



## **ASIA/INDIA - Surgery to change sex to female infants: the condemnation of the Church**

Bhopal (Fides Service) –What has taken hold in the state of Madhya Pradesh (central India) is an aberrant phenomenon: cases in which doctors practice surgery to change sex to female babies multiply, at the request of parents who favor males. The state government has launched an official investigation to stop the practice, known as "genitoplasty", which has already seen 300 cases of girls under the age of one year operated in the city of Indore. The cost of the surgery is the equivalent of about \$ 3,200, and the emergence of this phenomenon has made Indore city a destination for families from other states, like New Delhi and Mumbai.

Activists and human rights organizations have defined the practice as "shocking" and the National Commission for Child Protection has asked the government for stricter measures to block it. "We have strongly condemned, as Indian bishops, this horrible practice. It is the result of a mindset that favors male as a source of profit and as a son of greater value, mortifying the dignity of women", explains Fr. Charles Irudayam, Secretary of the "Committee for Justice, Peace and Development" of the Episcopal Conference of India in an interview with Fides. "We knew about the phenomenon of selective abortion which, according to some studies, over the past 20 years has concerned more than 5 million young girls. The government is trying to deal with ad hoc measures, and in fact there has been a decrease. Now surgery emerges. I believe it is first and foremost the parents' responsibility who demand it, then the doctors who carry it out. A lot needs to be done – just like what the Church is doing - to spread a culture of equality and to promote the dignity and the rights of women in society. But we have to fight a rooted mindset, and is therefore a work that takes time", remarks the Secretary. The Catholic Church, recalls Fr. Irudayam, handles thousands of health care facilities, "valued for their excellent work, which spread a mentality and practice of respect for life and human dignity. We must continue in the work of educating the conscience". Fr. Anand Muttungal, spokesman for the Council of Bishops of Madhya Pradesh, told Fides: "The preference to male is still a strong factor in the families of the Hindu faith, the belief is that to have salvation you need a son. With the religious factor, the problem becomes large. As a Church of Madhya Pradesh we have expressed our concern and we try to be close to the problems and needs of the people".

In India there are about 500 million women, out of a population of over one billion people. Since independence the state has enacted laws to protect the rights of women, but gender inequality is still an open issue. According to data from the NGOs, the infant deaths of females exceed the males by more than 300 thousand units per year, because of the privilege given to males also in nutrition. Women suffer discrimination in childhood, then in access to education, in employment and in all sectors of society. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 07/08/2011)