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A Study on Gender Preference for the Desired Fertility and Factors Influencing Son Preference in Southern India

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Though the overall sex ratio in India has increased by 0.75% in the last decade, the child sex ratio between 0-6 years age group has dropped to all time low since independence to 914 females against 1000 males. Decreased child sex ratio has been observed in Karnataka including Mysore district in the last decade. Hence a study was considered for the gender preferences for the desired fertility.

Objectives: The study conducted to determine the sex preference for desired fertility among eligible couples and also to assess factors influencing child sex ratio.

Methodology: Cross sectional study among rural population of Mysore district consisted a total of 402 eligible couples. Data regarding various basic socio-demographic characteristics & village-level economic development were collected.

Results: The study showed that 97.51 % of women want at least one girl child in the family. Majority of women 50.99% had equal preference for of boys and girls.

Conclusion: It would be to better understand & work towards finding the motivations and social norms of the women and communities who do not express a son preference.

Key words: Gender, Sex preference, son preference, sex ratio

INTRODUCTION

"Missing women" was the term mentioned to describe the raising concern of masculine sex ratio in southeast asia[1]. Though various other estimates of missing women show lower figures, consensus figure anywhere lies between 60 to 100 million.[2]

The Indian sex ratio has shown a secular decline since the beginning of the twentieth century excepting some reverse trend of improvement during 1951, 1981 and 2001[3]. Though the overall sex ratio in India has increased by 0.75% in the last decade. The child sex ratio continued to decline over the decades (976 in 1961 to 927 in 2001)[4]. In a shocking revelation, the child sex ratio between 0-6 years age group has dropped to all time low since independence to 914 females against 1000 males as given by 2011 census of India[5].

Female infanticide, and sex selective abortion as well as female child neglect are the two explanations put forth for the masculinity of sex ratio[6]. None of which is described in terms of its precise magnitude on its bearing on masculinity of sex ratios.[3] Son preference in India is a well-documented phenomenon, and its implications for skewed sex ratios, female feticide and higher child mortality rates for girls have drawn research and policy attention[7].

Within India, parts of the South exhibit comparatively little son preference--Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka, while in North Central India the problem is severe, and extreme lack of desire for any daughter is found in the Northwest--Punjab and Haryana[8]. Considering Karnataka the child sex ratio is about 943 females against 1000

males. But comparing to the figures of 2001 census the child sex ratio in Karnataka has decreased by 0.32%, which was 946 females against 1000 males[5]

Preference for sons is motivated by economic, religious, social and emotional desires and norms that favor males and make females less desirable[9]. Less well researched are the underlying determinants of son preference and its implications for living girls. Hence the present study was carried to determine the pattern of sex preference whether son or daughter for the desired fertility among eligible couples and the factors influencing their interest.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study were to determine the sex preference for desired fertility among eligible couples and also to assess factors influencing child sex ratio.

METHODS

This is a cross sectional study among rural population of Mysore district. Considering the prevalence of son preference on an average[5] to be 50%, the sample size was calculated to be 400. A total of 402 eligible couples were included in the study excluding those who didn't give their consent. Mysore district consists of seven taluks namely Heggadadevanakote, Hunsur, Krishnarajanagar, Mysore, Nanjangud, Tirumakkudal Narsipur and Piriyapatna. Out of these seven, three taluks and 10 villages from each taluk were randomly selected. 13 eligible couples were included in the study from the houses that were pre-numbered and were randomly selected. If no eligible couples were available those meeting our inclusion criteria in a selected house, subsequent numbered houses were selected. Additional number of eligible couples were included based on population proportion to size of the village.

Data regarding various basic socio-demographic characteristics were collected. Information regarding village-level economic development as measured by access to roads, electricity and health care facilities; and village-level status of women as measured by female literacy and employment outside the home were collected.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to including them in the study. Information was obtained using a pre-structured questionnaire. Among the couple only wives were interviewed to obtain the data. The study protocol was approved by Institution Ethics Committee.

Eligible couples with at least one living child were included in the study. Eligible couples who are not permanent residents of the village were excluded from the study. Physically and mentally challenged persons and couples not giving consent for the study were also excluded..

Case definition

Eligible couple: Currently married couples with wives aged between 15 and 49 years who were in need of family planning services are referred to as eligible couples.[10]

RESULTS

A total of 440 women were contacted among whom 402 gave consent to the study. Responses from 402 women were included in the analysis. The study showed that, preference was given more for boys than girls when asked about ideal composition of child for the family (table 1). But still girls are wanted. 97.51 % of women want at least one girl child in the family.

The proportion of women who wanted more boys than girls was substantially higher among those who reported their ideal family size in odd numbers, rather than in even numbers. Majority of women 50.99% of women had equal preference for of boys and girls (Table 2B). The main reasons among the women who preferred boys over girls were Continuity of lineage, old age security, Inheritance of property, Social security.

Table 1: Distribution of women based on number of boys or girls considered ideal for the family

No. of child	Frequency of women for requirement of number of boys for ideal family (n=402)	Frequency of women for requirement of number of girls for ideal family (n=402)
None	2 (0.49)	6 (1.49)
1	358 (89.05	392 (97.51)
2	31 (7.71)	3 (0.74)
>2	11 (2.73)	1 (0.24)

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages

Table 2: Gender Preference of women for child

Preferences	**Women (n=402)(%)**
More boys than girls	189 (47.01)
More girls than boys	8 (1.99)
Equal girls and boys/no preference	205 (50.99)
Preferred female child for their future	
Second born if first child was male	98.3%
Second born if first was female	0.83%
Third born if previous two were male	100%
Third born if previous two were female	0%

Table 3: Factors influencing sex preference of desired fertility

Variable	Regression coefficient*	*P*
Community level development		
Village has health facilities(n=402)	−0.12	0.06
Village has roads (n=402)	−0.07	0.12
Household wealth		
Household holds land (n=402)	0.78	0.12
Household Wealth Quintile (n=402)		
Compared to Poorest 20%	0.01	0.31
2nd poorest 20%	0.05	0.13
3rd (middle) 20%	0.01	0.08
4th (richest) 20%	0.01	0.06
Richest 20%	-0.12	0.03**
Education (n=402)		
No schooling	0.01	0.27
Primary	-0.17	<0.001**
Middle	-0.20	<0.001**
Higher	-0.59	<0.001**
Media exposure (n=402)	-0.54	<0.001**
Listen/watch radio/TV	-0.15	<0.001**
Go to cinema monthly	-0.19	<0.001**
Type of family (n=402)		
Joint	0.30	0.04*
Nuclear	-0.12	<0.001*

*logistic regression ** statistically significant (Positive coefficients indicate that the variable increases son preference while negative coefficients indicate that it reduces son preference.)

Women accept a baby of either sex for their first birth, but they are more likely to be selective for the future pregnancy if their firstborn is a female child. Only 0.83% of women wanted to be there second born to be female when first was also a girl (Table 2B)

Data revealed that Education of women had significant influence on sex preference for the child. Educated women were less likely to prefer sons than daughters. 98.2 % of the women who wanted atleast one daughter in the family were all literate received education till high school. Similarly exposure to media like radio, TV, cinema was associated with weaker son preference. (Table 3). Economic development did not show statistically significant impact on son preference. A modest weakening of son preference was seen only among the richest table (Table 3)

The preference for son was high (94.6%) among women who belonged to joint family. Majority 88.9% of the compulsion to bare male child came from elders in the family particularly mother-in-law (91.3 % of the times).

DISCUSSION

The prime motivation for son preference stems from the preferential sex composition of children.[1] When women asked about the ideal sex composition of their families, it is clear that boys are generally preferred but girls are still wanted. Similar result was obtained in a study conducted by pande et al., which revealed a majority (59.8 percent) want at least two and an additional third of the women (33.1%) want one son. But parents do not want only boys. An overwhelming majority (87.2 %) of the women want at least one daughter as well, although typically not more than one.[2]

The study from Pande et al also showed that 46 percent of women wanted more boys than girls, more than half (54.1 percent), said they want equal numbers of boys and girls, had no specific sex preference.[2] These finding is consistent with our study result which reveals 50.99% of women had equal preferences for boys and girls. This shows that preference for son is not universal.

A study by Dasgupta (2005) has proved that sex ratio is closely related to sex composition of children already born in the children.[11] Our Study showed that only 0.83% of women wanted a second child to be girl when the first child was also a girl.

Various other studies have also showed that sex composition of children in the family affects subsequent fertility behavior in the family[12]. With the ongoing pace of fertility transition, couples are rather forced to achieve a desired sex composition of children within a limited allowance for the number of children. This is mentioned as another dimension intensifying preferential fertility regulation leading to the distortion in sex ratios. With the changing social norms towards smaller family size, the availability and access to new technologies provides an easy way for parents to realize their desired goals.[1]

One might think that women from economically developed areas and those from rich families might show less preference. But our study showed no significant impact of economic improvement or wealth over son preference. Only a modest weakening for son preference was observed among the women in richest families. Our results correlate with the findings from the study by Pande etal.[9]

Elders in the family influence significantly for the preference of son over daughters. Women are pressurized to bear sons while limiting the number of daughters in order to conserve scarce household resources. [1,13]

Educational status of the women weakens the preference for son. Educated women are less likely to prefer sons over daughters, and highly educated women are especially less likely to do so. Study by Clark s shows that Son preference is not distributed randomly, but is found to be greater among the socially and economically disadvantaged, that

is uneducated, scheduled castes, rural Muslims and Hindus and non-southern states.[14]

Our study shows that access to media and cinema is significantly associated with weaker son preference. Hence access to modern information and ways of life may contribute to prefer sons and daughters equally. Similar result was seen in a study done by Bhat et al, which revealed urban residence reduced the proportion of sons in the ideal family size by about 2 percent, regular exposure to the mass media by 1 percent and high school education of women by 6 percent.[15]

CONCLUSION

Wanting of girl child among women is very much on brighter side for the improvement of sex ratio in future. The results are on the more positive side may be because the study is conducted in southern India where son preference is not strongest when compared northern part of India as shown by various studies.

Today the focus of most Indian government policy related to son preference has been to reduce sex selective abortion. It is important to address the underlying motivational factors than just the means through which it is implemented. One important source for policy inspiration on this issue would be to better understand the motivations and social norms of the significant proportions of women and communities in India who do not express a son preference.

Further research should be carried out to explore why almost half of women do not show preference to sons over daughters, is economic improvement is influencing the pattern of sex composition of children in the family in a deviant way, how can factors like education and modern information facilities made effectively available that have positive impact.

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