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Exposing Gendercide in India and China

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*It's a Girl—The Three Deadliest Words in the World*. Directed, photographed, and edited  
by Evan Grae Davis, produced by Andrew Brown, original music by Charles David  
Denier, 2012.

“A daughter is a burden on her father’s head” (Hindi saying).

“A thief has come” (Rajistani saying at the birth of a girl).

“It is more profitable to raise geese than a girl” (Chinese saying).

“A daughter is a thief” (Chinese saying).

Male child preference is deeply rooted in patriarchal societies such as India and China where for thousands of years, customs and values developed that equate males with strength, blessing, and wealth. As suggested by the traditional sayings above, corresponding with the high value placed on males is low value for the life of girls. *It's a Girl—The Three Deadliest Words in the World* examines the perilous life of girls and women in certain regions of India and China where high numbers of infant girls are aborted, killed after birth, and abandoned. Girls that survive often experience neglect and

abuse. *It's a Girl* takes the viewer inside India and China to bring attention to the cultural and political systems that are responsible for gendercide.

While both India and China have a strong preference for sons, the two nations have distinct factors that lead to gendercide. In India where daughters are raised as guests who will marry and join the household of their husbands, the marriage of a girl has required her family to pay a dowry of money and property. This contributes to a belief that the daughter, in contrast with the son, is a burden and a drain on the family's resources. *It's a Girl* begins in a rural village in Tamil Nadu, India with a woman who talks about killing eight of her infants upon birth because they were female. Stating that her duty is to give her husband a son, avoiding a life of increased poverty and strife are the additional reasons given for not letting her infant girls survive. Public health workers discuss common methods of infanticide employed in rural India such as suffocation, strangulation, and poisoning. The violence against girls in India extends beyond infancy and is linked to the dowry system. The dowry functions as a resource exchange system where women are traded along with money, property, and family prestige. *It's a Girl* examines how the dowry system results in the disempowerment and abuse of women and gendercide. "Dowry death" of women routinely occurs when a husband is dissatisfied with his wife, say, for not giving birth to a male child. Bride burning or self-immolation can also result from dowry disputes. Because of these devastating outcomes, in 1961 India outlawed the payment of dowry. *It's a Girl* demonstrates that the tradition continues with courts not enforcing the law and even ignoring "dowry death". With male children seen as the way to gain and not lose resources, sex determination tests are now

widespread in India and the selective abortion of female fetuses is routine. To stem the practice of female feticide the Indian government passed the 1994 Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act. The film features Dr. Mitu Khurana, a medical doctor in Delhi who refused to abort her twin daughters despite pressure and abuse from her husband, his family, and others. Dr. Khurana brought her case before the courts to test the enforceability of the PCPNDT. While her case continues she claims there is a lack of accountability and that illegal sex determination tests continue and are linked to the increased demand for abortion of female fetuses. Dr. Khurana has joined other activists in the growing campaign on behalf of missing girls in India.

In China, female feticide is linked to the government's One Child Policy in effect since 1979. *It's a Girl* explains that pregnancy and birth permits are required in China. Family planning police make raids to enforce the policy. Even though rural families may be permitted to have more than one child if the first child is not a boy, those who violate the policy and attempt to have larger families risk forced abortion and sterilization with forced abortions occurring up to the ninth month of pregnancy. If illegal births occur, they do not receive citizenship thus have no official existence. Heavy fines can be imposed. The limit on the number of children allowed combines with strong son preference to make female infants unwanted. Millions of female fetuses are aborted in China. If not aborted, girls might be abandoned and given up for adoption in efforts to have the one desired son. The consequence of the restrictive population measures in China is an out of balance gender ratio with 140 males to every 100 females (a gender ratio that India shares as well). Today there are an estimated 37 million more men than women in China. This

imbalance has resulted in an increase in female sex trafficking and kidnapping of girls to secure future brides for sons, creating even more harm for girls. Further, *It's a Girl* comments on the escalating suicide rate among women in China exploring its connection to the low cultural value placed on the life of girls. Recently China's government announced that it would begin to phase out the coercive family planning policy. This may be a step towards reducing gendercide, but as the film states, changing cultural values so that families are as happy with having girls as with boys is also required.

What is the solution to such intractable cultural systems that violate the human rights of girls and women? *It's a Girl—The Three Deadliest Words* is explicitly linked to international and national campaigns and urges the viewer to join scholars, grassroots organizations, and activists to apply pressure and intervene in these nations. As this important film argues, gendercide is the human rights issue of our day.