

MALE CHILD PREFERENCE FOR THE FIRST CHILD DECREASING AMONG WOMEN IN SURAT CITY

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ABSTRACT

The systematic undervaluation of women is quite visible in our country through adverse sex ration at birth for girls. The present study attempts to address the desired gender preferences of the first child of couples in Surat city. Randomly selected 270 women were interviewed using a semi structured questioner. It was observed that just below two-thirds (63%) of the respondents had expressed their contentment with either gender choice. Of the remaining the majority had expressed their desire for a male child (22.2%) followed by a female child (14.4%). 'Ensuring continuation of family name' was the most cited reason for preferring male as a first child while 'females are considered as the 'Laxmi' of the house' was the most common reason for favouring female as first child. However, Nearly all of the respondents (98.9%) profess that boys and girls should be given equal rights. At the minimum the study revealed that the people of Surat city are becoming sensitive towards the issue of male child reference or at least adopting a politically correct attitude in public settings.

Keywords: Gender, female foeticide, India

INTRODUCTION

The systematic undervaluation of women is quite visible in our country in terms of lower status of girl child; unwantedness; practices as dowry; lower social status of parents of brides; lifelong responsibility of parents even after marriage; fear of sexual exploitation and abuse; disdain upon arrival of girl child and have been amply documented by various researchers.¹⁻⁴ The sex ratio at birth favours females; lower female mortality throughout entire lifespan given equal medical care⁵; additionally men's propensity to risk behaviours and violence increases premature mortality⁶, contrary to higher female mortality in the Indian scenario¹.

Employing life tables of gender-neutral countries, the population sex ratio is calculated at between 97.9 and 100.3⁷. Throughout the rest of the world, women outnumber men by 3-5% so where have our women gone¹? Should we

label the distorted sex ratio deficits of 2001 Census data resulting from systematic girl child discrimination/ killings, especially in the belt extending from northwest of India to parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra⁸ as annihilation? Recent newspaper reportings and raids have clearly brought out the rampant misuse of sonography for prenatal sex determination and the need to sensitise the community on the vital issue of skewed sex ration and its consequent social impacts. The present study attempts to address the desired gender preferences of the first child of couples in Surat city.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study comprises of face to face interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule containing both, qualitative and the quantitative

variables, among 270 randomly selected families residing in Adajan Patia; Nanpura; Ghod Dod; Citylight; Sarthana Jakatnaka; Umarwada; Sagrampura; Bhatar; Rustampura; Athwalines; Parle Point; Palanpur Patia; Majuragate; Ring Road; Ugat; Bhesan; Katargam; Ved Road; Varachha; Singanpore; Amroli of Surat city of South Gujarat with their informed consent from 29th March 2007 to 15th May 2007. The first part

of the study aims to explore whether gender bias exists in our society in the form of the desired gender of the first child by the couples and the reasons for the same. Once the reasons for the gender bias of the first child are revealed and compared to their contextual background, this issue could be explored in a better manner and possible remedial solutions could be contemplated.

Table 1: Reasons for preferring a boy as the desired first child (n=60)

Reason(s) preferring a boy as the desired first child	No.	%
Son serves as a support of the family in all situations	9	15
Family tension decreases if the first child is a boy	2	3.3
A son is a great financial help to his parents	4	6.7
Boys enjoy freedom to do anything according their will	1	1.7
Ensuring continuation of family name	17	28.3
Ensuring continuation of family traditions and customs	5	8.3
A son is a matter of respect for the mother in the family	1	1.7
A boy stands good position in our society	1	1.7
For families desiring a single child, a boy is always preferred	3	5
A male child helps in having a small and happy family	1	1.7
We feel good and delighted	2	3.3
Women face ruthless and insulting experiences in life	6	10
No reason given	8	13.3

Table 2- Reasons for no gender preference desire for the first child (n=171)

Reason(s) for no gender preference desire for the first child	No.	%
In today's era, both boys and girls can progress equally	38	22.2
Gender contemplation leads to unnecessary doubts & tensions	2	1.2
Gender does not matter to us	12	7.0
Gender does not matter for first child	24	14.0
For parents all children are equal	31	18.1
Irrespective of gender of the education of a child is important	2	1.2
Gender of the child is God's gift to us	34	19.8
We don't have a say in God's orders	5	2.9
We should not oppose God's power with science & technology	1	0.8
Foetus is a living thing. So it should not be killed	1	0.8
First Child's gender is immaterial owing to fertility concerns	4	2.3
Having a child is more important than gender issues	9	5.3
Child is our second existence irrespective of the gender	2	1.2
Both girls & boys help parents so this issue is unimportant	2	1.2
In times of need a girl also helps & rescues her parent's	1	0.8
No reason	13	7.6

Table 3: Reasons for preferring a girl as the desired first child (n=55)

Reason(s) for female gender preference	No.	%
Females are considered as the 'Laxmi' of the house	15	27.2
Dikari Vahal No Dariyo	6	10.9
Female are more sensitive and caring towards parents	10	18.2
Daughter can help her mother in her household work	1	1.8
Girl makes home environment more lively	2	3.6
Daughter teaches us how to behave with a daughter-in-law	2	3.6
Female joins two families	3	5.5
Girls are equal to boys in present times	5	9.1
What females can do, males cannot always do so	2	3.6
Sons give more importance to their wives after marriage	2	3.6
At least one daughter is must for a family	2	3.6
As I am a female, why should I prefer a male child!	2	3.6
No reason	5	9.1

OBSERVATIONS

It was observed that just below two-thirds (63%) of the respondents had expressed their contentment with either gender choice. Of the remaining the majority had expressed their desire for a male child (22.2%) followed by a female child (14.4%). The reasons listed for the gender preferences or neutrality are listed in tables 1 to 3.

DISCUSSION

An estimated 80 million females are consequently missing in India and China alone¹. The deficit of women in India and the possible factors responsible for it have aroused attention among demographers, social scientists and women activists who have tried to understand the phenomenon in terms of under-enumeration of women in the census counts, sex-selective migration, and sex ratio at birth, as well as sex differentials in mortality.

The tables of this study reveal quite a rosy picture as compared to earlier times when male child preferences were very strongly expressed¹⁻⁸. Yet its hard to be believed. If gender neutrality does indeed prevail then why aren't girls visible¹? Why are they missing¹? Or perhaps this gender neutrality is a recent phenomenon? Time would tell. However, this does bring home one fact that the government activities are indeed sensitizing the people on this issue. The subsequent tables highlight the reasons for no gender preference for the first child or for male child preference or for female child preference. It is heartening to note that there are also respondents who opine a preference for a female child for reasons as considering a female child as the "Laxmi" of the house. The males gender increases substantially (44-4%) in subsequent children mainly for reasons such as continuation of family name (32.5%) and for completion of family (22.5%).

However those couples harbouring no gender preferences and those preferring a second girl child mainly due to their feeling that a female child as the "Laxmi" of the house is indeed a welcome finding given the current gender ratio disparity in our country. What is particularly interesting is that oparents are quite relaxed about the gender of their second child once their first child is a male child. The continuation of

family name emerges as the main reason as to why our society gives more importance to boys over girls, as cited by 112 out of 270 respondents.

At the same time nearly all of the respondents (98.9%) profess that boys and girls should be given equal rights. These findings alongwith publicised stringent govt. punitive sanctions on prenatal sex determination and female foeticide are indeed sensitizing our populace and are signalling the ushering in of times when the govt. would not tolerate such attitudes. The statements and campaigns of the Govt. of Gujarat, on "Beti Bachao Andolan" speak volumes about their commitment for the abatement of female foeticide. The social sanctions on "save the girl child" are very significant such as the historic and unprecedented gathering of the Patidar society to vow to stop female foeticide. The gigantic numbers of the people who participated in this event itself is mind boggling. At the minimum it is safe to say that the people of Surat city are becoming sensitive towards the issue of male child reference or at least adopting a politically correct attitude in public settings. With the forthcoming harsher govt. legislations on prenatal sex determinations coupled with intensive IEC campaigns it is quite possible that we would witness better gender ratio in our next census.

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