

## Celebrating International Women's Day: IFES' Partners Work with Community Leaders in India to End Female Feticide

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At 72-years-old, Sardarni Kuldeep Kaur is an unlikely activist. Although the retired secondary school teacher had been aware for years of the high rates of sex selective abortions in her Sikh community in Rajasthan, India, it wasn't until she attended an IFES-sponsored workshop on the issue in 2005 that Kaur said she "woke up."



According to India's 2001 census, the Sikh community has the country's lowest ratio of female to male children: 786 girls to 1,000 boys. Kaur said the workshop brought back a memory from her own childhood, when a man visited Kaur's house and asked her father if he would keep her newborn sister or "get rid of her" since he had seven daughters already.

"Father was livid and asked the neighbor to leave and never mention something like this ever again," said Kaur.

The workshop prompted Kaur to create a network of women's groups called Samooh Stree Satsang, whose members are women who regularly worship at Sikh places of worship (*gurdwaras*). In just two years, Kaur has formed 20 such groups in Jaipur. The groups meet monthly to sing hymns, pray, and discuss the issue of female feticide in their community. The attendees are then encouraged to spread the word in their own neighborhoods and ask as many people as possible to sign an oath stating that they will never eliminate girls in the womb or allow it to happen.

The network recently inspired the community of Sri Ganganagar to dedicate a [mass wedding](#) to the issue and obtain oaths from the couples and 1,000 [wedding guests](#). Sri Ganganagar has the lowest child sex ratio in Rajasthan.

The problem of female feticide is not limited to the Sikh community. The 2001 census found that in India overall there are 927 girls for every 1,000 boys. A preference for boys is deeply ingrained in Indian society. Practices such as dowry—which requires that a bride's family give money/valuables to the groom's family and often leads poor families into deep debt—have led to the perception that daughters are a burden on a family.

However, the 2001 census figures created an uproar in some circles in India. The government reacted by adopting an amendment to its 1994 Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques Act that sought to ban sex selection and further regulate clinics that offer pre-natal testing. While such testing is normally used to detect abnormalities in a fetus, it has been misused to allow couples to determine a child's gender and abort the fetus if it is a girl.

IFES partners, along with numerous women's NGOs in India, are working to break the silence that surrounds these practices, which are often viewed as private family matters. In February, IFES and its local partner Ekatra launched *45 Million Daughters Missing: A Compendium on Research and Intervention on Female Feticide and Infanticide in India*. The book offers abstracts of research on the issue and describes

every 1,000 males	
Religious communities	Total
All	927
Hindus	925
Muslims	950
Christians	964
Sikhs	786
Buddhists	942
Jains	870
Others	976

government and civil society initiatives that deal with female feticide and adverse sex ratio issues. It also provides a contact list of resource centers, researchers, community organizations and media resources on the issue. IFES' [Dignity of the Girl Child](#) program is part of its ongoing [Gender and Law Project](#), which was launched in 2003. All IFES programs in India are implemented through Indian partner organizations.

Kaur said partnerships between Indian and international organizations are essential in order to change the longstanding cultural norms that lead to female feticide. Together, they have the resources to back laws that ban dowry and provide vocational training to allow more women to become economically independent.

Although more female leaders are backing the campaign against female feticide, Kaur said more women need to come forward.

"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?'"