

DETERMINANTS OF GENDER PREFERENCE AND ITS ASSOCIATION WITH SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS AMONG MARRIED WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Background- Alarming spread of practice of female foeticide is definitely a matter of concern. It is important to recognize the social and cultural factors in that particular society in order to understand why preference for male child is so strong in a society. **Aim-** The present study was conducted to assess the effect of socio-cultural factors on the preference for son-preference and to find out reasons behind preference for son and non-preference for daughter. **Methods-** Simple random sampling technique was used for sample collection among 423 women in the reproductive age group of 15-49 years using pre-designed questionnaire. Analysis was done in SPSS version 20.0 and Chi-square test was used to test the statistical significance. **Results-** 83.2% had preference for a male child. Location of residence, social class, occupation, education and religion were significantly associated with gender preference. Keeping the family line (46.9%) alive was the major reason behind preference for son followed by old age security (34.9%) and pressure from in-laws (23.0%). Girl not staying with parents after marriage (62.8%) was found to be the most frequent reason cited for not preferring a girl child. **Conclusion-** Improvement of the status of women in the society and to ensure effective implementation of the PNDT Act has to be maintained with further strengthening to improve the existing situation.

KEY WORDS- Gender preference, Socio-cultural factors, Education.

INTRODUCTION

“May you be the mother of a hundred sons” is a common Hindu wedding blessing. In most Indian families, a daughter is viewed as a liability, and she is conditioned to believe that she is

inferior and subordinate to men.¹ Son-preference is a form of gender discrimination and is well-documented phenomenon in India, and its implications for skewed sex ratios, female feticide and higher child mortality rates for girls have drawn research and policy attention.^{2,3}

The most alarming and disturbing aspect of census 2011 report is sharp fall in female child sex ratio or juvenile sex ratio (JSR).^{4,5} State of Haryana secured first place with JSR of just 830 in the lowest JSR across country. The bottommost districts on child sex ratio lie again in Haryana- Jhhajar being worst in India with meagre 774 girls per 1000 boys.⁶

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Skewed sex ratio is an issue of major concern and has long-term social and demographic consequences.

In spite of legislations like PC-PNDT act, alarming spread of practice of female foeticide is definitely a matter of concern which need to be addressed immediately. To understand why preference for male child is so strong in a society, it is important to recognize the social and cultural factors in that particular society. The present study was therefore conducted to assess the effect of socio-cultural factors on the preference for the sex of the children. An additional objective of the study was to find out reasons behind preference for son and non-preference for daughter.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The sample size was calculated with the assumption that 50 per cent of the reproductive women will have preference for the male child and 50 per cent for the girl child. Sample size was calculated at relative precision of 10%, at 95% Confidence Interval and adding 10% non response rate, using the formula $n = Z^2 P(1-P)/e^2$; the estimated sample size will be 423 subjects.

Simple random sampling technique was used for sample collection. The study was conducted both in urban and rural field practise areas of department of community medicine. For true representation of both the groups the study samples was taken in ratio of 1.3:1 (the ratio of rural to urban population in district Ambala is 1.3:1). Thus 233 were taken from rural area and 190 from urban area. Study population for rural area was further divided among three PHCs in the ratio of 40:35:25 as per the population served under each PHC.

A pre-designed and pre-tested proforma was used to collect the baseline data by house-to-house visits. Informed oral consent was taken before the initiation of the survey. Analysis was done in SPSS version 20.0. Chi-square test was used to test the statistical significance.

RESULTS

A total of 423 women in the reproductive age group of 15-49 years were studied. Out of the 423 respondents, 352 (83.2%) had preference for a male child. The mean age of the study subjects was 31 ± 4.2 years. Majority of the women were from the socio-economic classes II to IV. Out of total 56.7 per cent of the women were from nuclear families. 59.8 per cent of them were educated up to primary and secondary school and 70.4 per cent were engaged in household work.

Out of total, 90.1 per cent of the rural women had a preference for the male child as compared to 74.7 per cent of the women from urban areas and the difference was found to be statistically highly significant ($p < 0.001$). Male child preference was observed more in joint and extended nuclear families than nuclear families. 86 per cent of the women from the lower classes III, IV and V preferred a male child as compared to 78.1 per cent of the women from the higher classes I and II. Preference for son was observed in 90.6 per cent and 60 per cent of the illiterate and graduated women respectively. Son-preference was higher among Hindus (87.2%) than others. (Table 1)

Keeping the family line (46.9%) alive was the major reason behind preference for son followed by old age security (34.9%) and pressure from in-laws (23.0%). Girl

not staying with parents after marriage (62.8%) was found to be the most frequent reason cited for not preferring a girl child. (Table 2)

DISCUSSION

Out of total 423 study subjects studied, 83.2% had preference for a male child. A study from slums of Chandigarh reported similar findings in this regard.⁷ Preference of son was observed among 57.8% of study participants. Not surprisingly BN Vadera et al also reported that 58.3 per cent of the women had preference for a male-child respectively.⁸ Another study from Gujarat also observed very high level of son-preference i.e. 87.5% among study subjects. Similar kind of gender preference has been observed in different parts of our country.^{9,10}

Preference for sons is influenced by economic, religious, cultural, social and emotional desires and norms that favour males and make females less desirable and parents expect sons but not daughters.¹¹ There is a proverb, 'Bringing up a girl is like watering a plant in the neighbour's garden'. While a son is considered an asset, a daughter is considered a liability.¹²

Our study shows significant association between level of education of women and preference for son. Regarding association between place of residence and son preference, we found the association between two as highly significant. Preference for a male child was higher among the rural women (90.4%) than the urban Women (74.7%). Narayan Das had also observed a similar difference between the rural and urban population in his study of "Sex Preference and Fertility Behavior".¹³ Another study from Jamnagar by BN Vadera also observed a

similar difference between urban and rural areas.⁸

As the findings of the study has revealed, religion has a significant role to play in changing the mindsets polluted with unhealthy son preference. Probably religious dogmas are misinterpreted by the religious leaders and practitioners who are all men so as to keep women secondary. Correct awareness and true interpretation of the holy books in every religion should be promoted which in turn would remove the blindness of millions of religious fundamentalists and practitioners.

In the present study it was found that, Keeping the family line alive and old age security were two topmost reasons for preference for a son. The two most common reasons for non-preference for a girl-child were - Not staying with parents after marriage and marriage related problems. As per a report published by UNFPA in conjunction with Ministry of H&FW and Office of Registrar General and Census Commissioner India 2003, there is a strong preference to son in India, which is influenced by many socio-economic and cultural factors, such as son being responsible to carry forward family name and occupation, source of support at the old age and to perform religious rites during cremation and practice of dowry.⁸ Findings of Dyson and Moore are in accordance with observations of our study.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

The findings of present study show that gender preference is related to the existing socio-cultural factors in the society, especially education, residential area of women and religion. This highlights the need to improve the education level amongst women. Awareness of women

particularly in rural areas is also required to decrease the preference for a male-child. Improvement of the status of women in the society and to ensure effective implementation of the PNDT Act has to be maintained with further strengthening to improve the existing situation.

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Table 1: Distribution of study subjects according to son-preference and socio-economic characteristics

DETERMINANTS	SON-PREFERENCE	P value
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		Yes (N=352)	No (N=71)	
Residence	Urban (n=190)	142 (74.7)	48 (25.3)	.000**
	Rural (n=233)	210 (90.1)	23 (9.9)	
Type of Family	Nuclear (n=240)	193 (80.4)	47 (19.6)	.20
	Joint (n=158)	137 (86.7)	21 (13.3)	
	Extended nuclear (n=25)	22 (88.0)	3 (12.0)	
Social Class	Classes I& II (n=151)	118 (78.1)	33 (21.9)	.03*
	Classes III,IV &V (n=272)	234 (86.0)	38 (14.0)	
Occupation	Non working (Housewife) (n=298)	241 (80.9)	57 (19.1)	.04*
	Working (n=125)	111 (88.8)	14 (11.2)	
Education	Illiterate (n=128)	116 (90.6)	12 (9.4)	.01*
	Primary (n=157)	129 (82.2)	28 (17.8)	
	Secondary (n=96)	78 (81.3)	18 (18.7)	
	Higher Secondary (n=27)	20 (74.1)	7 (25.9)	
	College or more (n=15)	9 (60.0)	6 (40.0)	
Religion	Hindu (n=321)	280 (87.2)	41 (12.8)	.000**
	Muslim (n=23)	18 (78.2)	5 (21.8)	
	Sikh (n=75)	52 (69.3)	23 (30.7)	
	Others (n=4)	2 (50.0)	2 (50.0)	

*p<0.05 - Significant, **p<0.01- Highly Significant.

Table 2: Distribution of study subjects by reasons cited for the son-preference and non-preference for daughter

VARIABLES*	N (%age)
Reasons for preference for son	
Son would carry on the family lineage	165 (46.9)
Old age security	123 (34.9)
Pressure from in-laws	81 (23.0)
Income purpose	38 (10.8)
Social status	49 (13.9)
To perform last rite	8 (2.3)
Other reasons	3 (0.8)
Reasons for not preference for daughter	
Economic liability (burden) necessitated by dowry to girl	57 (16.2)
Insecurity experienced by girl child	28 (7.9)
Marriage related problems	80 (22.7)
Difficulty to rear up	55 (15.6)
Not staying with parents after marriage	221 (62.8)
Other reasons	7 (1.9)

**Multiple responses permitted*

