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## **Economic Motivation and Fertility Behaviour: a Comparison of Rural and Urban Areas in Tamil Nadu**

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### **Introduction**

Fertility behaviour in India, as anywhere else, is subject to socio-economic conditions as well as religious and cultural traditions. Not only is the fertility decision of couples influenced by a wide range of factors such as education, the position of women and their participation in the work force, economic condition, urbanization, social security systems and so on, but it differs between husband and wife, and between urban and rural areas.

From the economic point of view, besides other factors, couples more children in order to supplement the family income and as a means of economic support in their old age. This motivation exerts a powerful influence on fertility increase all over the world and especially in developing countries like India [B] [C] [D] [E] [F] [G] [H]. Further, the economic motivation for children exerts a weaker influence in urban areas than in rural areas where the demand for child labour in agricultural and allied activities is greater. The changing behaviour of parents then turns towards the sex composition of children; as they expect more old age support from male children, they prefer sons resulting in an increase in fertility and poor attitudes towards family planning in urban and rural areas. Many studies have reported the strong son preference prevalent in India" [I] [J] [K] [L]

Traditionally, apart from social prestige and the felt need to continue the family line, the existence of sons is considered very important for old age support [O] [P] [Q] [R]. That this strong preference for sons can lead to female infanticide in rural areas is known, and sex differentials in child mortality has also been reported [S] [T] [U] [V]. In recent times however, demographers have declined from their stand that son preference and old age security are major factors in the fertility decision-making process of parents in developed countries. But in developing countries like India, this tendency exists even today, resulting in fertility increase.

## **Objectives**

This study focuses on the intensity of preference for sons over daughters in anticipation of old age security both physically and financially, and its impact on fertility behaviour-of urban and rural Households in Tamil Nadu.

An effort has also been made to analyze the rural-urban differentials in these, parameters in relation to fertility decision-making. The intention explore and examine the reasons for wanting sons and daughters and for educating them, and the actual, desired and ideal family size of Ids. While a large number of studies have addressed these no major attempt has been made to analyze urban-rural differentials s with regard to son preference and old age security motives holds in Tamil Nadu. The present study therefore attempts to fill

## **Data and Methodology**

Data for the study were obtained from 400 households from the urban and rural areas of Tamil Nadu by using multistage random sampling. In the first stage, all the districts of Tamil Nadu were, ranked by cumulative scores of performance of 16 basic socioeconomic and demographic indicators from 81 Census. From this, two districts which showed the best and worst viz. Madurai and Dharmapuri respectively were selected. Next, four taluks-the best and worst performing, again based on the same indicators-were selected from each district. These were respectively, Uthamapalayam and Andipatti taluks from Madurai district and Krishnagiri and Pennagaram taluks form Dharmappri district. One village and one urban ward was then selected randomly from each of the four taluks to vide rural and urban households respectively. In the last stage,) 50 households from each village and ward were selected randomly; households without children and aged couples were not included in the sample. In almost all cases, both the husband and wife from the selected household were interviewed. The questionnaire was administered between February and September 1990.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Attitudes regarding sons**

Table 1 presents the attitudes of the couples in relation to sons. More rural couples (67 per cent) -compared to their, urban counterparts (42 per cent) considered it "Very important" to have at least one son. Likewise, more urban then rural, couples considered it "somewhat important" or "unimportant" (49.0 and 32.5 per cent, and 9.0 and 0.5 per cent respectively). Interestingly however, a sizeable number of rural couples compared to urban (72 and 55 percent respectively) considered two children to be enough, irrespective of sex.

A district-wise comparison indicates that both urban and rural couples in Madurai district thought it "very important" to have at least one son (70 and 82 per cent respectively compared to 14 and 52 percent in Dharmapuri) while in Dharmapuri, more couples accorded it as "somewhat important". (82 and 42 per cent of urban and rural respectively compared to 16 and 18 respectively). Overall, both urban and rural households considered least one son as important, indicating the general tendency to value sons more than daughters.

**Table 1:** Percent Distribution of Urban and Rural Respondents by Attitudes regarding Sons

Attitude	Madurai		Dharmapuri		Combined		Total N=400
	Urban N=100	Rural N=100	Urban N=100	Rural N=100	Urban N=200	Rural N=200	
<b>How important is it to have at least one son?</b>							
Very important	70	82	14	52	42.0	67.0	54.5
Somewhat important	16	18	82	47	49.0	32.5	40.8
Unimportant	14	0	4	1	9.0	0.5	4.8
<b>If you don't get a son, What would you do?</b>							
Continue Until a boy Comes	9	6	8	13	8.5	9.5	9.0
Stop after getting girls	52	60	92	86	72.0	73.0	72.5
Uncertain	39	34	0	1	19.5	17.5	18.5
<b>Does a Greater Number of Sons Mean Higher social Status</b>							
Yes	18	29	17	15	17.5	22.0	19.8

No	73	65	83	85	78.0	75.0	76.5
No Opinion	9	6	0	0	4.5	0.0	2.3
<b>Do you consider two children to be enough, regardless of sex?</b>							
Yes	71	99	40	45	55.5	72.0	63.8
No	20	1	60	55	40.0	28.0	34.0
No idea	9	0	0	0	4.5	0.0	2.3
<b>Does a larger family mean better security in old age?</b>							
Yes	16	21	21	23	18.5	22.0	20.3
No	82	78	79	77	80.5	77.5	79.0
No idea	2	1	0	0	1.0	0.5	0.8
<b>Is a son essential to perform funeral duties?</b>							
Yes	79	59	81	87	80.0	73.0	76.5
No	6	41	17	10	11.5	25.5	18.5
Other	15	0	2	3	8.5	1.5	5.0

Note: Data collected by the author for his doctoral dissertation.

It is surprising, that though sons are obviously preferred, almost 72-73 cent of all couples indicated their willingness to limit family size if they only female children, probably because of the fear of dowry and so on [R] More urban than rural couples in Dharmapuri expressed this opinion while the reverse was true of Madurai district. Further, while only a few couples (9 per cent) wished to continue childbearing until a male child was born, about 18 per cent of both urban and rural couples were unable to give a specific answer indicating that they wanted at least one but not many sons.

Table 1 also shows that while over three-fourths of all couples (76.5 per cent) did not equate a greater number of sons with higher social status, though among those who did think so, rural rather than urban couples were more likely to

believe so (22 and 17 per cent respectively). No significant inter-district differences were evident in this regard. The findings also indicate that despite a preference for sons, as many as 80.5 percent of all urban couples and 77.5 per cent of all rural ones did not consider a large family as better security in old age. Again, among those who held this view, there were fewer urban than rural couples (18.5 and 22 per cent respectively). This attitude was more prevalent in Dharmapuri district than in Madurai district.

Traditionally, one of the major reasons for having sons is to perform the funeral rites of the parents [W]. As revealed in Table 1, more urban compared to rural couples agreed with this belief (80 and 73 per cent respectively); likewise, fewer urban than rural couples did not consider a son as essential for performing their last rites ( 11.5 and 25.5 per cent respectively). This is contrary to the expectation that rural couples tend to be more tradition-bound and hold orthodox views. District-wise, households in Dharmapuri district were observed to be more traditional than those in Madurai for wanting sons

### Reasons for Wanting Sons

Table 2 presents the reasons expressed by the couples for wanting sons daughters. The findings reflect greater similarities in responses between urban and rural couples. More than half of both urban and rural couples wanted son for old age security. This was more evident in the Madurai sample than e Dharmapuri sample. Both urban and rural households expected greater physical as well as financial help during their old age from their sons than from their daughters . Old age security was the foremost reason for sons expressed by both urban and rural respondents (53.5 and 54.5 respectively). This was followed by the son's financial contribution to the family income (15.5 per cent and 21.5 per cent of urban and rural respondents respectively) rather than his help in working on the farm, family business, house and so on (1.5 and 3 per cent of urban and rural respectively). Among other factors, which influenced son preference, emotional support expressed by 14.5 per cent of both urban and rural couples with a higher response from those in Dharmapuri than Madurai. While more urban (1 per cent) than rural (5.5 per cent) couples wanted sons ' in order to continue their family line, the need for sons to meet religious obligations did not receive any significance in the study area.

**Table 2:** Percent Distribution of Urban and Rural Respondents by reasons for Wanting Sons and Daughters

	Madurai		Dharmapuri		Combined		Total
Reasons N=100	Urban N=100	Rural N=100	Urban N=100	Rural N=200	Urban N=200	Rural N=200	N=400

<b>For wanting sons</b>							
Old age security	58	61	49	48	53.5	54.5	54.0
Financial Contribution	22	18	9	25	15.5	21.5	18.5
Emotional Support	8	11	21	18	14.5	14.5	14.5
Continue family line	7	8	18	3	12.5	5.5	9.0
Help in farm, house etc	0	2	3	4	1.5	3.0	2.3
Religious obligation	5	0	0	2	2.5	1.0	1.8
<b>For wanting daughters</b>							
Emotional support	48	79	36	52	42.0	65.5	53.8
Help in farm, house etc	33	18	48	26	40.5	22.0	31.3
Financial contribution	7	1	10	22	8.5	11.5	10.0
Religious obligations	3	0	0	0	1.5	0.0	6.8
Old age security	6	1	6	0	6.0	0.5	3.3
Continue family line	3	1	0	0	1.5	0.5	1.0

### **Reasons, for wanting daughters**

The pattern of reasons for wanting daughters is as expected, quite different from that observed in the case of sons. The direction of the responses clearly leans towards the emotional motive in urban as well as rural areas (42.2 and 65.5 per cent respectively), with a dominance in rural households (Table 2). This is followed, by their work contribution on the farm, house etc. rather than their financial contribution (from non-domestic activities), unlike in the case of sons where the latter received greater importance.

Daughter are not given importance by parents as old age economic security [Y] because they are considered transitory family members.

By and large, sons were wanted for reasons of security - in their old age and earlier through their economic contribution to the family income; from non-domestic work (19 and 54 per cent respectively compared to 3 and 10 per cent in case of daughters), while daughters were valued for emotional support and their work contribution in domestic (non-economic) terms -(54 and 31 percent respectively compared to 15 and 2 per cent in case of sons). About 7 per cent of all wanted daughters to fulfill certain religious duties during festivals etc. (Compared to 2 per cent who wanted sons for the same purpose.

### Reasons for educating children

The reasons for educating children also showed gender variations, although the couples indicated their willingness to educate both. [Table 3](#) presents the findings on this aspect of the study.

**Table 3:** Percent Distribution of Urban and Rural Respondents by Reasons for Educating Sons and Daughters

Reasons N=100	Madurai		Dharmapuri		Combined		Total N=400
	Urban N=100	Rural N=100	Urban N=100	Rural N=200	Urban N=200	Rural N=200	
<b>For educating sons</b>							
Career and employment	50	60	82	75	66.0	67.5	66.8
Status	7	5	3	5	5.0	5.0	5.0
Intelligence	21	4	8	6	14.5	5.0	9.8
Essential	13	30	2	5	12.5	17.5	12.5
Don't want	9	1	5	9	12.0	5.0	6.0
<b>For educating daughters</b>							
Good marriage	47	31	12	28	29.5	34.5	32.0
Autonomy	20	47	29	13	24.5	30.0	27.3
status	3	20	32	4	20.0	12.0	16.0
Earning potential	1	1	22	36	11.5	18.5	15.0
Don't want	24	1	5	9	14.5	5.0	9.8

Data collected by the author for his dissertations

The majority of all couples wanted to educate their son in the hope of getting economic security during their old age; they expected to get better security only if their children were economically well-off. About 67 per cent of both urban and rural couples thought that education would mean a better career and employment for their sons, a view which was more commonly expressed in Madurai - than in Dharmapuri. However, a small percentage of couples (12 per cent of urban and 5 per cent of rural) did not want to educate their sons probably because of their own economic backwardness and fear of immoralities this was more evident among urban than rural households because the economic crisis is more severe in urban areas as also the cost of schooling. It also suggests that people in rural areas are beginning to realize the importance of education, and may augur well for, fertility reduction in the coming generations. While a small percentage-probably those, belonging to the better-off business communities, considered education to be a status symbol, it was of interest to observe that about 10 per cent and 13 per cent of all couples wanted to educate their sons purely for knowledge/intelligence and because they considered it "essential" respectively. The latter two reasons were more often mentioned by the Madurai sample than the Dharmapuri one.

The reasons for educating daughters were quite different as education was considered essential not so much for getting a job as for getting a good life partner (32 per cent of all couples) as shown in Table 3. This tendency, exists more among rural sample households than urban households and has also been reported between the husband and wife [1]. A notable observation is that parents-both urban and rural-wanted to educate their daughters for reasons of providing autonomy and independence (27.3 per cent). Further, since the parents' aspirations moved towards economic freedom for their daughters, they wanted to see their daughters employed; hence their purpose of educating them to develop their earning potential (15 per cent of all couples). As in the case of sons, about a tenth of the parents did not want to educate their daughters at all.

When one looks at the two districts, the importance given to the education of both sons and daughters was greater in Madurai than in Dharmapuri, and higher among, rural than urban households. Another notable feature is the desire of rural couples in Madurai district to educate their daughters as a means to autonomy (47 per cent compared to 20 per cent of couples in urban Madurai. and 29 and 13 per cent of urban and rural couples respectively in Dharmapuri).

## Actual, desired and ideal family size

### Actual family size

Family size is defined as the number of living children in a family excluding their parents and others. The preference for sons and expectation of old age security are also influenced by actual, desired and ideal family size. Table 4 presents the actual, desired and ideal family size of the sample households

**Table 4:** Percent Distribution of Urban and rural Respondents by Actual, Desired and Ideal Family Size

	Madurai		Dharmapuri		Combined		Sample
Children	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	N=400
	N=100	N=100	N=100	N=100	N=200	N=200	
<b>Actual family size</b>							
1	1	0	0	0	0.5	0.0	0.3
2	33	32	37	34	35.0	33.0	34.0
3	40	41	48	39	44.0	40.0	42.0
4	16	16	13	23	14.5	19.5	17.0
5	6	6	0	2	3.0	4.0	3.5
6	4	5	2	2	3.0	3.5	3.3
<b>Desired family size</b>							
1	5	3	2	3	3.5	3.0	3.3
2	48	50	40	40	44.0	45.0	44.5
3	35	30	56	50	45.5	40.0	42.8
4	12	17	2	7	7.0	12.0	9.5
5	0	0	0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
6	0	0	0	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>Ideal family size</b>							
1	9	4	1	1	5.0	2.5	3.8
2	69	74	50	58	59.5	66.0	62.8
3	22	19	46	38	34.0	28.5	31.3
4	0	3	3	3	1.5	3.0	2.3
6	0	0	0	0	0.0	0.0	0.0

Data collected by author for his doctoral dissertation

The average actual family size was higher for the rural sample than for the urban sample (2.94 and 3.05 respectively); the overall actual family size of one perhaps as a result of child loss subsequent to the adoption of a permanent method of family planning. While there was a slightly higher representation of couples with two (35 and 33 percent respectively) and three (44 and 40 percent respectively) children among urban compared to rural couples, those with four children were better represented in the rural than in the urban sample (19.5 and 14.5 percent respectively)

Households with 5 and 6 children constituted only about 3 per cent of both urban and rural samples. Even though significant inter-district differences in actual family size were not evident, a slight variation could be noted. The mean actual family size in Dharmapuri was lower than in Madurai for both the urban and rural samples (**Table 5**).

**Table 5:** Mean of Actual, Desired and Ideal Family Size\* by Urban and Rural Respondents

	Madurai		Dharmapuri		Combined		Total
	Urban N=100	Rural N=100	Urban N=100	Rural N=100	Urban N=200	Rural N=200	N=400
<b>Actual Family Size</b>	3.05	3.11	2.82	2.99	2.94	3.05	2.96
<b>Desired Family Size</b>	2.54	2.61	2.58	2.59	2.56	2.60	2.58
<b>Ideal Family size</b>	2.13	2.21	2.51	2.43	2.32	2.32	2.32

\* Family Size is used to mean the number of Children, excluding parents. Data collected by the author for his doctoral dissertations.

### **Desired family size**

The desired family size of the respondents is also presented in Table 4. The two-child family norm was more or less equally desired by both urban and rural couples (44 and 45 per cent respectively) while a slightly higher proportion (46 per cent) of urban compared to rural (40 per cent) couples wanted three children. Overall, nearly 90 per cent of all couples wanted either two or three children. More couples in urban and rural Madurai (48 and 50 per cent respectively) compared to their counterparts in Dharmapuri (40 and 40 per cent respectively) opted for a two-child family. On the other hand, three children constituted the desired family size of more urban and rural couples in Dharmapuri (56 and 50

per cent respectively) compared to their counterparts in Madurai (35 and 30 per cent respectively). This desire for more children depends upon the sex composition desired, and reflects attitudes of gender preference.

The average desired family size did not show any significant difference, it was 2.56 for the urban sample and 2.60 for the rural sample. The mean desired family size in urban Madurai was lower than that in urban Dharmapuri but higher when the rural averages were compared (Table 5). By and large, the actual mean family size was higher than the mean desired family sizes all cases.

### **Family size**

Table 4 further indicates that over three-fifths (62.8 per cent) of all couples considered a two child family as ideal, and a third (31.3 per cent) considered three children as ideal. While the former was preferred by more (rural couples 66.0 per cent; urban; 59.5 per cent), the latter was preferred by more urban couples (urban: 34.0 per cent; rural: 28.5 per cent). Only nine couples considered four children as the ideal number. District-wise, more couples in the madurai sample (urban: 69 per cent; rural: 74 per cent) were in favour an ideal of two children than couples in the Dharmapuri sample (urban: 50 per cent; rural: 58 per cent), and twice as many couples in Dharmapuri (urban: 46 per cent; rural: 38 per cent) favoured an ideal of three children Compared to their Madurai counterparts (urban: 22 per cent; rural: 19 percent).

Again, no difference in mean ideal family size was observed between the urban and rural samples; it was 2.32. The mean ideal family size in Madurai district was lower than that (2.13 for urban and 2.21 for rural) in Dharmapuri district (2.51 for urban and 2.43 for rural). It was also lower than that estimated (3.2) by Khan and Rao for Bihar [H]. Further, while in Madurai, the mean ideal family size of the urban sample was lower than that of the rural, in Dharmapuri, it was the reverse (Table 5).

### **Conclusion**

The results of the above study show that a son is essential for all couples, powerful need for old age security that exists in urban and rural areas alike. Even though there is strong preference for sons, parents are inclined to stop after getting a certain number of girl children (and no boys) due to the high marriage costs of daughters. The responses of rural couples appear to favour fertility reduction, though the level of literacy is higher in urban areas. The belief that larger families mean greater old age security did not receive much acceptance in urban and rural areas. Generally, all parents preferred a son to a daughter mainly for old age security and financial help, along with other expectations such

as continuity of family line, performing funeral rituals etc. However, to what extent such benefits are actually received by parents is questionable. If so, the problems encountered by aged persons [Z] would have not arisen. Hence, in order to prevent population growth, the Government should make efforts to reduce son preference and provide old age security benefits, pensions and so on.

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