

Meddling Kids Movement

HIMANI KALRA

Gender Equity Activist



She/Her/Hers

MKM Gender Equity Team Member Rida Yumn Ahmed talked to Himani Kalra, a 16-year-old gender equity activist from Atlanta, Georgia, our new Gender Equity Team Member. They chatted about Every Girl Matters, raising awareness about female gendercide, and her work with the Invisible Girl Project!

Rida: I am really impressed with all of your work, especially Every Girl Matters! Can you tell me more about “Every Girl Matters”?

Himani: I started a project called “Save the Girl Child” a few years ago. Its mission is to raise awareness about female infanticide and female feticide. Female infanticide is the deliberate killing of a newborn female child by her family. It most commonly happens immediately after birth or within the first year of the girl’s life. Female feticide is the deliberate selective abortion of a female fetus after prenatal sex determination, thereby preventing a girl child from even being born. The scale of these issues is huge - female gendercide has silently claimed the lives of over 200 million girls in the world. As I developed my work and addressed its root causes; one of which is to raise social awareness and make people across the globe aware of this issue – I set up a Facebook page called “Every Girl Matters”. It has thousands of followers. Through this page, I post thoughtful articles and newsworthy items to make the public realize the true depth and nuances of female gendercide.

Rida: What got you involved in the representation of females and gender equity specifically?

Himani: I am the 2nd daughter in an Asian family, from India. Though we live in the United States, I travel to India every year and have often stayed for months at a time. Female infanticide and female feticide are problems predominantly prevalent in South Asian and East Asian countries, particularly in India and China, which are two of the world’s most populous countries. In these countries, for a variety of reasons, boys are culturally preferred over girls.

Since I have spent so much time in India, I have come to understand the patriarchal influences and different reasons that lead to female gendercide. It is a complex issue in which poverty, culturally ingrained preferences for a male offspring, societal problems like dowry, government family-restriction policies, and lack of education – lead to a devaluation of the girl-child in people’s mind and therefore the cavalier decision to terminate a life. Now, due to immigration, female gendercide is also being seen

in cultural communities in the UK, Canada, and the United States. The fact that countries outside of Asia are demonstrating a propensity to abort females at high rates, shows that no culture or country is immune to gender discrimination in the form of female infanticide and feticide. Rather, this is a human global problem.

Rida: What has it been like working to raise awareness about female gendercide?

Himani: It is been an eye-opening for people to hear about gendercide. Even though many are educated and socially progressive, they do not realize the true scale of female gendercide. This is an unspoken, ignored topic - the darker underbelly of many countries – and people simply do not realize it is happening or its magnitude and implications. The unchecked killing of baby girls has had serious consequences in the countries where gendercide is being practiced. The male-female sex ratios have been seriously skewed with only 940 girls per 1000 boys, and some areas, the numbers falling as low as 850 girls for 1000 boys. This has led to an increase in crime, trafficking, child brides, the poverty cycle perpetuating, population decline, social instability, and labor market economic distortions due to the potential of one gender not being recognized. Other than Asia, gendercide is being seen in cultural communities in developed countries like the UK, US, and Canada - through skewed sex ratios at birth (SRB's). A normal SRP is usually 106 boys to 100 girls. When gendercide is being practiced, the ratios change -shifting as high as 130 boys for 100 girls – due to female feticide. This has a great impact on countries when it continues unchecked. Yet people are often unaware this is happening in their communities or choose to ignore it!

Working to raise awareness about female gendercide is not like waving a magic wand to wish a problem away. It is a complicated multi-factorial issue that has been years in the making and is embedded in the societal and cultural consciousness. Working to eradicate it, means not only raising social awareness about the issue but also actively working for the empowerment of the girl-child and ensuring her education and health so that she can survive and thrive.

Rida: How has been your experience working as an ambassador for the Invisible Girl Project?

Himani: The Invisible Girl Project is a non-profit organization based in North Carolina, the USA that is working to end female gendercide in India. It rescues girls who are in troubled homes and vulnerable situations and who are at risk for gendercide and trafficking. It also assists Indian organizations in working for health, education, and empowerment of women. The girls that are rescued by IGP come from vulnerable situations and have faced abuse and neglect by their families. IGP provides them a safe place, stabilizes their living situations, and arranges for their care, education, and eventual adoption. One goal of IGP is to ensure that these girls know that they are precious, loved, and valued – to promote a sense of self-worth. It asks for thoughtful cards and letters to be sent to the girls periodically throughout the year – delivering messages of hope and encouragement.

I have been involved in a number of letters drives, and my work to raise awareness about female gendercide led to my joining The Invisible Girl Project as a Brand Ambassador. Together, our collective voices become amplified as we fight to protect innocent girls whose lives are being snatched away. There are other organizations like Women's Rights Without Frontiers that are also actively working against female gendercide in China.

Rida: What do you think our society and our lawmakers need to do better when it comes to empowering women and girls?

Himani: Female gendercide must first be recognized for what it is! Female infanticide constitutes one of the worst forms of human rights violations, where a girl is denied her most basic and fundamental

right -“The right to life”. In terms of the sheer size of the atrocity, the number of victims claimed by female infanticide exceeds the number of deaths in World War I and World War II combined. It surpasses the number killed in all the genocides of the 20th century and has eliminated more people than the AIDS epidemic or the great flu epidemic of the early 20th century. Female infanticide is a huge atrocity much like the decimation of Jews during the Holocaust.

It is important for all of us, no matter what part of the globe we live in, to be concerned about female infanticide. The consequences of gendercide are adverse and far-reaching. In populations with skewed SRBs, the very fact that many millions of girls have been deliberately eliminated simply because they would have been female establishes a social reality that colors the whole realm of human relationships. Sex-selective termination tears at the very fabric of liberty by denying equal protection under the law to one half of the population. The preference for boys and gender inequities will not change without outside intervention. Failure to address female gendercide is a failure to address the role of women in society. Gender equality lies at the very heart of each country’s successful progress and development. The loss of the girl child in society is a tragedy of lost potential. We must join forces to ensure that sex-selection is understood as discrimination against girls and must end.

To end gendercide, society and lawmakers must address it on many levels. Raising awareness by educating families, banning gender-based abortions, passing equal opportunity employment laws, revising patriarchal family laws to give girls more rights, improving girls health through free vaccinations and medical care, and subsidizing free schooling for girls will all go a long way in empowering girls.

Rida: Why do you think it’s important to establish organizations like Neelok Foundation? Describe your journey in empowering society through this institution.

Himani: I have co-founded a non-profit organization with my sister called The Neelok Foundation. It is in memory of my grandmother who was a pediatrician who lived in India and died of oral cancer. She treated children of the slums, and we were deeply inspired by her spirit of service. She strongly believed in the potential of the girl-child and the need to invest in her health and educational upliftment. The Neelok Foundation honors the name of her medical practice – The Neelok Medical Center – and is working to support the education and healthcare of girls in low-income communities where gendercide and patriarchal mindset are known to be prevalent and the early detection of oral cancer to decrease its high mortality rates. The Neelok Foundation is supporting free vaccinations and health camps for girls and the setting up of rural/village schools by Ekal. It is also continuously working to raise social awareness of gendercide and oral cancer.

Rida: Are there any current activism projects you are working on that you would like to talk about or plans for the future?

Himani: One of the projects that I am working on is the support of Ekal schools through fundraising. The Ekal Foundation is a non-profit organization involved in education development in rural areas and villages of India. Since village children cannot get to school, Ekal’s mission is to bring the school to them. It is the largest grassroots, non-government educational initiatives in India with a presence in 96,000+ villages. It provides free education to more than 2.6 million children, especially focusing efforts on girls. \$365 sponsors education for one Ekal school and 35 students. Ekal is able to maintain a dollar-a-day cost because it works with a low overhead budget and is supported by the villagers with whom it works. Since tackling and eradicating female gendercide ultimately involves addressing the root causes – one of which is the imperative need for education of girls, my project work is actively partnering to support and sponsor multiple Ekal schools. We are also committed to

sponsoring two girls each year for free schooling and medical care funded through The Neelok Foundation.

Rida: Can you discuss the challenges faced in countries where there is a One-Child policy in reference to the awareness you are creating.

Himani: The One-Child policy was introduced in China in 1979 to set a limit and control the size of the rapidly growing population. It lasted three decades before the government announced a reversion back to a two-child limit in 2015. However, during its time, the government monitored its compliance through enforced contraception, abortion, sterilization, and fines and harassment for violations. Atrocities like women being strapped on tables and forced into abortions, often in late stages of pregnancy were reported. The Chinese Communist Party has boasted that it "prevented" 400 million births (of which most were female) through its One Child Policy, a mind-numbing statistic! Some of these practices are still continuing even though the policy has been discontinued.

The resultant consequence is that China has a serious female deficit and faces among the world's most severe gender imbalances. According to official estimates, there are currently 60 million more males than females in China and it is estimated that in a population of 25 million babies born each year, there are 750,000 more males than females. In a hearing before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, demographic experts have warned that China's large number of "surplus males; will lead to societal instability and higher crime rates and has already increased the trafficking of women and girls. It will also cause population decline and by 2100 the population of China, according to predictions, could plummet to 700 million from its current 1.3 billion, in part due to the many years of female baby killings. However female gendercide continues unabated. Women's Rights Without Frontiers, that is crusading against gendercide in China, has substantial information on its website.