

The Impact of Son Preference on Fertility Dynamics and Gender Imbalance: A Focus on India

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Abstract:

Son preference significantly impacts fertility dynamics in many developing countries, notably in India, where it profoundly influences demographic trends, gender ratios, and socio-economic structures. Cultural norms and socio-economic factors drive this preference, with sons valued as carriers of family lineage and economic providers, while daughters are often perceived as financial burdens due to dowry practices. Consequently, families exhibit differential treatment of children, resort to selective abortion, and maintain higher fertility rates to ensure the birth of a male child. These practices lead to skewed sex ratios and contribute to socio-economic issues such as increased violence and trafficking of women. Despite government efforts like the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act and the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao campaign, the persistence of son preference poses a formidable challenge to demographic equilibrium and gender equality. This review examines the cultural and socio-economic drivers of son preference, its impact on fertility rates and gender ratios, policy interventions, and strategies to promote gender equality and mitigate its adverse effects, particularly in India.

Keywords: Son preference, fertility dynamics, gender imbalance, India, socio-economic factors

Introduction

Son preference significantly impacts fertility dynamics, leading to differential treatment of children, selective abortions, and higher fertility rates aimed at ensuring the birth of a male child. This phenomenon is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of many developing countries and manifests through various practices that prioritize male offspring over female, profoundly affecting demographic trends, gender ratios, and socio-economic structures. In India, cultural norms and patriarchal values place a higher value on sons than daughters, with sons seen as carriers of family lineage and future economic providers. Socio-economic factors such as inadequate social security systems and dowry practices further reinforce this bias, prompting families to engage in practices to ensure the birth of at least one son, impacting overall fertility dynamics.

One significant consequence of son preference is the tendency towards higher fertility rates, as families may have more children than they would otherwise in their quest for a male child, contributing to larger family sizes and higher population growth rates. This practice, known as "son targeting," is particularly prevalent in rural areas where traditional values are deeply entrenched. Son preference also leads to skewed sex ratios, resulting from sex-selective abortions and the neglect of female children. Prenatal diagnostic technologies have facilitated the selective abortion of female fetuses, leading to significantly higher numbers of males compared to females in the population, with profound long-term socio-economic consequences. India presents a stark example of the impacts of son preference on fertility dynamics, with one of the most skewed sex ratios in the world. Despite government efforts such as the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act and campaigns like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, deeply entrenched cultural norms persist, reflecting the need for sustained efforts to promote gender equality. This review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how son preference affects fertility dynamics, particularly in India, by examining its manifestations and implications, analysing its effects on fertility rates and gender ratios, evaluating policy interventions, and identifying strategies to mitigate its adverse effects and promote gender equality.

Literature Review

The cultural and socio-economic underpinnings of son preference are well-documented across various studies. Cultural norms and patriarchal values deeply embedded in many societies, view sons as the carriers of the family lineage and primary economic providers, particularly in agrarian economies. Das Gupta (1987) highlights that in many traditional societies, the birth of a son is celebrated as it ensures the continuity of the family name and provides economic security for parents in their old age. Sons are often expected to contribute to the family's income and to support their parents, while daughters are seen as financial liabilities, primarily due to the practice of dowry (Arnold et al., 1998).

Socio-economic factors play a crucial role in reinforcing the preference for sons. Inadequate social security systems make male children essential for economic support in old age, especially in rural areas where agricultural labour is a significant part of the economy (Clark, 2000). This socio-economic backdrop creates a context where daughters are perceived as less valuable, further entrenching the cultural bias towards male offspring.

Son preference significantly impacts fertility dynamics, leading to higher fertility rates as families continue having children until a male child is born. This phenomenon often referred to as "son targeting," results in larger family sizes and higher population growth rates. Bongaarts (2013) explains that in rural areas, where traditional values and economic imperatives are more pronounced, families are more likely to continue childbearing until they achieve the desired number of sons. The use of prenatal diagnostic technologies has facilitated sex-selective abortions, contributing to skewed sex ratios. Jha et al. (2011) provide evidence that the availability of such technologies has led to a significant increase in the selective abortion of female fetuses. This practice has resulted in a higher number of males compared to females in the population, leading to pronounced gender imbalances. These imbalances have far-reaching socio-economic implications, including increased violence against women and trafficking. Hesketh and Xing (2006) argue that the surplus of males in the population exacerbates social instability and contributes to higher rates of gender-based violence. In India, despite rapid modernization and economic development, the preference for male children remains strong. Patel (2007) noted that the persistence of son preference in India is indicative of the deep-rooted cultural norms that prioritize male offspring. This preference has resulted in one of the most skewed sex ratios globally, with significant disparities between the numbers of males and females (Guilmoto, 2009).

To address these imbalances, the Indian government has implemented various policies and legal measures. The Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act aims to prevent sex-selective abortions by regulating the use of prenatal diagnostic technologies. Sekher and Hatti (2010) discuss the effectiveness of this act and note that while it has raised awareness about the issue, enforcement remains a challenge. Campaigns like *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* seek to change societal attitudes towards girls and promote gender equality. These campaigns aim to address the cultural and socio-economic roots of son preference by encouraging the education and empowerment of girls. However, changing deeply entrenched cultural norms is a formidable challenge. Despite legal frameworks and awareness campaigns, the preference for sons persists, underscoring the need for sustained efforts to promote gender equality and shift societal values (Patel, 2007). This literature review provides a comprehensive examination of the impact of son preference on fertility dynamics, highlighting the cultural and socio-economic drivers, the resulting demographic trends, and the policy interventions aimed at mitigating these effects.

Objectives

The primary objective of the present investigation is to analyse and synthesize existing research on the relationship between son preference and fertility dynamics in India. Specifically, the review seeks to:

- i. **Examine Cultural and Socio-Economic Drivers:** Investigate the cultural and socio-economic factors that underpin son preference in developing countries, focusing on India.
- ii. **Analyse Fertility Dynamics:** Explore how son preference influences fertility rates, family size, and population growth in developing countries.
- iii. **Evaluate Policy Interventions:** Assess the effectiveness of government policies and legal measures in addressing son preference and promoting gender equality in India.
- iv. **Understand Demographic Impacts:** Examine the long-term demographic implications of son preference, including skewed sex ratios and their socio-economic consequences.
- v. **Promote Gender Equality:** Identify strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of son preference and promote a more balanced and equitable gender ratio.

Materials and Methods

This literature review adopts a systematic approach to analyse existing research on the relationship between son preference and fertility dynamics in India. The methodology involves:

- i. **Literature Search:** Conducting comprehensive searches across academic databases, journals, government reports, and policy documents to identify relevant studies addressing the research topic.
- ii. **Data Collection:** Collecting and collating data from selected studies, including key findings, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks employed.
- iii. **Data Synthesis:** Analysing and synthesizing the collected data to identify common themes, patterns, and trends related to the relationship between son preference and nature and pattern of fertility indicators in Indian populations.
- iv. **Critical Analysis:** Critically evaluating the strengths, limitations, and implications of the synthesized literature to gain insights into the underlying dynamics shaping maternal health development.

- v. Policy Implications: Drawing evidence-based conclusions and recommendations to inform policy interventions aimed at addressing the population challenges faced by multi-cultural communities in India and fostering their holistic development and prosperity.

Results and Discussion

Cultural and Socio-Economic Underpinnings:

Son preference, deeply entrenched in cultural norms and patriarchal values, highlights sons as bearers of lineage and economic sustenance. In India, bolstered by traditions valuing male progeny, sons are deemed pivotal for upholding family prestige and financial stability, particularly in agrarian settings where their labour significantly bolsters agricultural output. Recent research underscores the persistent influence of economic incentives on son preference, notably in rural locales where sons' contributions to agricultural endeavours are indispensable for economic sustenance. Furthermore, inadequate social safety nets compel families to rely on sons for eldercare, while the dowry system exacerbates the preference for male offspring owing to perceived financial liabilities associated with daughters. This economic calculus perpetuates the devaluation of daughters and reinforces son preference (Das Gupta, 2003).

Son preference profoundly impacts fertility dynamics, as families may persist in childbearing until the birth of a male child, culminating in elevated fertility rates, particularly pronounced in rural areas and among socioeconomically disadvantaged families. The proliferation of prenatal diagnostic technologies further skews sex ratios through sex-selective abortions, notwithstanding legal prohibitions. Economic considerations underpin son preference, with sons expected to furnish financial support to aging parents, thus perpetuating a self-reinforcing cycle of favouring male progeny. Grasping these economic drivers is imperative for policymakers to effectively redress gender imbalances and advance gender parity (Jayachandran, 2017).

Fertility Dynamics Influenced by Son Preference:

Son preference drives up fertility rates, a phenomenon known as "son targeting," particularly prevalent in rural areas where traditional values persist (Bhat and Zavier, 2003). This desire for sons leads to larger families, especially among less educated and lower-income families (Jayachandran, 2017). The resulting demographic consequences exacerbate population growth, particularly in economically disadvantaged regions (Guilmoto, 2018). Moreover, son targeting imposes significant socio-economic burdens on families, straining resources and limiting educational and healthcare opportunities, especially in rural settings (Rosenzweig and Zhang, 2020). This practice reinforces gender imbalances, perpetuating patriarchal norms and inequality (Anderson & Ray, 2019). Addressing son targeting is imperative for mitigating its far-reaching impacts and promoting equitable family planning practices.

Skewed Sex Ratios:

Son preference manifests in skewed sex ratios at birth, driven by families resorting to sex-selective abortions to ensure male offspring. Prenatal diagnostic advancements, despite legal restrictions, exacerbate this trend, notably in countries like India. Jha et al. (2011) underscored the pivotal role of prenatal sex determination in India's skewed sex ratios, where many opt for female fetus abortions. Chao et al. (2021) elucidate the persistence of sex-selective abortions, attributing it to entrenched cultural norms and accessible diagnostic technology, challenging legal measures like the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act. Resulting gender imbalances wield profound socio-economic repercussions. Guilmoto (2018) elucidates the surplus of males triggering societal ills, including heightened violence and human trafficking, stemming from the scarcity of females. Anderson and Ray (2019) argue this surplus fuels social unrest and aggression, curtailing economic growth. Das Gupta (2019) further outlines the economic strain and limited workforce participation due to the gender imbalance, compounded by heightened fertility rates spurred by the pressure to produce male heirs.

Despite modernization, India grapples with entrenched son preference. Jayachandran (2017) stresses that economic growth alone is insufficient to uproot such preferences, advocating for concerted cultural and attitudinal shifts. Government initiatives strive to rectify gender imbalances, yet Sekher (2012) notes the challenge posed by enduring cultural and socio-economic biases favouring sons, necessitating sustained societal transformation. In essence, son preference perpetuates skewed sex ratios via sex-selective abortions facilitated by prenatal diagnostic technologies. Addressing this issue mandates comprehensive measures, encompassing stringent legal enforcement, cultural reform, and equitable treatment of female children. Deep comprehension of son preference drivers and impacts is imperative for effectuating policies promoting gender parity.

Differential Stopping Behaviour:

Research indicates that fertility decisions are often swayed by the gender makeup of existing children. Families with a firstborn daughter are more inclined to continue having children compared to those with a firstborn son, reflecting a

clear bias towards male offspring. Early studies by Bhat and Xavier (2003) shed light on this trend, emphasizing that the presence of a son significantly reduces the likelihood of further births. Recent investigations, such as those by Chao et al. (2021), corroborate and expand upon these findings, underscoring the pivotal role of the first child's gender in shaping subsequent fertility patterns, particularly in developing nations like India. Here, families are inclined to have more children if the firstborn is a girl, propelled by a deep-seated cultural preference for sons, who are perceived as future breadwinners and heirs to the family legacy. Jayachandran (2017) further elucidates this "differential stopping behaviour," illustrating how families persist in childbearing until they attain their desired number of sons, especially prevalent in rural areas where traditional values hold sway and the socio-economic benefits of male offspring are more pronounced. Consequently, families with daughters but no sons are markedly more inclined to continue expanding their families, resulting in larger household sizes.

This pattern of behaviour significantly influences population growth dynamics, as discussed by Guilmoto (2018), who underscores how the enduring preference for sons perpetuates elevated fertility rates, exacerbating challenges related to population pressure, resource scarcity, and insufficient social services. Such preference-driven fertility trends pose obstacles to population control and economic progress, particularly in densely populated countries like India. Moreover, this trend reinforces gender disparities within populations, as highlighted by Anderson and Ray (2019), who note that the pursuit of sons leads to an overrepresentation of males relative to females in demographic structures. This skewed sex ratio engenders long-term social and economic ramifications, including heightened violence and exploitation of women, along with difficulties for men in securing marital partners.

The persistence of differential stopping behaviour also underscores gender inequality, as articulated by Das Gupta (2019), who argues that this practice perpetuates the devaluation of daughters, necessitating the birth of sons to validate a family's lineage. Such cultural bias against female children impedes their access to education and healthcare, perpetuating cycles of gender disparity and injustice. In response, policymakers have implemented initiatives like the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao campaign in India to reshape societal perceptions of female children and advocate for gender parity. However, as Sekher (2012) emphasizes, transforming deeply ingrained cultural norms demands sustained and multifaceted interventions addressing both cultural and economic drivers of son preference. Thus, the gender composition of existing children significantly shapes fertility decisions, with a pronounced inclination towards sons driving higher fertility rates. This differential stopping behaviour perpetuates larger family sizes, impacting population dynamics, and exacerbating gender imbalances and socio-economic challenges. Addressing these issues necessitates comprehensive policies that champion gender equality and challenge the entrenched norms underpinning son preference.

Policy and Legal Interventions:

The Indian government has implemented various policies and legal measures to address gender imbalances and reduce son preference. The Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, 1994, aims to prevent sex-selective abortions, but enforcement remains challenging (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2020). Additionally, programs promoting the value of the girl child seek to change societal attitudes (Government of India, Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2015). These efforts reflect a multifaceted approach to tackling deep-seated cultural norms and promoting gender equality (Sekher, 2012; Patel, 2016).

Socio-Demographic Implications:

The persistence of son preference in India has significant socio-demographic implications. The skewed sex ratio has resulted in a surplus of males, leading to societal issues such as increased gender-based violence and trafficking (Kaur, 2013). Furthermore, the pressure to bear male children can lead to higher fertility rates, counteracting family planning initiatives and affecting population control efforts (Bongaarts and Guilmoto, 2015). Studies have shown that the cultural emphasis on having male offspring influences reproductive behaviour, often resulting in larger family sizes as couples continue to have children until a son is born (Das Gupta, 2014). This phenomenon not only undermines the effectiveness of population control policies but also exacerbates gender disparities and contributes to long-term demographic challenges (Jha et al., 2011).

Conclusion

Son preference significantly impacts fertility dynamics in developing countries, and its effects are particularly pronounced in India. This preference, deeply rooted in cultural, economic, and social factors, drives parents to favour male children over female ones. Consequently, families often continue to have children until they have the desired number of sons, leading to higher overall fertility rates. This behaviour also results in skewed sex ratios, with a higher number of males compared to females, and differential stopping behaviours, where parents cease having more children only after the birth of a son. Several cultural factors underpin son preference in India, including traditional beliefs that

sons are responsible for performing last rites and ensuring the continuation of the family lineage. Economically, sons are often seen as future breadwinners who can provide for their parents in old age, whereas daughters are perceived as a financial burden due to the dowry system. Socially, the higher status accorded to men compared to women reinforces the desire for male offspring.

Although policy measures have been implemented to counteract these issues, such as promoting female education and legal provisions against sex-selective practices, changing these deeply entrenched cultural norms is a formidable challenge. Government initiatives aim to improve the status of girls and promote gender equality, but societal attitudes and practices change slowly. Continued and intensified efforts are necessary to promote gender equality and mitigate the adverse effects of son preference on fertility dynamics. This includes not only enforcing existing laws but also engaging in widespread educational campaigns and community programs that challenge and change long-standing biases and stereotypes about gender. Only through sustained and multifaceted approaches can the deep-rooted cultural norms be transformed, leading to a more balanced and equitable society.

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