

Lesson 8: Heroism: Fighting Femicide

PURPOSE

To motivate students to embody the heroism of justice in their daily lives.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Understand that heroism means embodying habits of excellence, such as justice.
2. Recognize femicide as an example of a contemporary human rights violation committed against women.
3. Recognize examples of people who oppose femicide and work to abolish this practice.

VOCABULARY

- Heroism: embodying habits of excellence
- Femicide: the practice of intentionally aborting female children or killing them after birth because of the preference for male posterity

MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- [Video](#): India's Missing Daughters
- Mara Hvistendahl: Missing – 163 Million Women
- Discussion Guide: Missing
- [Trailer](#): It's a Girl Documentary

PROCEDURE

Step 1: Review the previous lesson. Recall the definition of justice. Highlight that justice means that different things should be treated equally if they are equal (or at least very similar) in some relevant and important principle and that justice should be blind to everything except this important principle.

Step 2: Explain that today, the class will deal with the topic of heroism, specifically that relating to justice. Ask the students if they remember what heroism is and how it is defined. After listening to students' initial comments, recall the definition of heroism and write it on the board:

Heroism: embodying habits of excellence

Explain that during this lesson, the class will explore what constitutes heroism of justice and how one can embody it. The class will learn about different people fighting injustice in different parts of the world today, to see what we can learn about fostering habits of excellence in the area of justice.

Step 3: Today, many historical violations of justice and human rights have been overcome in different countries. Nevertheless, many injustices and violations of human rights still exist today. One of them is called femicide or female infanticide.

In 1990, Amartya Sen, an Indian economist from Harvard, coined the term “missing women” to account for the fact that in some parts of the world, most notably in India and China, the ratio of women is suspiciously low. Sen noted that “at birth, boys outnumber girls everywhere in the world, by much the same proportion — there are around 105 or 106 male children for every 100 female children.”⁷⁵

Nevertheless, after conception, “biology seems on the whole to favor women. Considerable research has shown that if men and women receive similar nutritional and medical attention and general health care, women tend to live noticeably longer than men. Women seem to be, on the whole, more resistant to disease and in general hardier than men, an advantage they enjoy not only after they are forty years old, but also at the beginning of life, especially during the months immediately following birth, and even in the womb. When given the same care as males, females tend to have better survival rates than males. Women outnumber men substantially in Europe, the US, and Japan, and in most of Asia and North Africa.”⁷⁶

However, in some parts of the world, this ratio is significantly more skewed. In some Indian states like Punjab and Haryana, Sen noted, that the ratio is remarkably low (0.86) on the whole in India and Bangladesh, China (0.94) and Pakistan (0.90). Comparing these ratios to the usual of women to men of 1.05, Sen estimated, that “a great many more than 100 million women are ‘missing’.”⁷⁷

These numbers were later updated and some scientists show that there are at least 163 million women missing in the world currently, as femicide and infanticide go unreported.

The reasons for “missing women” are complex, but one of them is femicide. The vocabulary definition of femicide is:

Femicide: a practice of intentionally aborting female children or killing them after birth because of the preference for male posterity

⁷⁵ Amartya Sen: More Than 100 Million Women Are Missing, 1990.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Mara Hvistendahl is a Science magazine correspondent who was a college student in China when she first saw an elementary school classroom where boys seriously outnumbered girls. Returning to China as a journalist several years later, she set out to investigate how, exactly, an estimated 163 million females came to be missing from Asia's population — in South Korea, Vietnam, and Georgia, as well as India and China. The result of her research is the book *Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys Over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men*, from which we will read the excerpt adapted from the book's opening chapter.

Divide students into groups and ask them to read the text, [Missing: 163 Million Women](#) and discuss the accompanying questions. After the groups finish discussing, ask them to share their conclusions with the rest of the class. Lead the class discussion based on the Answer Key provided with the text.

Step 4: Note that even though femicide is widespread in some parts of the world, there are those who heroically fight to oppose and abolish these practices in law, culture, providing caregiving solutions and education.

Show the [video](#): India's Missing Daughters to learn more about the practice and people who are heroically working to oppose it and offer remedies.

After watching the video, highlight the following heroic examples:

Dr. Mitu Khurana - a woman who was a victim of sex-selection procedures and continues to fight for justice. When she conceived twin girls, her husband started pressuring her to have an abortion which she did not want. After giving birth, her mother-in-law kicked one baby girl down the stairs, attempting to kill her. After these terrible experiences, she decided to fight back and file a case against her in-laws.

Rajan Choudry - Runs an NGO to save unborn baby girls (female fetuses) by organizing raids to dismantle sex-selection racquets and illegal abortion clinics. He understood how sonography techniques were misused to determine the sex of fetus and abort female fetuses. Even though prenatal sex scans became illegal, many doctors performed underground scans, charging enormous fees.

Devendra Agarwal - a social worker who leads an orphanage for abandoned girls. He was deeply disturbed by hearing the news of newborn girls being dumped in garbage dumps and drains, so he put a baby basket outside his office and ashram (a monastery or a place of worship in Indian religions) for mothers to put their babies there instead of killing or abandoning them, so he could take care of them.

Hemant and Kavita Maroo - a couple who could not have children for a long time and decided to adopt a girl after learning that girls are being killed in India simply for being girls. They adopted a baby, Jenisha, from an orphanage. Jenisha was abandoned (dumped in a basket) in freezing temperatures when she was only a few days old.

Lead the class discussion by explaining that these are all normal people who are not celebrities, famous leaders, or globally lauded human rights champions. Each of these people recognized an important problem in their local community and heroically stood up to oppose it.

These problems may not exist in all places in the world, but the example of these people demonstrates that it is always critical to stand up for human dignity and to oppose violations of dignity, even when that opposition is unpopular or without public approval.

These stories show that every heroic action demands attention to problems or challenges within the community in which we live or find ourselves. In earlier lessons, the class learned that coercive family planning still happens in many countries around the world today. It is especially important to reflect on the value people give to those most vulnerable in our country, including children who are not yet born, and especially children that are targeted for abortion because of disability, race, or other characteristics.

Sometimes the problems we see around us may not directly affect us, but we see that it is a violation of the dignity of another human person. Dr. Mitu Khurana experienced injustice herself and decided to oppose that same injustice. Others, like Rajan Choudry and Devendra Agarwal, recognized an important violation of human rights causing other people to suffer.

Step 5: If helpful, consider expanding the conversation based on the [Discussion Guide: Missing](#). This can depend on the time available for the discussion, the interest of students in the topic and the readiness of the teacher to deal with the topic of abortion.

Step 6: Summarize. Recall the most important facts about the missing women, the violation of human dignity and rights through femicide and the examples of people who are working to oppose that injustice. Remind students that habits of excellence are something they can practice every day. Heroic actions and reactions to injustice are an outgrowth of pursuing small habits of excellence in our daily life.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Show the students the [trailer](#) for the documentary *It's a Girl*. Propose the idea of organizing a movie night with discussion, as well as the possibility to discuss it later in class.

Mara Hvistendahl: Missing – 163 Million Women⁷⁸

Midway through his career, Christophe Guilmoto stopped counting babies and started counting boys. A French demographer with a mathematician’s love of numbers and an anthropologist’s obsession with detail did his dissertation research in Tamil Nadu, a state in southwestern India where the fertility rate had fallen to European levels even as personal income remained low. But over the course of working in India, he realized that people were not simply having fewer children. They were having fewer girls.

Outside of the pocket of rural Tamil Nadu where Guilmoto happened to do his field research, Indians rarely killed infants. “Everybody talked about infanticide because it carried more emotional weight”, he recalls, “[B]ut actually it was hardly in existence.” As it turned out, Tamil Nadu was in fact one of the states where girls had a better prospect of survival, while in 2001 the northwest, a wealthy region considered India’s breadbasket, reported a regional sex ratio at birth of 126 – that is, 126 boys for every 100 girls. (The natural human sex ratio at birth is 105 boys for every 100 girls.) The cause for this gap, Guilmoto quickly learned, was that pregnant women were taking advantage of a cheap and pervasive sex determination tool – ultrasound – and aborting if the fetus turned out to be female.

The link to technology was alarming, for it meant that India’s skewed ratio of male to female newborns was an outgrowth of economic progress, not backward traditions. And it wasn’t just happening in India. Guilmoto found that several other Asian countries exceeded the biological upper limit of 106 boys born per 100 girls. In the 1980s, South Korea, Taiwan, and parts of Singapore registered sex ratios at birth exceeding 109. By 2000, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia would show sex ratios at birth of over 115, and significantly skewed birth ratios would later appear in Vietnam and Albania as well. In preliminary census results released this spring, China reported a sex ratio at birth of 118 boys per 100 girls, while India, which uses an alternative statistic, reported 914 girls for every 1,000 boys, ages 0-6. People, Guilmoto realized, were engineering what he calls “rampant demographic masculinization”— a change with potentially grave effects for future generations. “It was very difficult,” he told me, “not to see it as a revolution.”

In 2005, Guilmoto calculated that, had Asia’s ratio remained at its natural equilibrium of 105 over the past few decades, the continent would have had an additional 163 million women and girls.

[...] As the first generation touched by sex-ratio imbalance grows up, the silent biological discrimination that is sex selection has been exacerbated by more visible threats to women, including sex trafficking, bride buying, and forced marriages.

⁷⁸ excerpt from Mara Hvistendahl: *Unnatural Selection; Choosing Boys Over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men*.

In South Korea and Taiwan, increasing numbers of men obtain wives on one-week “marriage tours” of Vietnam — a trade similar to America’s mail-order-bride industry but so pervasive that in South Korea more than 1,000 international marriage agencies have registered with the government. In wealthy parts of China and India, men buy women from poorer regions, working through shady brokers who may or may not bother to secure the women’s consent. In poorer parts of China and India, they visit brothels staffed by prostitutes who have often been forced into sex work.

As Generation XY matures in other parts of the gender-imbalanced world, moreover, even these crude tactics will not be an option. Men in western China, eastern India, Vietnam, Georgia, Albania, and other countries with recent or looming sex-ratio imbalances won’t be able to import women, because at some point in the near future the supply of women will dry up. “The idea of importing brides to solve the shortage in women may work in countries with lower populations, but in a huge country like China they are just a drop in the ocean”, Tian Xueyuan, deputy director of the China Population Association, recently told the China Daily – “It’s not a realistic solution.”

It won’t just be forlorn single men who will suffer in 2020s Asia and 2030s Eastern Europe. Other scholars have begun to calculate the impact that hundreds of millions of surplus men will have on everything from health care to crime. Historically, societies in which men substantially outnumber women are not nice places to live. Sometimes they are violent: Leaders in both China and India now see the imbalance as a threat to social stability.

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

What are some figures which testify to the phenomenon of missing women?

What was the reason for the gap in the ratio of women to men in India?

Which violations of human dignity and rights happened as a result of missing women?

What are the consequences of the missing women for the “surplus men” and people around them?

Answer Key for the teacher

1. **What are some figures which testify to the phenomenon of missing women?** Hvistendahl gives figures which testify to the number of missing women:

“In 2001 the northwest, a wealthy region considered India’s breadbasket, reported a regional sex ratio at birth of 126 — that is, 126 boys for every 100 girls. And it wasn’t just happening in India. Guilimoto found that several other Asian countries exceeded the biological upper limit of 106 boys born per 100 girls. In the 1980s, South Korea, Taiwan, and parts of Singapore registered sex ratios at birth exceeding 109. By 2000, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia would show sex ratios at birth of over 115, and significantly skewed birth ratios would later appear in Vietnam and Albania as well. In preliminary census results released this spring, China reported a sex ratio at birth of 118 boys per 100 girls, while India, which uses an alternative statistic, reported 914 girls for every 1,000 boys, ages 0-6.”

2. **What was the reason for the gap in the ratio of women to men in India?** Hvistendahl discusses the reason for the gap in the number of women versus men:

“The cause for this gap, Guilimoto quickly learned, was that pregnant women were taking advantage of a cheap and pervasive sex determination tool — ultrasound — and aborting if the fetus turned out to be female. The link to technology was alarming, for it meant that India’s skewed ratio of male to female newborns was an outgrowth of economic progress, not backward traditions.”

3. **Which violations of human dignity and rights happened as a result of missing women?** Hvistendahl argues that this injustice did not stop of itself, but that the process of femicide led to subsequent human rights violations:

“As the first generation touched by sex-ratio imbalance grows up, the silent biological discrimination that is sex selection has been exacerbated by more visible threats to women, including sex trafficking, bride buying, and forced marriages.

In South Korea and Taiwan, increasing numbers of men obtain wives on one-week “marriage tours” of Vietnam—a trade similar to America’s mail-order-bride industry but so pervasive that in South Korea more than 1,000 international marriage agencies have registered with the government. In wealthy parts of China and India, men buy women from poorer regions, working through shady brokers who may or may not bother to secure the women’s consent. In poorer parts of China and India, they visit brothels staffed by prostitutes who have often been forced into sex work.”

4. **What are the consequences of the missing women for the “surplus men” and people around them?** Hvistendahl discusses the consequences of having a population of “surplus men”:

“It won’t just be forlorn single men who will suffer in 2020s Asia and 2030s Eastern Europe. Other scholars have begun to calculate the impact that hundreds of millions of surplus men will have on everything from health care to crime. Historically, societies in which men substantially outnumber women are not nice places to live. Sometimes they are violent: Leaders in both China and India now see the imbalance as a threat to social stability.”

Discussion Guide: Missing

One of important hot-button issues of today is the problem of abortion. Discussion of the issues often leads to discomfort and divisiveness. Nevertheless, since it is one of the most important human rights issues of today, it is important to engage in critical thinking and civilized dialogue about it.

After introducing the students to the topic of the discussion, ask the questions below.

1. In the beginning of the video, a demographer from the Indian Institute of Technology says that ironically, “the womb is today one of the most unsafe places for the girl child.”⁷⁹
 - Do you think the same could be said for unborn children in general, considering that about 73 million abortions occur worldwide each year?⁸⁰
 - Does this meet the demands of justice? Explain.
 - How can we make the womb a safer place both for the girl child and for children in general?

2. Dr. Mitu Khurana hoped that her daughters would be embraced by her husband’s family. Instead, they were not accepted and her mother-in-law tried to kill one of her daughters.
 - Do you think that thinking about girls as unwanted influences the attitudes people take toward them?
 - Is this attitude respectful of human dignity?
 - How would you apply this reasoning to speaking about “unwanted children” in general?

3. Since prenatal screening tests became available in 2000, almost all children with Down Syndrome in Iceland are aborted. On average, only two children with Down Syndrome end up being born each year in Iceland, and this is mostly because the prenatal screening tests are only 85% accurate.⁸¹
 - Do you think children with Down Syndrome and disabilities in general are seen as less valuable than other children?
 - Are they also viewed as an unwanted burden by their parents or the society?
 - Does this attitude respect their dignity?

79 CNA Insider: Killed In The Womb For Being Girls: India’s Missing Daughters, 2019, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8WHQ9Lp310> (last visited Dec 2, 2022).

80 Guttmacher: Unintended Pregnancy and Abortion Worldwide, March 2022, available at <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-worldwide> (last visited Dec 1, 2022).

81 Juliana Quinones, Arijeta Lajka: “What kind of society do you want to live in?": Inside the country where Down syndrome is disappearing. in: CBS News, available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/down-syndrome-iceland/> (last visited Dec 1, 2022).

4. In the US, children from black and Hispanic racial background are predominantly being aborted. For example; "In 2016, as in previous years, more African American babies were aborted than were born alive in New York City."⁸². For this reason, some black Americans have argued that abortion is being used as means of racial sex-selection.
- Do you think that in some cases the lives of children from non-white racial background can be seen by society as less valuable?
 - Is this respectful of their dignity?
 - How can the dignity of children from different races be protected before birth?
5. We have seen that today, some societies are placing conditions on children for their birth based on sex, race, economic background, disability, and other characteristics.
- Is it just to put sex, race, economic background or disability as a condition for the birth of a child?
 - What should be the important principle of justice in this respect?
 - Are human dignity and rights dependent on sex, race, disability, level of poverty or other characteristics? If not, on what are they based?

⁸² Tessa Longbons: Abortion Reporting: New York City, Charlotte Lozier Institute, December 2018, available at <https://lozierinstitute.org/abortion-reporting-new-york-city-2016/> (last visited Dec 2, 2022).

Answer Key for the teacher

1. The fact that around 66 countries in the world have legalized or decriminalized abortion on request⁸³, show that the womb is indeed one of the most unsafe places for unborn children. This should not be so since justice demands that law protect the life of everyone equally, regardless of age, stage of development, sex, or other characteristics. One of the most important purposes of law is to protect life and security of persons. The principle that ought to guide whether or not one's life should be protected by law is whether or not that person is a human being, and the law should be blind to all other characteristics. Biology and embryology have proven that the embryo and fetus are human beings⁸⁴ and members of human species, which means their lives should also be protected by law.

To make the womb a safer place for girl children and for children in general, one solution is to make the laws more protective of unborn children. Statistics show that many women who decide to have an abortion are pressured by their partners and families, social, psychological and by economic circumstances.⁸⁵ Society could and should work to provide alternatives to those women so they are not forced to have abortions.

2. When we are thinking about girl children in terms of being wanted or not, we evaluate their worth on the basis of the wishes and desires of their parents and the society. However, as the class learned in this curriculum, what gives humans their worth is their dignity and human dignity is intrinsic – all people have it by virtue of being human. This means that the worth of a human person cannot not be approached from the point of view of the wishes of parents or society, but from the perspective of intrinsic value. Each person is unique and unrepeatable, regardless of whether her parents recognize this or not.
3. Suggesting prenatal screening to women so that they can terminate children with Down Syndrome or any disability is to condone the view that persons who (could) have a disability as less valuable than other children. Implicit in this idea is that their lives are not worth living, or that they are too much of an unwanted burden for the parents and society. Aborting children with Down Syndrome or a disability definitely violates their dignity since they are treated as less valuable and not offered an equal opportunity to be born, as other children are.

83 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). World Population Policies 2017: Abortion laws and policies.

84 Moore KL, Persaud TVN. The Developing Human, 7th ed. Philadelphia: Saunders–Elsevier, 2003; 31; Carlson BM, Human Embryology and Developmental Biology, 3rd ed. Philadelphia: Mosby–Elsevier, 2004; 2, 8–10, 31.

85 BMC Womens Health. 2013; 13: 29. Published online 2013 Jul 5. doi: 10.1186/1472-6874-13-29 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3729671/> (last visited Dec 2, 2022).

4. Even though this is often not explicitly stated, some societies consider that the lives of children from non-white racial background are less valuable, since they are more likely to encounter social and economic difficulties, and could possibly end up in crime. In the book *Freakonomics*, professors John J. Donahue and Steven D. Levitt, propose that women who are at greater risk of giving birth to crime-prone children are disproportionately more likely to elect to have abortions. The cumulative effect of these individual-level decisions, so their thesis goes, would, over time yield a reduction in the rate of serious crime.⁸⁶ This idea is similar to population control as it views certain people as “problems” to be eliminated or reduced, rather than addressing the issues. The idea that you can stop crime by preventing certain people or populations from reproducing is modern day eugenics. This attitude does not respect human dignity; it views the lives of some as more or less valuable and fails to provide equal opportunity to all persons.

We in society must work to provide alternatives to women so they feel supported in their courage to choose to respect their dignity and the dignity of another person, so that all children know they are wanted and welcomed.

5. Putting sex, race, or disability as a condition for the birth of a child is unjust since justice should be blind to those characteristics when it comes to right to life. The important principle of justice in this respect is whether someone is a human being, which unborn children definitely are regardless of their sex, race or disability. Also, their human dignity and fundamental human rights are not based on those characteristics, but on the fact of them being human. All persons have dignity regardless of any characteristics, including their stage of development, except their humanity.

⁸⁶ Steven D. Levitt, Stephen J. Dubner: *Freakonomics. A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, 2009.