

Malhi, Prabhjot.: Influence of Gender Preference for Children on Fertility Behaviour: A Comparative Study of Men and Women in Haryana. The Journal of Family Welfare. June 1995. 41(2). p.53-60.

Influence of Gender Preference for Children on Fertility Behavior : A Comparative Study of Men and Women in Haryana

Dr. Prabhjot Malhi

Introduction

A number of recent studies [A] [D] have documented evidence to show that couples have a decided preference for a particular sex combination of children. For example, in many South Asian countries, including India, there is a strong preference for sons over daughters. In fact, son preference has been considered to be one of the factors responsible for the high fertility in these countries, and it is argued that such gender preferences for children may act as a major constraint in the implementation of family planning programs, particularly in countries which are beginning to experience a fertility transition [E] [F].

The impact of gender preference on fertility has usually been investigated by examining data relating to the sex composition of living children of couples who do not want any more children, the assumption being that if son preference has an impact on fertility, couples who have sons are much more likely to not want more children and to practice contraception. Such an impact has been documented and empirically demonstrated in several South Asian countries [I].

Some of the earlier studies conducted in India did not find any association between son preference and higher fertility. The first All India Family Planning Survey, for instance, found that the parity progression ratios of couples were not much affected by the sex of their living children. However, the survey did find that the desire for additional children was greatest among couples who had daughters only. In another study from Jordan, Bangladesh and India, Repetto [J] observed that the fertility decisions of couples were not influenced by the desire to have sons. On the contrary, they were motivated by the economic advantages associated with having children, regardless of their sex. Repetto argued that couples who already have more sons may be more likely to want more children because of the perceived financial utility of sons, while couples with more daughters may be more likely to terminate childbearing sooner because of the economic liability of having several daughters. An alternate hypothesis advanced by McClelland [K] to explain the positive association between the number of sons and fertility is that despite a strong preference for sons, couples

with several daughters may not risk having an additional child because of the fear that the child may be another daughter.

Most fertility surveys, which seek to measure the demand for children and gender preference are confined to currently married women and hence assume that the woman's response reflects the preference of the couple. Thus, it remains unclear whether it is the men or the women who exhibit a greater demand for children, particularly male children. This issue is further complicated by the fact that conflicting theoretical formulations regarding men's and women's reproductive goals are suggested in the literature. On the one hand, Caldwell [L] argues that in pre-transition societies men receive a disproportionate share of their children's love, loyalty, and labor while women have to bear the costs of childbearing and rearing, and in such social settings, the fertility desires of men will be higher than those of women. In contrast, Cain and his associates [M] suggest that in South Asian countries where women are economically dependent on their male family members, women will be motivated to want a greater number of children, especially sons, who are perceived as an insurance against the risks of divorce, widowhood and old age.

In an extensive review of the literature on the differences between men's and women's reproductive preferences in developing countries, Mason and Taj [N] conclude that although gender differences in fertility desires appear to be small and statistically insignificant, whenever differences do exist, there is a tendency for men rather than women, to prefer more sons. Further, they noted that studies from high fertility countries were somewhat more likely to show, greater gender differences in fertility intentions than studies from countries with low fertility. However, they found no consistent evidence to indicate whether married men or women desire more children even after such a qualification.

Although one would expect that the patriarchal social structure prevalent in India, particularly in North India, would result unequal fertility desires among men and women, not many studies have focussed these differences. Previous studies conducted in India on gender differences in fertility desires are few and far from conclusive [O] [P]. In a recent study, Jejeebhoy and Kulkarni [Q] observed that although the differences between the fertility preferences of husbands and wives were small, wives as compared to their husbands tended to desire a somewhat greater number of children as well as sons, and these differences tended to increase with age. Moreover, women's family size desires were primarily shaped by their concern for support from sons in old age, while men desired sons mainly for cultural and religious reasons.

This paper addresses two important research issues by utilizing data from a recent survey conducted in the rural and urban areas of Kurukshetra district in

the State of Haryana. It examines the impact of gender preferences on fertility behavior and family planning acceptance in order to gauge the extent to which son preference enhances the desire for additional children. Second, it examines the gender differences in fertility decisions by comparing the extent to which preferences for the sex of children differentially affect the reproductive desires of married men and women. It is hypothesized that the sex composition of living children has a strong impact on the desire for more children among both men and women. Specifically, those respondents who do not have a son are more likely to want additional children. Moreover, since Haryana is characterized by marked inequalities in social structure which is strongly patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal, it is further hypothesized that in such a social setting women as compared to men would have higher fertility goals and a stronger preference for sons [R].

The Setting, Data, and Methodology

Haryana is one of the economically advanced states of India with a per capita income next only to the state of Punjab. Although income levels have increased in the State, the population growth rate and fertility, remain relatively high as compared to the corresponding national averages. The crude birth rate (CBR) in Haryana declined from 37.5 per 1000 in 1981 to 34.8 in 1989 and the total fertility rate (TFR) declined from 5.4 in 1981 to 4.3 in 1987 [S] [T]. Interestingly, the contraceptive prevalence rate of the state was also considerably higher than the national average, having doubled during the last decade from 29.1 per cent in 1980 to 58.2 per cent in 1990 [U].

With regard to the status of women, gender inequalities with respect to access to education, employment and health care are very pronounced [V]. Although the female literacy rate has been steadily increasing over the last two decades, it still remains markedly lower than the male literacy rate. In 1991, female literacy was only 33.62 per cent while male literacy was 55.97 per cent [W]. The economic participation of women is among the lowest in the country; in 1991 only 11.29 per cent of the women were recorded as workers as compared to 47.92 per cent of the males [W]. Girls in the State are married at a relatively early age: in 1981, the mean age at marriage of girls was 17.84 years lower than the national average of 18.33 years. The sex ratio of the State has been historically low and in 1991 there were only 874 females per 1000 males. Although the sex ratio improved during the last 20 years, it still remains the lowest in the country. Sex differentials in child mortality are particularly striking and the sex ratio of male / female childhood mortality (q5) was only .82 in the State as compared to .94 in India [X].

Data for this study were drawn from a larger field survey conducted in the rural and urban areas of Kurukshetra district in Haryana by the Center of Research in

Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh, in 1991-92. The sample comprised 567 (269 rural and 298 urban) currently married women aged 15-49 years and 179 (105 rural and 74 urban) currently married men with wives in the reproductive ages of 15-49 years.

The survey utilized a questionnaire, which elicited information on a number of socio-economic characteristics of the household, and family size desires, and contraceptive use from currently married men and women. The rural respondents were selected from four villages randomly selected from each of the four blocks of the district while the urban respondents were randomly selected from the town of Shahabad. The two samples did not differ significantly on a number of important socioeconomic and demographic indicators such as household income, age at marriage of the women, marital duration, and total number of living children.

Cross-tabulation of data pertaining to the desire for an additional child with the number of living sons and living children was done separately for men and women, and examined to see whether the sex composition of surviving children influences future fertility intentions. Further, in order to compare gender differences in gender preference an attempt was also made to quantify these preferences by using the techniques proposed by Chang et al [Y] and Arnold [Z]. The method of Chang et al Y can be used to compute son preference and desire-for-balance ratios for respondents with two or more living children. In this paper, these ratios were computed for respondents with two living children only who desired no more children. The son preference ratio was obtained by dividing the percentage respondents with two sons who did not want any more children by the percentage of respondents with two daughters who did not want any more children. The desire-for-balance ratio was computed by dividing the percentage of respondents with two children of the opposite sex who did not want any more children by the percentage of respondents with two children of the same sex who did not want any more children.

In order to quantify the overall impact of sex preference for children on fertility and family planning behavior, the method proposed by Arnold U was used. This method assumes that in the complete absence of gender preferences, at any given parity all the couples would behave in a similar fashion as those at the same parity who were most satisfied with the current sex composition of their children, that is, at the maximum rate within that parity Z [AB]. This technique is fairly flexible and can be used with a fertility and family planning measures. In the present study, it was used to calculate the impact of gender preference on the sire for additional children.

Results and Discussion

Gender Preferences and Desire For Additional Children

Within any parity, the combinations of sons and daughters associated with a relatively higher percentage of respondents who did not want more children was interpreted to mean that the respondents had achieved their preferred sex composition of children. If son preference were to affect the desire for additional children then, within any parity, those with one or more sons would be more likely not to want more children as compared to those who did not have any sons. Conversely, if the desire for a balanced sex composition was to affect fertility the within a given parity, respondents who had either all sons or all daughters would be more likely to want additional children as compared to those who had children of both sexes. F [AA] [AC] [AD] Table 1 presents a distribution of the male and female respondents who did not any more children by the number of living children and of living sons.

Table 1: Percent male and female respondents not wanting additional children by number of living children and living sons

No. of living children		No. of living sons	Men		Women	
			%	N	%	N
0		0	0.0	14	0.0	34
1		0	7.7	13	5.0	40
		1	26.7	15	27.1	48
	Sub-total		17.9	28	17.0	88
2		0	11.1	9	5.0	20
		1	83.3	18	75.0	88
		2	70.6	17	80.7	57
	Sub-total		63.6	44	68.5	165
3 or 3+		0	0.0	2	0.0	9
		1	90.9	22	82.9	82
		2	97.8	45	99.3	135
		3 or 3+	100.0	24	96.3	54
	Sub-total		94.6	93	90.7	280
Grant Total		Total	67.6	179	67.4	567

Table 1 clearly indicates a very strong preference for sons both among men and women. Generally, the percentage of respondents who did not want additional children increased with the number of surviving sons. Since the Indian family planning program actively advocates a two-child family norm, an examination of gender preferences for children among couples who currently had two children

was used to assess son preference and desire-for-balance ratios. The results indicated that among women with two children, those who had sons only were approximately 16 times as likely, as those who had daughters only to want no more children. In comparison, only six times as many married men wanted to terminate childbearing after two children if both children were sons as compared to those who had two daughters. Although the desire-for-balance ratio was also higher for men than for women, the difference between men and women was not so pronounced as can be seen from Table 2 which presents their sex preference and desire-for-balance ratios.

Table 2: Son preference and desire-for-balance ratios of male and female respondents with two children

	Men	Women
% respondents having two sons and not wanting another child	70.6	80.7
% respondents having one son and one daughter, and not wanting another child	83.3	75.0
% respondents having two girls and not wanting another child	11.1	5.0
Son preference ratio	6.4	16.1
Desire-for-balance ratio	1.7	1.2
% respondents having two sons, and practicing contraception	82.4	72.0
% respondents having one son and one daughter, and practicing contraception	72.2	67.0
% respondents having two daughters, and practicing contraception	55.6	20.0
Son preference ratio	1.5	3.6
Desire-for-balance ratio	1.0	1.2

In order to detect if the respondents wished to achieve some balance in the number of sons and daughters in their completed families, the desired sex of the additional children they wanted was examined in relation to the sex composition of their surviving children. The results presented in Tables 3 and Table 4 indicate that overall, the respondents had a tendency to want children of the sex that they did not have. However, this desire was much stronger if there was no son in family.

Table 3: Percent male and female respondents desiring additional sons and daughters, by number of living children and living sons

No. of living children		No. of living sons	Men		Women	
			%	N	%	N
0		0	100.0	92.9	94.1	88.2
1		0	92.3	0.0	95.0	5.0
		1	26.7	73.3	27.1	62.5
	Sub-total		57.1	39.3	58.0	36.4
2		0	88.9	0.0	95.0	5.0
		1	16.7	0.0	25.0	1.1
		2	5.9	29.4	3.5	19.3
	Sub-total		27.3	11.4	26.7	7.9
3 or 3+		0	100.0	0.0	100.0	11.1
		1	9.1	0.0	17.1	0.0
		2	2.2	0.0	0.0	0.7
3 or 3+		0.0	0.0	0.0	3.7	
	Sub-total		5.4	0.0	8.2	1.4
Grant Total		26.3	16.2	26.5	13.9	

For instance, at parity two, both men and women who did not have a son wanted a son, while the desire for a daughter was fairly muted even among those who did not have a daughter. Further, the desire for a second daughter was virtually non-existent. This was true in the case of both men and women. Moreover, for both men and women the average number of additional sons desired over the average number of additional daughters desired was greater when they only had daughters as compared to the average number of additional daughters over sons desired by respondents who only had sons (Table 4). This pattern, however, was more pronounced among women thereby reinforcing the finding that among women, preference for male children is relatively more marked.

Table 4: Average number of additional sons and daughters desired by male and female respondents by sex composition of living children.

Respondent	Respondents having	
	All sons	All daughters
Men		
Sons wanted	.15	1.00
Daughters wanted	.35	.00
N	46	24
Women		
Sons wanted	.12	1.66
Daughters wanted	.33	.04
N	129	69

The overall impact of gender preferences for children on the desire for additional children was quantified by the technique by Arnold Z. The results indicated that when gender preferences were eliminated, the percentage of respondents who did not want, more children increased approximately by 9 per cent (9 per cent for men and 9.3 per cent for women). Although the increase substantial, it is important to note that it similar for both men and women.

The results of the present study thus reveal a higher preference for sons among women as compared to men. This is in sharp contrast to the findings of previous studies, which either did not find any gender differences or found men to have a stronger preference for sons. It is noteworthy that most studies on gender differences in fertility goals have largely been limited to comparing the stated preferences of couples measured either by ideal or desired family size. The behavioral consequences of gender preferences have been less extensively studied. It seems that gender differences do not consistently emerge on all measures and there is a need to devise more sensitive indices fertility preferences.

But why is it that in this part of the country, women tend to have a relatively stronger for sons? It appears that in social where settings were women are relatively more economically and socially dependent on men, their concern about security is more marked and sons are perceived as an essential future investment. Our findings provide support to Cain's E M theoretical formulation that in patriarchal societies it should be women who are more pronatalist and strongly motivated to bear male children.

In sum then, the results of the present study clearly indicate that the fertility behavior of both men and women is, influenced by a strong desire to acquire a minimum number of surviving sons in the family. In the light of these findings it appears that despite the declining fertility levels in Haryana, future reductions in fertility may become increasingly more difficult to achieve unless there is a decline in the preference for male children. Moreover, since women exhibit a stronger desire for sons, measures related to improving women's status in society, would be one way of hastening the erosion of prevailing social norms which support and sustain son preference in the State.

References

A. Freedman, R. and Coombs, L.C.: "Cross-cultural comparison: Data on two factors in fertility behavior". Report of a project of the Sub-committee on Comparative Fertility, Analysis of the IUSSP, The Population Council, New York (1974).

B. Williamson, N.: *Sons or Daughters: A Cross-cultural Survey of Parental Preferences*, Sage Publications, Beverley Hills California (1976).

C. United Nations: "Selected factors; affecting fertility and fertility preferences in developing countries." In *World Fertility Survey Conference 1980, Vol. 2, World Fertility Survey*, London (1981).

D. Cleland, J., Verall, J. and Vaessen, M.: "Preferences for the sex of children and their influence on reproductive behavior", *World Fertility, Survey Comparative Studies No.27*, International Statistical Institute, Voorburg (1983).

E. Cain, M.T.: *Women's Status and Fertility in Developing Countries: Son Preference and Economic Security*. The Population Council, New York (1984).

F. Nag, M.: "Sex preference in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan and its effect on fertility," *Demography India*, 20:163-185 (1992).

G. Gadalla, S., McCarthy, J and Campbell, O.: "How the number of living sons influences contraceptive use in Menoufia Government, Egypt", *Studies in Family Planning*, 16:164-169 (1985).

H. Karki, Y.B.: "Sex preference and the value of sons and daughters in Nepal", *Studies in Family Planning*, 19:169-178 (1988).

I. Chowdhury, M.K. and Bairagi, R.: 'Son preference and fertility in Bangladesh,' *Population and Development Review*, 16:749-757 (1990).

J. Repetto, R.: 'Son preference and fertility behavior in developing countries', *Studies in Family Planning*, 3:70-76 (1972).

K. McClelland, G.H.: 'Determining the impact of sex preferences on fertility: A consideration of parity progression ratio, dominance, and stopping rule measures', *Demography*, 16:377-388 (1979).

L. Caldwell, J.C.: *Theory of Fertility Decline*, Academic Press, New York (1982).

M. Cain, M.T., Khanam, S.R. and Nahar, S.: "Class patriarchy and women's work in Bangladesh," *Population and Development Review*, 5:405-437 (1979).

N. Mason, K.O. and Taj, A.M.: 'Differences between women's and men's reproductive goals in developing countries,' *Population and Development Review*, 13:611-638 (1987).

O. Poffenberger, T.: Husband-wife Communication and Motivational Aspects of Population Control in an Indian Village, Central Family Planning Institute, New Delhi (1969).

P. Kee, P.: Population Socialization Research: A Review. East-West Population Institute Working Papers No.9, East-West Center, Hawaii (1981).

Q. Jejeebhoy, S.J. and Kulkarni, S.: 'Reproductive motivation: A comparison of wives and husbands in M, India", *Studies in Family Planning*, 20:264-272 (1989).

R. Koenig, M.A. and Fee, G.H.C.: 'Partriarchy, Women's status and reproductive behavior in rural North India, *Demography India*, 21:254-68 (1992).

S. Registrar General of India.: Fertility in India : An Analysis of 1981 Census Data, Occasional Paper No. 13 Ministry of Home Affairs, Demography Division, New Delhi (1988).

T. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare: Family Welfare Program in India: Year Book 1989-90, Ministry of Family Welfare, New Delhi (1991).

U. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare: Family Welfare Program in India: Year Book 1986-87, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, New Delhi (1988).

V. Singh, K.P.: "Status of women in Punjab and Haryana. In K. Mahadevan (ed), *Women and Population Dynamics Perspectives from Asian Countries*, Sage Publications, New Delhi (1989).

W. Census of India: Provisional Population Totals: Haryana. Paper I: Government of India, New Delhi (1991).

X. Registrar General of India: Child Mortality Estimates of India, Occasional Paper No.5, Ministry of Home Affairs, Demography Division, New Delhi (1988).

Y. Chang, M., Freedman, R. and Sun, T.: 'Trends in fertility family size preferences, and family planning practice: Taiwan, -1961-81," *Studies in Family Planning*, 12:211-228 (1981).

Z. Arnold, F.: "Measuring the effect of sex preference on fertility: The case of Korea", *Demography*, 22:280-288 (1985).

AA. Arnold, F.: "Sex preference and its demographic and health implications,' *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 18:93-101 (1992).

AB. M Arnold, F. and Liu, Z.: "Sex preference: Fertility and family planning in China," *Population and Development Review*, 12:221-246 (1986).

AC. Knodel, J.E. and Prachuabmoh, V.: 'Preferences for sex of children in Thailand: A comparison of husbands wives' attitudes", *Studies in Family Planning* 7:137-143 (1976).

AD. Malhi, O: "Impact of women's education on sex preferences, value and aspirations for children: Evidence Haryana", *Man and Development*, XV: 46-62 (1993).