A holistic approach to preventing female infanticide
Case study: Kadayampatti Women and Child Development Project

The context
Female infanticide is a widespread problem in India and according to 1981-91 census data 1.2 million “missing girls” were unaccounted for. The cultural practice of the groom’s family requiring a dowry from the bride’s family is believed to be one of the main reasons for female infanticide in India, as girls are perceived to be a financial burden. Additionally in large families, girls are often considered to be another mouth to feed.

Widespread media coverage in the 1980s and public pressure shamed the government of Tamil Nadu into action. The government subsequently introduced two programs in 1992 to eliminate female infanticide in high-risk areas, however female infanticide still remained a big problem in the region.

In 2002, World Vision India, with support from World Vision Australia and AusAID, took a holistic approach and initiated a three-year project aimed at reducing female infanticide in Tamil Nadu’s Kadayampatti Block. The project proved to be so successful that the district governor invited World Vision to expand its work to include 17 other blocks in the Salem district of Tamil Nadu.

The project
1. Sensitisation and awareness program:
The Kadayampatti project adopted an innovative, integrated and participatory approach. The project conducted gender and development (GAD) awareness and training for families, youth, schools and police. It provided pre-marriage counselling to discourage the dowry practice and advocated the elimination of female infanticide and violence against women.

2. Women’s self-help groups: Women have been the driving force in this project. By organising themselves into self-help groups (SHGs), they identified high-risk families and provided culturally-appropriate counselling. They were also trained on female infanticide and other gender-based issues and were instrumental in delivering GAD awareness training to the community. They became the community watchdog in challenging female infanticide and other gender-related issues.

3. Women in MED programs: Micro-Enterprise Development (MED) was a key aspect of this project, providing credit and skills to the SHGs. The project targeted vulnerable groups and high-risk families and collaborated with government, NGOs and banks. Partnerships with healthcare providers ensured healthcare for targeted groups, whilst the banks provided access to loans of twice the amount of SHGs’ savings deposits. Collaboration with police facilitated counselling for women who reported sexual abuse and violence, and collaboration with schools facilitated the training of young people on gender-based issues.

4. Education as a better model for empowerment:
The World Vision Area Development Program in the region introduced the KGBV (Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidhyalaya) school, a Government of India project to educate girl children aged 10 to 14 years. It targeted girls in very poor families, girls who had dropped out of school and school who were never enrolled. The active involvement of and increasing awareness of parents about the value of girls’ education and the empowerment of the Parent Teachers’ Association and Community Based Organisations contributed to accelerating girls’ education and reducing female infanticide.

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1 High risk families in this study include the poorest of the poor, landless, widows, women-headed families, people with a disability, people discriminated against due to caste and families with more than five children.
Project outcomes

• There has been a significant decrease in the incidence of female infanticide in Kadayampatti Block as shown by the decrease in the female infant mortality rate (IMR) from 156 in 1999 to 48 in 2005 (see figure below). This rate was slightly higher than the project target of 43, the national average.

Figure 1 Kadayampatti Block Female Infant Mortality Rates, 1999-2005


• There has also been a reported decrease in violence against women. There has been change in community tolerance of violence against women with the community and SHGs taking the lead in conflict resolution and providing counselling.

• The GAD awareness and sensitisation activities have resulted in husbands and wives both contributing to the household workload, leading to more harmonious family relationships. Prior to the project, women were just confined to their homes, doing all the productive and reproductive roles. Women have also been enjoying relative freedom of movement as a result of joining the SHGs. Their successes in acquiring skills, running their businesses and earning income have resulted in women gaining respect from their husband and husband’s family.

• Community attitudes to the dowry system are slowly changing, with the majority of grooms’ families now accepting whatever the bride’s family is offering and in some villages dowry is no longer required at all.

• There has been a marked increase in girls’ attendance at school. This has been attributed to changing attitudes towards women and girls and the high value given to education as a result of the GAD awareness and sensitisation program. Adoption of a government policy providing free education to all and grants to pay for books, transport and food provided an additional incentive to send girls to school. Introduction of the KGVB model helped girls from Kadayampatti to access education.

• Although only 35 percent of women surveyed reported an improvement in their economic status as a result of the Kadayampatti program, the most remarkable change was in the economic status of the poorest of the poor. In one village where 80 percent of residents had been classified as “poorest of the poor”, there were now no members in this category. In material terms, this meant that they had gone from having no house and little food to now having a roof over their head, three meals a day, a change of clothes and their children were now attending school. Discrimination against the lowest castes is also decreasing as the lowest caste members are now allowed to drink from tumblers in the village. In addition, the social status of widows is improving and they are slowly gaining respect and integrating more into the community. They no longer have to wear white saris as a sign of their marital status.
Lessons learned

• The key to the success of the Kadayampatti project was the involvement and active participation of all community members as change agents, including gaining the active support of men for the SHGs. This was instrumental in changing community attitudes to female infanticide and changing community perceptions about women being a financial burden.

• Gender education and sensitisation, pre-marriage counselling, school involvement in community development and counselling for people reporting cases of violence against women were paramount in changing attitudes and motivating communities to act. This process encouraged community members to consider the best ways to address female infanticide and other gender-based issues.

• The holistic approach to female infanticide and gender-based issues, which addressed cultural, political and economic issues, proved to be very successful. Intensive GAD promotion, education and sensitisation at all levels addressed the cultural aspects of the issues. The creation of the SHGs provided a social, political and economic movement to address gender-based issues in an integrated way. They were able to identify high-risk families, and provide them with social and economic support, both in terms of counselling and as managers of microfinance projects.

• It was important to engage governments, NGOs and other organisations to maximise and share resources and provide the legal environment to address the issues.

• The building of strong and transparent relationships with the communities was important to gain trust and confidence and to motivate people so that attitudes could be changed. Working alongside the communities, building their capacities and providing support and encouragement, motivated the communities to reflect, change mindsets and attitudes, and act on the issues.

• Investing in girls and giving special attention to girls’ education improved girls’ status and reduced the number of female infanticide cases.

Finally, clearly defined and participatory monitoring systems, conducted by, with and in communities and SHGs at all levels, allowed for steps to be taken to improve the project and rectify any problems. To enable the communities and SHGs to effectively perform their monitoring roles, it is also important to clearly define the monitoring roles, processes and systems and to build the capacity of communities and SHGs to undertake these roles.

Project funding and contact information

This project was supported by World Vision Australia and AusAID.

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Sources:
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