of 91.8 females per 100 males was reported among children age 0 to 5 in the 1991 Indian Census.²²

Focusing on population disparities as the primary result of these practices, however, is to miss the underlying problem. The cultural



and economic factors that lead to female infanticide and selective abortion are part of the vicious cycle of discrimination against women and their devaluation.

“To argue that people should not murder their baby girls because they will create a future shortage of wives not only reflects a conservative vision of limited future roles for any girl babies who survive, but such an ‘argument’ also reinforces the devaluation of female life except as it is valuable in relation to men,” writes law professor Hom.²³

Former Chinese government minister for family planning Peng Peiyun has candidly written that China’s one-child policy has resulted in women being treated as commodities.²⁴ As fewer men can find women to marry, more women and girls are kidnapped and sold into slavery. Reports include ethnic Chinese girls from Vietnam kidnapped for sale in rural China, and North Korean women bought by local ethnic Korean-Chinese men.²⁵ Adoption agencies in India have been charged with such practices as singling out destitute families for solicitation and buying their girls to be resold overseas at a profit.²⁶ These adoption agencies have defended their actions by pointing to female infanticide and arguing that they are saving girls’ lives by selling them to rich adoptive parents.

The growth of selective abortion and criminal activity around this practice

As the Indian government increased criminal penalties for female infanticide, the availability of sex-determining technologies such as ultrasound scanning has led to a rise in sex-selective abortion. The Indian Medical Association (IMA) estimates that five million female fetuses are aborted each year, and estimated in 1999 that India had approximately 20,000 ultrasound clinics, most unregistered and staffed by unqualified doctors.²⁷ In the Indian states of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, mobile vans take sex-detection clinics to outlying villages. “You will find an ultrasound machine even in a village which has a road over which only a bullock cart can go, and electricity to run the machine and nothing

else,” said one ultrasonographer, as reported in *The Hindu*, a national Indian newspaper.²⁸

Because the Indian demand for fetal sex-determination is so great, doctors can ask for high fees, which has resulted in an increase in fetal sex-determination and abortion businesses and abuses. For example, the IMA revealed that some sex-determination centers perform ultrasound scanning weeks before the fetal sex can be determined and charge women to undergo repeated and unnecessary ultrasonography.²⁹ Unethical scan centers and doctors have told expectant parents they have a female fetus in order to collect the abortion money.

Efforts to stop these abuses

It seems apparent that the most direct way to stop female infanticide and selective abortion is to criminalize the behavior of the people who are actually harming girl children—the families and medical workers themselves. However, criminalization has little effect if local government officials and citizens themselves do not assist in enforcement. Social workers in one Indian state have told journalists that, despite laws to the contrary, police ignore even obvious instances of female infanticide.³⁰

Like India, the Chinese government has criminalized female infanticide and selective abortion. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women has called upon China to enforce these laws more regularly.³¹ The nongovernmental organization Human Rights in China reports that these practices are common in many parts of the country and prosecutions for female infanticide are unusual.³²

Realizing that legislation and law enforcement organizations will not curb these abusive practices by themselves, the Indian government has undertaken a variety of programs to educate its public. It also has encouraged local NGOs to take action against these practices. Some of these efforts are described in the last section of this booklet.

WHAT IS FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING?

- Female genital cutting (FGC) is an ancient cultural tradition practiced in many countries, but it occurs primarily in Africa.
- FGC includes several procedures that remove part or all of a girl's healthy exterior sexual organs.
- FGC can cause serious short- and long-term health problems.

Female genital cutting (FGC) is a centuries-old cultural practice³³ found in many countries among people following various religions and beliefs. It includes a variety of procedures that remove part or all of a girl's healthy exterior sexual organs. Also known as female genital mutilation, female genital circumcision, female genital operations, or clitoridectomies, FGC is the term used by African organizations working on this issue, and FGC is most prevalent in African countries.

Although FGC procedures may be performed any time between birth and young adulthood, FGC is generally carried out before a girl begins to menstruate. Today it is estimated that between 85 and 115 million girls and women have undergone some type of FGC.³⁴ The Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) estimates that two million girls are undergoing FGCs annually.³⁵

These procedures can cause serious short- and long-term health effects including infertility, infection and difficulty in urinating, menstruating and childbirth. There are cases where girls and women have died from the procedure.

There are rare occasions when corrective genital operations are necessary for the health of female children, but there are no medical reasons for FGC to be carried out. However, there are many cultural traditions and ideals attached to the practice of FGC, which encourage their continuation. For example, some communities prac-

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ting FGC believe that circumcising a girl will calm her and help her to be an obedient wife. Other communities consider FGC a rite of passage into womanhood, a symbol of the girl's virtue, or believe that performing an FGC will preserve a girl's virginity.

"Behind circumcision [FGC] lies the belief that, by removing parts of girls' external genital organs, sexual desire is minimized," said human rights activist Nawal El-Saadawi. "...female circumcision is meant to preserve the chastity of young girls by reducing their desire for sexual intercourse."³⁶

In many communities where FGC procedures are prevalent, women are restricted to specific, gender-oriented activities supporting their status as wives and mothers. FGC procedures are an intrinsic part of the female socialization process and are encouraged and conducted by women. Normally, men do not directly participate in FGC.³⁷

Many practicing communities believe that their religion supports the practice of FGC, but there is no basis for conducting these procedures in any of the major religious texts. FGC is practiced by people following Islam, Christianity, Judaism and animistic religions.³⁸

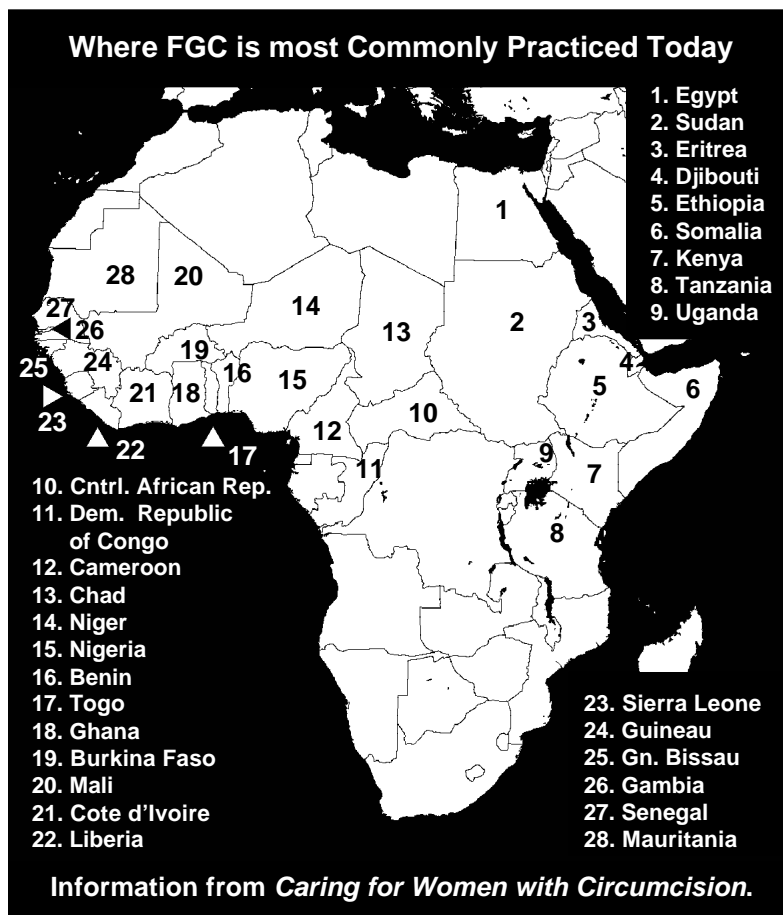
Whether one regards FGC as a valuable tradition that prepares females to fulfill their gender roles in their culture or one regards it as morally and physically harmful, the majority of procedures are conducted on girl children who have no choice about compliance and no viable alternatives provided to them. Protection of children's best interests requires their meaningful participation in matters that have such great physiological and psychological impact on their lives.

Where is female genital cutting practiced?

FGC is practiced primarily in African countries (in 28 countries of 43) but also occurs among ethnic groups in Oman and Yemen, as

well as in parts of Iraq, Saudi Arabia, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia.³⁹ In the past, FGC was practiced on girls and women from European countries and the United States,⁴⁰ and FGC cases are sporadically reported in western countries even today when it is practiced by African immigrants.

The procedures are most pervasive today in Egypt, Eritrea, Mali, Sudan and the Central African Republic.⁴¹ Studies in these countries show that there is a direct correlation between a woman's atti-



tude toward FGC and her place of residence, educational background and work status. According to the results of a health survey in Egypt, urban women are less likely than rural women to support FGC. There was less support for FGC among women who were employed and among women who had at least a secondary-level education.⁴²

What do the procedures entail and what are the health effects?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) there are four types of FGC.⁴³ These types range from the partial removal of a girl's clitoris (also known as clitoridectomy) to the complete removal of the clitoris as well as the majority of the inner and outer lips of the vagina (the labia minora and labia majora). The procedure is most often performed on young girls between the ages of 4 and 11 and in its most radical form also involves closing the partially amputated outer lips after inserting a small stick or reed into the opening to facilitate the passage of urine and menstrual blood.⁴⁴

FGC procedures usually are performed by older, respected women known as cutters.⁴⁵ Performing these procedures gives the cutters social status and provides their livelihoods.⁴⁶ When the procedure begins, other women and girls are asked to hold down the designated girl. The cutters generally have no medical training, use no anesthesia and use a variety of sharp objects easily available, such as broken glass, knives and razors. In some communities the procedure is performed on several girls in succession using the same implements without cleaning them. To hasten healing by contact, a girl's legs may be bound together for up to 40 days.⁴⁷ Cutters also use thorns and thread to suture the wound together.

Research on FGC shows that there are several short-term and long-term health ramifications. Immediately after the procedure girls often experience intense hemorrhaging, pain and shock. FGC cases resulting in severe bleeding and the inability to urinate have caused the death of many girls.⁴⁸ Girls undergoing FGC may develop infections such as tetanus, hepatitis and HIV. Long-term complications include chronic bladder infections and pelvic infections.

Radical FGCs sometimes leave an opening so small that urine and menstrual blood can pass only one drop at a time.

Other complications can include infertility, the development of excessive scar tissue, cysts at the site of the FGC, and the inability to give birth—leading to maternal and infant deaths. Girls and women who have undergone FGC report feelings of depression and an inability to experience sexual fulfillment.

For many females, the original procedure creates a need for additional cutting. Deinfibulation (re-opening the vaginal area) is often performed to facilitate childbirth, and reinfibulation (re-closing the opening) is practiced after childbirth.

Education and awareness

The challenges of addressing FGC are numerous and complicated by the fact that much of the resistance to eradicating the practice comes from women who view the procedures as a valuable cultural tradition. For example, an Egyptian health survey found that 50 percent of Egyptian women surveyed who had undergone FGC reported that they had at least one daughter who had undergone FGC also.⁴⁹ An additional 38 percent of the surveyed women wanted their daughters to have an FGC procedure in the future. Many of these Egyptian women wanted their daughters to have the same type of procedure they had.

“In many cases, the feeling is that [FGC] was practiced by the old relatives,” said Jane Frances Kulka, a member of the Ugandan parliament. “So women feel they must do it also to continue to associate themselves with the culture.”⁵⁰

The role of men cannot be ignored either. FGC is considered important to males because it is believed to enhance male sexuality, ensure the virginal status of brides, and prevent promiscuity among women. Women are concerned that they or their daughters will be refused in marriage if FGC has not been performed.⁵¹

Notwithstanding these considerations, over the last two decades there is evidence that attitudes toward FGC are changing. Some of this change can be attributed to the fact that there are more educational opportunities for girls. This has been evident in Sierra Leone where 79 percent of college-educated people surveyed favored the

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elimination of the practice.⁵² In Kenya⁵³ also a positive correlation can be seen between the number of people attending secondary school and the number of people opposed to FGC.

Several African countries have legislated against FGC,⁵⁴ including Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Djibouti, Ghana, and Guinea. National governments that support eradication include the governments of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Kenya, Niger, Senegal, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo and Uganda, but

that has not stopped the practice. Kenya is working on a national plan of action for the elimination of female circumcision,⁵⁵ and in Guinea communities have held ceremonies where cutters have handed in their instruments and agreed to stop performing FGC. In all these societies, the status and economic support FGC has provided to the cutters must be addressed. A local human rights group in Tanzania is working with ethnic groups in the state to change the FGC rituals.⁵⁶ This organization is promoting the idea of celebrating the circumcision ritual without actually performing the operation.

Awareness of FGC has become worldwide as health practitioners, educators and others have encountered girls and women who have undergone these procedures. Many western countries have made FGC illegal and have developed educational campaigns to inform the immigrant populations from FGC-practicing countries about their laws.

Several human rights organizations, including WHO, oppose the medicalization of FGC in any form and favor complete elimination. However, some FGC-practicing communities believe that it is acceptable to continue carrying out the milder forms of FGC as long as they are performed in a medical facility. Djibouti and Sudan have prohibited some types of FGC that can be legally performed, but as a result, those forms not outlawed are perceived to have gained legitimacy.⁵⁷

WHAT IS HONOR KILLING?

- Honor killing is the practice of killing girls and women who are perceived to have defiled their families' honor.
- Mere allegations of improper behavior on the part of a girl or woman are enough to defile a man's and family's honor.
- Honor killing is not dictated by any religious doctrine.

Honor killing is the practice of killing girls and women who are perceived to have defiled a family's honor by allegedly engaging in sexual activity or other improprieties before marriage or outside of marriage. The girl is killed to restore the family's honor, and girls throughout the world are at risk. The typical killer is a man in the girl's family—a father, brother, uncle, or cousin, and in most cases, he can kill with virtual impunity. In many countries where honor killing is a traditional practice, criminal penalties for honor killing are significantly lower than penalties for other types of murder.

Honor killing is an extreme form of child abuse and domestic violence. While child abuse and domestic violence are present in virtually every part of the world and may result in death, the tradition of honor killing is most widely reported in Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel (among Arab Israelis), Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, and Yemen.⁵⁸ In these and other countries where honor killing is practiced, men who kill because they believe that their honor has been defiled may still receive reduced criminal penalties or no penalty at all when they invoke the "honor defense." Brazil and the United States are examples of two countries that have de facto honor defenses.

Many of the victims of honor killing are under the age of 18, but the risk for girls does not disappear as they mature into woman-

hood. Honor killing is a danger for girls and women alike, and while this article focuses on girls, the issues discussed also are applicable to women.

The scope of the problem

Exposing the practice of honor killing began in recent years, and it is believed that hundreds of girls and women are killed each year in the name of honor, but the true scope of the problem is still largely unknown. Statistics are difficult to secure and experts believe that most honor killings go unreported. The statistics that are available provide a glimpse of the scope of the problem.

In Pakistan in 1999, 364 girls and women were reported victims of honor killing in the Sindh province alone.⁵⁹ In Jordan in 1998, there were 20 reported honor killings.⁶⁰ In Egypt in 1997, there were 52 honor killings out of 843 premeditated murders.⁶¹ In Lebanon there were 36 reported honor killings between 1996 and 1998.⁶² In Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip there were 64 reported honor crimes between 1990 and 1999. However, a woman's organization working in the Gaza Strip believes that between the years of 1996 and 1998, 177 cases reported as natural deaths in the Gaza Strip were actually honor killings.⁶³ In Yemen surveys completed by Mohammed Ba Obaid, head of the Women's Studies department of Sanaa University, found more than 400 women were reported victims of honor killings in 1997, the last year for which research is complete.⁶⁴

What is considered a violation of a man or family's honor?

Honor violations in their broadest interpretation involve a girl's use of her sexuality in a way that is deemed inappropriate by her society and particularly by the men in her family. In many Arabic and Islamic communities, the honor of a family and its men resides in the behavior of its girls and women.

Documented honor violations have included engaging in an illicit sexual relationship, eloping, being raped, being sexually abused by a family member and then running away, seeking divorce, and

being seen alone with a man or boy even if the interaction is innocent. Mere allegations of these or other improprieties are enough to defile a family and man's honor; proof is not necessary nor is it always sought. Even in cases of rape and child sexual abuse the girl victim is perceived to be the perpetrator of a crime against the honor of a man, her family, and sometimes an even broader affiliation—such as her cultural group.

In Pakistan in March 1999, a 16-year-old girl with mental retardation was reportedly raped several times by a government employee. The girl's uncle reported the rape to the police who held the girl in protective custody before releasing her to her tribe, the Mazuzai. The tribal leader concluded that the only way to restore the tribe's honor was to kill the girl for the shame she brought on the tribe. At a tribal gathering, the girl was shot dead.⁶⁵

In Jordan in 1999, 17-year-old Amal's family learned she was pregnant as the result of a rape by a friend of her father's. Amal sought an abortion, but the doctor refused to perform the procedure because it is illegal in Jordan. Amal's father took the money that was to pay for the abortion and used it to purchase a gun. Her father and brother took turns shooting her eight times with the gun while she lay on a mattress in her room. Amal survived the attack, and was placed under protective custody.⁶⁶

The age of the girl is irrelevant to her ability to bring dishonor on a family. In Palestine in 1997, a four-year-old girl was left to bleed to death by her family after she had been raped by a 25-year-old man. The girl survived, but her family believed they were dishonored, and the girl's reputation was marred for life.⁶⁷

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How honor killings are carried out

Honor killings take different forms in different countries and communities. Some girls are shot. Some girls are beaten to death. Some girls are strangled. Some girls are stabbed. And some girls are hacked to death.

In certain communities, the killing starts as a violent assault which results in the girl's eventual death. "Domestic violence is also frequently intended to punish a woman for any perceived in-subordination supposedly impacting on male honour," according to Amnesty International.⁶⁸ Burning girls and women to punish them for defiling a man's honor is common in Pakistan with 1,600 cases reported since 1994 in Rawalpindi and Islamabad alone.⁶⁹

Near Islamabad, a 17-year-old girl, Nagina Bidi, was burned by her brother when she was seen talking with her cousin. Nagina's father had chosen this cousin for Nagina to marry, but Nagina's brother wanted her to marry his wife's brother. Shortly after seeing her talking to her cousin on the street, two of Nagina's brothers tied her to a wooden post, sprinkled her with kerosene, and set her on fire. Nagina was admitted to the hospital where the family claimed she had been injured when a stove burst. The doctors learned from Nagina that her brother set her on fire for disobeying him. After 23 days in the hospital, Nagina died.⁷⁰

Why men kill for honor

In countries and cultures where communalism is the norm, the "inappropriate" actions of a girl are ascribed to and borne by her entire family. Communalistic societies focus on the shared identity of the group—such as a family—and internal or individual differences are overcome by appealing to the unity of the group.⁷¹ As such, the family is the unit to be protected, not the individual, and because individual actions reflect on entire families, men believe they bear the burden of restoring the family honor. The family honor is the men's honor, as the men's honor is the family's honor. Protecting it is paramount.

For Muslim and Druze communities that practice honor killing, there is support for the practice by both men and women who believe that the killings carry out the laws of Islam, but according to religious leaders, honor killing is not stipulated by the religion. Islam strongly condemns and punishes adultery and inappropriate sexual relationships, but the validity of the allegations and any resulting punishment is to be decided by a court, not by the family.⁷² A judge dealing with Islamic law in Pakistan told an Amnesty In-

ternational delegation that Islam strictly forbids taking the law in one's own hands and that the allegations of honor violations are to be decided by the courts.⁷³ According to Abul Menem Abu Zant, a prominent Islamic leader in Jordan, "These crimes are occurring because of ignorance of Islam."⁷⁴ Invoking Islamic law as an explanation for honor killing continues unabated among ordinary people despite the insistence by religious leaders like Abu Zant that such killings are not in accordance with Islamic law.

Arab Christians, a minority in the Middle East, also commit honor killings. Experts say that Arab Christians commit honor killings in proportion to their population in the Middle East.⁷⁵ Honor killing is not supported by Christian religious doctrine either.

Honor killing and practices of extortion

Honor killing also has become a way for people to make money. Many critics of honor killing believe that the number of killings have increased as girls and women have become more of a commodity with a financial value to men. A great deal of attention has been paid to Pakistan on the issue of honor killing, and a fair amount is known about its current practice.

Amnesty International asserts that in Pakistan, the commodification of girls and women has contributed to the violence perpetrated against them in the name of honor.⁷⁶ Viewing girls as commodities to be traded, bought, or sold comes in to play in arranging marriages, settling disputes, and compensating another family for the loss of a woman killed for honor. There have been reports of staged honor killings committed solely for the purpose of obtaining the financial settlement given to the aggrieved person.⁷⁷

In Pakistan, the financial incentives for honor killing are tied to who is killed for the alleged honor violation. Despite the fact that a girl's own family may kill her, the family is perceived to have lost something of value, and they must be compensated. If the girl or woman and man involved in the alleged honor violation are both killed, then there is no financial exchange—both families are seen as having lost something. If, however, only the girl is killed, as is often the case, the man who was her partner in the honor violation must pay the man affected in the girl's family for her loss, for the

damage to the affected man's honor, and to escape death himself.⁷⁸ In addition to honor killings for financial gain, there have been reports of men killing a man and a woman and asserting that an honor violation occurred in order to cover up the murder of the male victim for a reason unrelated to honor. In Pakistan, as in other countries, the gains associated with honor killing outweigh the costs because the punishment for honor killing is minimal.

Punishments for honor killing

Men who commit honor killings do so with virtual impunity. Killers can expect reduced sentences or no sentences at all for killing girls or women in their families. The judges who sentence men for honor killings are typically allowed great latitude in determining punishment, and most are empathetic toward the perpetrators, believing the killer acted in self-defense to protect his honor.⁷⁹ Mohammed Ajjarmeh, chief judge of the High Criminal Court in Jordan, captured this sentiment when he said, "Nobody can really want to kill his wife or daughter or sister. But sometimes circumstances force him to do this. Sometimes, it's society that forces him to do this, because the people won't forget. Sometimes, there are two victims—the murdered and the murderer."⁸⁰

Reduced criminal penalties are not solely attributable to sympathetic judges. Laws explicitly grant leniency for men who commit honor killings. In Egypt the criminal code allows a husband to receive a reduced penalty for killing his wife if he can prove that he killed her to defend his honor, and, in general, men receive lesser punishments for murdering female relatives than for any other kind of homicide.⁸¹

Laws in Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan allow men to kill their wives for adultery.⁸² The Iraqi decree issued in 1990, which allows men to take the law into their own hands, states, "Any Iraqi who kills, even with premeditation, his own mother, daughter, sister, aunt, niece or his cousin on the father's side, for adultery will not be brought to justice."⁸³ And in Iran, since 1993, despite the occasional sham denunciation by clerics, laws stipulate a fine as low as \$6.20 for killing a so-called "dishonored" woman.⁸⁴ In Pakistan, in addition to the judicial practice which allows men to argue the mitigating circum-

stance of “grave and sudden provocation” brought on by an honor violation, the 1990 law of Qisas and Diyat⁸⁵ allows men to literally get away with murder.⁸⁶

The law of Qisas and Diyat was passed in the name of Islamization of law and discriminates against women in Pakistan. The law provides for the handling of offenses relating to physical injury, manslaughter, and murder with those offenses no longer being committed against the state. The offense is now committed against the victim which leaves the victim’s family in control of whether to seek punishment of the criminal. This means that families can protect family members who killed to restore the family’s honor. The state cannot interfere in this matter, and must do its best to help the family achieve its goals even if that means that a killer is never punished.

Lebanon also had a penal code that protected men who committed honor killings, but it amended its laws and eliminated the honor killing exemption.⁸⁷ A neighboring country, Jordan, is striving to make similar progress. In December 1999, the Jordanian Senate revoked Article 340, the law that allowed leniency for men who commit honor killings.⁸⁸ The bill must be approved, however, by Jordan’s Chamber of Deputies, the same body that rejected a similar proposal brought before it earlier. Opponents to the proposal include the Islamic Action Front, the political action group of the Moslem Brotherhood. The Islamic Action Front issued a religious decree stating that attempts to change Article 340 were forbidden under Islam.⁸⁹ These Islamic leaders charge that the movement to abolish Article 340 is an attempt to “corrupt public morals and impose Western values on Jordan’s conservative culture.”⁹⁰ Secretary General Abdul Latif Arabiyat of the Islamist Action Front said, “we feel that whoever is leading all these campaigns to change is aimed at demoralizing our society, and the women’s issue has been used by the West against Arabs and the Muslims to push Arab women to abandon their honour and values and start acting like animals.”⁹¹

In countries where there are not explicit laws pertaining to honor killing, men who kill girls and women may be able to use an “honor defense” successfully.

In Brazil, men regularly invoke an honor defense when charged with the murder of a wife. The defense rests on the same premise as

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those laws that specifically recognize honor killings—the man’s honor has been defiled, he has suffered a grave injury, and he is entitled to retaliate. In 1991, Brazil’s highest court rejected the honor defense in its *Lopes* decision.⁹² Despite the court’s ruling, the honor defense continues to be used successfully in Brazil, according to Human Rights Watch.⁹³

The honor defense in the United States is typically described as a heat of passion or provocation defense. The idea, though, is the same. The man has been dishonored by the woman’s actions which provoke an extreme reaction in the man causing him to kill her. These types of defenses may, at

first, not appear to be the same as honor killing; however, the rationalizations and results are strikingly similar. In a 1994 Texas case, Kenneth Peacock murdered his wife several hours after finding her in bed with another man. Peacock pled guilty to a reduced charge of manslaughter and was sentenced to 18 months in jail. The judge who sentenced Peacock said, “I seriously wonder how many married men would have the strength to walk away without inflicting some sort of corporal punishment. I’m forced to impose a sentence only because I think I must do so to make the system honest.”⁹⁴

Honor killing is receiving public attention

The practice of honor killing is receiving more attention than ever before from mass media, NGOs and international organizations like the United Nations that are examining the problem and spurring people to action to stop it.

In 1994, Rana Husseini, a reporter for the English-language *Jordan Times*, began writing articles exposing the practice of honor killing in Jordan. With the support of her newspaper she researched and reported incidents of honor killing, and soon Arabic-language newspapers in Jordan also were reporting honor killings. Condemnation of the practice spread, and a national campaign to end honor

killing is underway in Jordan. In February 2000, approximately 5,000 Jordanians marched to urge parliament to treat honor killing cases like any other homicide.⁹⁵ The demonstrators were joined by two members of the Jordanian royal family—Prince Ali Bin Al Hussein and Prince Ghazi Bin Mohammed. The campaign to end honor killing also is supported by Jordan’s King Abdullah, Queen Rania, Queen Noor, and Princess Basma.⁹⁶

The 1999 honor killing of Samia Sarwar, who was shot dead in her lawyer’s office by her own family for seeking a divorce, was widely covered in Pakistan. In response to the murder, Sarwar’s lawyer, Hina Jilani, who was present when her client was murdered, and her law partner, Asma Jahangir, started a campaign against honor killing with other women’s rights activists.⁹⁷ A resolution was introduced in the Pakistani Senate to condemn the killing of Samai Sarwar, but the Senate rejected the resolution with some members saying that the killing was not a human rights issue, but a “matter of honor.”⁹⁸ Human rights and women’s rights activists protested the Senate’s actions by demonstrating outside the parliament building in Islamabad. They continue organizing on this issue and protesting the murder of girls and women for alleged honor violations.

Additional good news is that at least six Arab countries are trying to reduce and eliminate incidents of honor killing. An important step took place in June 1999, when representatives from Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and Jordan attended a two-day conference on “prevention of honor crimes.”⁹⁹ While the participants were human rights activists and members of NGOs working on this issue, there has been real and tangible progress made by governments against honor killing, and it appears that there is growing support for questioning and ultimately eliminating a practice that is nothing to be proud of.

WHAT CHANGES ARE OCCURRING IN THESE AREAS OF GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION?

- National governments are working on many different levels throughout their countries to bring about change.
- International human rights organizations are working in conjunction with local organizations.
- Grassroots organizing to address human rights abuses can bring about local, national and international improvements.

The UN, national governments and NGOs are facing complex challenges determining how human rights will be protected as we enter a new century. No longer is it simply a matter of identifying what constitutes a human rights abuse, nor is it satisfactory to excuse the perpetuation of abuses in parts of the world by arguing that countries undergoing economic development have lesser obligations to meet human rights standards. Western countries also are realizing, as the ideological boundaries of the Cold War dissolve, that it is not acceptable to trade off human rights concerns in order to gain political alliances.

Action on gender-based discrimination, particularly where it impacts girl children, has been held back worldwide for all these reasons and more. However, today, in each of the specific issues this booklet has discussed, important cases and local political action are setting new standards for addressing the protection of the girl child's human rights.

Public and private partnerships are being used to stop female infanticide and selective abortion

Several successive Indian governments have addressed the issue of discrimination against girl children and women—including the issue of female infanticide and, recently, selective abortion. In order to create more grassroots support for ending these practices, the Indian government has become aware of the need for programs that address the concerns of the localities from which these practices emerged. In partnership with government programs, Indian activists have sought creative ways to bring about such fundamental change.

For example, in 1998 a 40-day-long street theater campaign was organized by a nongovernmental organization and the government of India's state of Tamil Nadu. The campaign took place in the state district possessing the highest infant mortality rate and the lowest female literacy rate.¹⁰⁰ The campaign was designed to raise awareness about a wide range of health-related issues, with a focus on women's empowerment, female infanticide, and social issues such as dowry.

"What is needed is a long-term strategy to try and change the mindset of growing boys and girls, so as to counter gender discrimination at an early age," said Vibha Parthasarathy, president of India's National Commission for Women.¹⁰¹ Toward this end, The Indian Council on Child Welfare (CCW) trained teenage Indian girls in Tamil Nadu to form vigilante groups to stop female infanticide. The girls distribute leaflets advising a pregnant woman to tell the police if her husband suggests killing their child. The teenagers also insist on being present at some deliveries if they suspect female infanticide is planned.

"We no longer think girls are liabilities. We are as good as the boys—and we would go to any lengths now to save our newborn sisters," said one group leader.¹⁰² The CCW chose adolescent girls as the focus of their efforts to eradicate female infanticide so the girls themselves could later withstand social pressures to kill their own daughters.

Cultural sensitivity decreases female genital cutting

There is evidence of FGC becoming an underground practice in countries such as Egypt and Sudan when laws have been created to halt the practice.¹⁰³ High profile trials have not frightened practitioners into stopping. Many people who believe in the custom simply hide their practice from officials. However, educational campaigns designed by and implemented in the villages where the practice occurs have had some success in decreasing the number of girls undergoing FGC procedures.

In 1998, the UN Population Award was given to the Uganda Sabiny Elders Association (SEA) for its work in combating FGC within the Sabiny community in Eastern Uganda.¹⁰⁴ This was the first instance in which an outside organization, in this case the UN Population Fund, worked in concert with villagers to solve a problem instead of imposing rules perceived to be foreign. This was key to the success of SEA's educational program. Because FGC procedures are viewed as traditional, Ugandan practitioners did not want outsiders telling them that it was wrong. This was apparent when the Ugandan government first considered outlawing the practice, and there was a sharp increase in the number of girls undergoing the FGC rituals. When SEA's education program began in 1994, 854 Sabiny girls had undergone an FGC procedure that year. However, after the program had been in place for two years, the number of girls undergoing FGC dropped to 544 girls—a 36 percent difference.

Another example of a successful pilot program was developed in Kenya in the early 1990s by the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH), an international NGO, and Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization (MYWO), a local Kenyan women's organization.¹⁰⁵ Together these groups developed an alternative ceremony to FGC after research had shown them that the ceremonies surrounding the actual cutting were of great importance to the community. Alternative ceremonies were implemented one district at a time. In 1996, 79 girls participated in the alternative ceremonies, but by 1998 the number had grown to 1,136 girls.¹⁰⁶

Reporting cases of honor killing opens the national debate in Jordan

Activists in Jordan report that the public campaign to change Jordan's law, which grants men special protections when they commit honor killings, hasn't yet resulted in the legislative changes they seek. However, it has brought about open discussion and public awareness of honor killing—a problem that for too long had been hidden and sometimes denied.

The impetus for the public campaign can be, in large part, traced back to the work of a dedicated journalist concerned about the plight of Jordanian women and girls. For the past six years, journalist Rana Hussein wrote about honor killing in the English-language newspaper *Jordan Times*. She wrote so many stories that it is difficult for her to remember the details of any particular case. But after years of telling the stories of women and girls who were killed or maimed by members of their families in the name of honor, Jordan's society took notice and organized a massive public campaign.

Today, Hussein serves on the national committee of the National Campaign to Eliminate the So-Called Honor Crimes. In six months' time the committee has distributed educational information, spoken in schools and universities, collected over 15,000 signatures that were presented to members of parliament, and held a public march in the capital city Amman. Campaign members have stimulated debate in the religious and political circles. They continue to work to change the opinions of members of Parliament and when necessary, they work to replace members through the election process.

Jordan's campaign, a model in grassroots organizing, has created public discussion and thinking. Hussein says if the world becomes a safer place for women, the campaign will have achieved its goal.

CONCLUSION

Throughout history the human rights of the girl child have been among the rights most neglected by societies around the world. Girl children have been thoroughly commodified both by traditions granting males the prerogative of controlling female behavior, defining their status and imposing their dependency, and by traditions of protecting adult authority over children's best interests.

Today we must find the methods and the means of fighting to protect each person's human rights through legitimate courts of law and programs of community education. We cannot accept cultural relativism as an excuse to not do anything in the face of severe violations. Yet, we must not treat tolerance for diversity as mere rhetoric, but honor cultural diversity with respect. The girl child is vitally important to human society. Her progress must be understood as vitally important and deserving of respect in every cultural tradition. The girl child is a complete human being and is deserving of her full complement of human rights.

ENDNOTES

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Female Infanticide and Selective Abortion

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4. Fact Sheet No. 23, "Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children," Office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights, Geneva Switzerland, 1997.

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22. Rasheed Bhagat, "India: Girl Babies: Hapless Victims of Social Pressures," *Business Line*, 20 July 1999.

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