

# A study on attitude, belief and practice of mother-in-law and her son regarding son preference in Berasia block of Bhopal district

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** A skewed sex ratio is harmful to the health and welfare of women in India and is perhaps the more alarming concern for population sustainability.

**Objectives:** (1) To assess the attitudes of mother-in-law and her sons toward preferring a baby boy over a girl child. (2) To find out fertility behavior in context to the above-mentioned choices. (3) To explore contributing factors that could be attributed to the attitudes of mother-in-law and sons toward a baby boy preference.

**Materials and Methods:** This cross-sectional study was done for 6-month duration (i.e., July–December 2014) in the rural area of Berasia block of Bhopal district. A total of 307 families were included in the study.

**Result:** The findings of the study suggest that families of both the generations those who had two male children in their first two birth order continued child bearing to increase their family size and same was the finding in the families of mother-in-law and son whose first two children were female, but parity progression was more in proportion in this group. Association between mother-in-law's education and son preference was found statistically significant ( $<0.0001$ ), that is, higher the illiteracy or lower school education, higher was the preference for baby boy.

**Conclusion:** Male child preference makes family to opt for larger number of children in order to ensure at least one male child in family, thus increasing the family size. Education is the most important factor in reducing male child preference.

**KEY WORDS:** Mother-in-law, son, son preference, attitude, education.

## Introduction

For more than five decades, the large disparity between the sex ratio of girls and boys is still rampant nationwide as shown in the Census 2011 and is perhaps the more alarming concern for population sustainability. Sex ratio in

Madhya Pradesh is 931, that is, for each 1,000 male subjects, which is below the national average of 940, as per Census 2011.<sup>[1]</sup> A skewed sex ratio is harmful to the health and welfare of women in India. The skewed sex ratio in Madhya Pradesh, India, stimulated "Beti Bachao Abhiyan" ("Save the Girl Child" campaign) in 2011. It is now a national campaign; however, son preference over a daughter is a growing problem in a number of Asian countries including China and South Korea. There would be unevenness in sex ratio of the population which will arise as a result of skewed sex ratio at birth will produce a sex disparity in the marriage market owing to a dearth of marriageable women. Countries like china and India are more prone to it as son preference prevails in these countries.<sup>[2]</sup>

The strong practice of son partiality and the low status of women in India together produce an atmosphere in which female children may not be treated similar to male children

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in many cases.<sup>[3]</sup> This gap in the child sex ratio, which has countrywide implications, is the result of decisions made at the most local level—the family.<sup>[4]</sup>

One of the major causes of son preference in India is related to the perceived economic utility of having sons.<sup>[5]</sup> When compared with daughters, sons help in family farms and businesses, have better earnings prospects in the labor market, and provide care for their parents during old age, although parental care by sons is waning, especially in urban India.<sup>[6–8]</sup> The studies also support the idea that the existence of a strong son preference is indicative of a greater discrimination against daughters.<sup>[9]</sup>

Preference of son eventually affects the demographic pattern. It may either reduce the sex ratio by a cruel practice of female infanticide or increase the total fertility rate beyond the expectation while trying to get more male children. In India, where there is a strict law on female infanticide, the latter is more likely to happen. However, in both ways, skewed sex ratio may result.<sup>[10]</sup>

This study is an attempt to determine contributing factors in son preference, which lead to increasing fertility behavior in the study population of Berasia block of Bhopal district.

## Objective

- To assess the attitudes of mother-in-law and her sons toward preferring a baby boy over a girl child.
- To find out the fertility behavior in context to the above-mentioned choices.
- To explore contributing factors that could be attributed to the attitudes of mother-in-law and sons toward baby boy preference.

## Materials and Methods

This cross-sectional study was done for 6-month duration (i.e., from July to December, 2014) in the rural area of Berasia block of Bhopal district, Madhya Pradesh, India. A total of 473 antenatal women were identified through community health center (CHC), primary health center (PHC), and sub-centers in the Berasia block in a span of 6 months. Antenatal women who were not living with their in-laws as joint family, whose in-laws were not living around nearby, or who were primigravida were excluded from the study. A total of 343 antenatal women or daughters-in-laws were approached in the house for interview with their mother-in-law and her son, of which 307 families gave consent for the study.

Interviews were conducted on mothers-in-law and sons to better understand the changing sociocultural context of their stated preference for boys and their behavior to achieve these preferences. Interview on sociodemographic details, fertility behavior, and attitude toward son preference with the help of pretested and prestructured questionnaire were taken. Data were coded and validated. Data entry and analysis were done using EPI info software (version 7) and MS Excel

software, 2007. Generation of descriptive statistics was done. The  $\chi^2$ -test was used to find out any association between the contributing factors and son preference.

The study was done according to Declaration of Helsinki, and verbal consent was obtained from the participants before administering questionnaire. Anonymity of participants was maintained by avoiding any information revealing the identity of the participants in the questionnaire.

## Result

Baseline sociodemographic characteristic of mothers-in-law and sons are shown in Table 1. A total of 307 families were interviewed in the study. About two-thirds, that is 65.7% of them, were Hindu and 34.3% were Muslim families. The mothers-in-law those who were illiterate, those who completed high school, those who finished the middle and primary school were found to be 62.5%, 19.2%, and 18.3%, respectively. The majority of the mothers-in-law were unemployed (79%) and a majority of the sons were skilled workers (66.5%). Most of the families belonged to the classes I and II of modified Prasad's socioeconomic classification. Family size of most of the son families (68.4 %) was  $\leq 2$  children; on the other hand, most of the mother-in-law families possessed more than 2 children in their families. Indicators of son preferences have almost universally shown their dependence on the number of living children.<sup>[11]</sup> This difference seen in the children size could be owing to the awareness regarding small family norms, and probably, generation gap, or the respondents could have manipulated the sex composition of their children by limiting the number of children before the next pregnancy.

Gender composition of the two generations, that is, mother-in-law families and son families, were compared with their total number of children as shown in Table 2. The findings of this study suggest that the families of both the generations those who had two male children in their first two birth orders continued child bearing to increase their family size, and same was the finding in the families of mother-in-law and son whose first two children were female but parity progression was more in proportion in this group. Those families of mother-in-law and son who had either female or male child in their first two birth order seem more satisfied with reduced family size.

Attitudes of mothers-in-law toward male and female child are shown in Figures 1 and 2. Finding shows that answers such as son carries generation forward and he is the lamp of house were the most common toward male child preference, while answers such as dowry problem, girls leave home after marriage, and girls help in household work were the most common toward female child preference.

Table 3 shows the mother-in-law preference, which shows an explicit preference for male child. Strong son preference is evident from the findings of this study. Son preference was assessed by asking mothers-in-law, the sex composition of their ideal family, and their responses by favoring more sons than daughters; hence, we concluded there is an acknowl-

**Table 1:** Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents

	Mother-in-law's family (%)	Son's family (%)
Religion		
Hindu	202 (65.8)	202 (65.8)
Muslim	105 (34.2)	105 (34.2)
Education status		
Illiterate	192 (62.5)	96 (31.3)
Primary and middle	56 (18.3)	27 (8.8)
High school	59 (19.2)	65 (21.2)
Graduate or above	0	119 (38.7)
Occupation		
Unemployed	243 (79)	35 (11.3)
Unskilled	24 (7.8)	39 (12.7)
Skilled	30 (9.6)	204 (66.5)
Semi-professional/professional	10 (3.3)	29 (9.5)
Socioeconomic status		
Sec I	14 (4.5)	57 (18.5)
Sec II	43 (14)	93 (30.3)
Sec III	148 (48.2)	68 (22.2)
Sec IV	49 (15.9)	39 (12.7)
Sec V	53 (17.4)	50 (16.3)
No. of children		
≤2 children	117 (38.1)	210 (68.4)
>2 children	190 (61.9)	97 (31.6)
Total	307 (100)	307 (100)

**Table 2:** Fertility behavior of mother-in-law and son according to the gender composition of the first two birth orders

Total no. of children	Gender combination of the first two children					
	Male–male (%)		Female–male or male–female (%)		Female–female (%)	
	Mother-in-law	Son	Mother-in-law	Son	Mother-in-law	Son
2	29 (45.3)	71 (65.2)	65 (68.4)	102 (87.2)	23 (15.5)	23 (34.3)
3–4 <sup>a</sup>	30 (46.8)	34 (31.2)	21 (22.1)	13 (11.1)	98 (66.2)	37 (55.2)
≥5 <sup>b</sup>	5 (7.9)	4 (3.6)	9 (9.5)	2 (1.7)	27 (18.3)	7 (10.5)
Total	64 (100)	109 (100)	95 (100)	117 (100)	148 (100)	67 (100)

<sup>a</sup>Combined for analysis.

<sup>b</sup>14 son's families were not included in the table because they had only 1 child.

edged son preference. Preference for a female child was negligible. Some of the preferences were for both male and female children. Many respondents feel obliged to report explicitly that they have no sex preference for their ideal family.

Association between mother-in-law's education and son preference was found to be statistically significant (<0.0001) (i.e., higher the illiteracy or lower school education, higher was the preference for son). The result reaffirms that education is the strongest predictor for gender preference. The education status of the sons shows that they preferred a male child, a female child, or both [Table 3]. The association between son's

education and son preference was found to be statistically significant (<0.0001) (i.e., as the education status increased, their preference for son reduced).

## Discussion

This study examined the issue of son preference by comparing son preference and fertility behavior of the two generations (i.e., mother-in-law and son), because they are the most important persons besides daughter-in-law when it comes to decide the birth of a baby in the family. As in

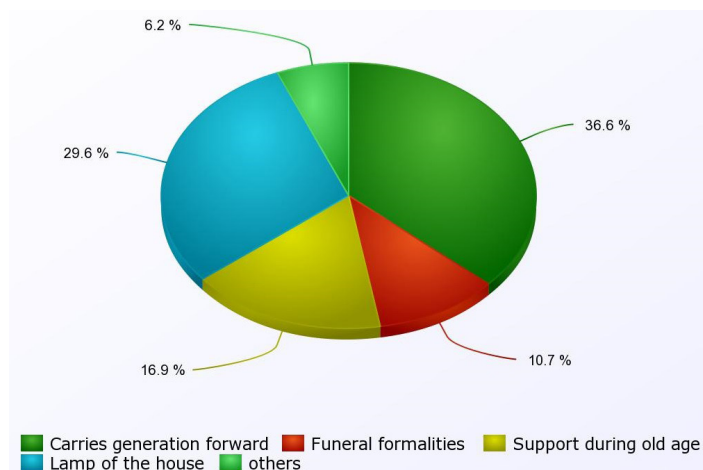


Figure 1: Attitude toward male child according to mother-in-law.

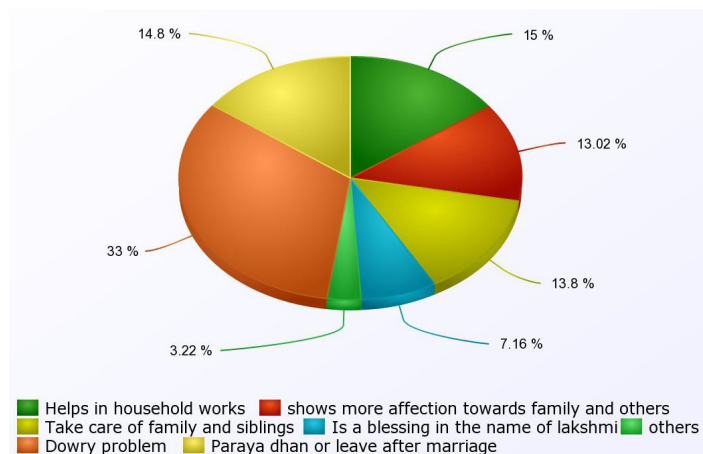


Figure 2: Attitude toward female child according to mother-in-law.

Table 3: Association of educational status of mother-in-law and son and their preference toward the gender of child

Education status	Preference toward gender of child			P*
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Both are equal (%)	
Mother-in-law				
Illiterate	178 (83.9)	0	14 (17.5)	<0.0001
Primary and middle	27 (12.8)	4 (28.6)	25 (30.9)	
High school	17 (8.3)	10 (71.4)	32 (39.6)	
Total	212 (100)	14 (100)	81 (100)	
Son				
Illiterate	42 (59.1)	3 (12)	51 (24.2)	<0.0001
Less than high school	19 (26.8)	5 (20)	68 (32.2)	
Graduate or above	10 (14.1)	17 (68)	92 (43.6)	
Total	71 (100)	25 (100)	211 (100)	

\* $\chi^2$ -test was performed.

developing countries, men tend to have a stronger preference for sons than women, which is shown in the study done by Mason and Taj.<sup>[12]</sup> The study showed the difference in the household size of both the generations. Decline in the proportion of household size in current generations may be owing to demographic transition and more awareness toward family norms through increased use of contraceptives. But, still, there is long way to go as the average household of India is 4.8.<sup>[13]</sup>

### Fertility Behavior and Sex Composition

In general, families with more sons than daughters were less likely to progress to higher parities than were families with more daughters than sons. In this study, families having two daughters in their first two parities tend to increase their family size when compared with the families with two male children in their first two parities. Evidence from this study also suggests that parents were by no means completely averse to having daughters. Families with two sons in their first two parities progressed to the next parity to have at least one daughter, a result consistent with the previous research done by Pande and Malhotra,<sup>[4]</sup> Asghar *et al.*,<sup>[10]</sup> Chauhan,<sup>[14]</sup> and Rahman and DaVanzo,<sup>[15]</sup> which found that an overwhelming majority of the families wanted at least one daughter as well, although typically not more than one. This shows that, although son preference is strong in both the early and later stages of family formation, families also wanted to have at least one daughter after having several sons.

### Attitude Toward Gender

This study examined the attitude of mother-in-law toward having male or female child in the family. Attitude toward male child was mostly positive, as answers such as the male child carries the generation forward, followed by lamp of the house, were predominant. While attitudes toward female child were mostly downbeat, answers such as dowry problem, female child leaves after marriage, and female helps in household work were more common among the responses by mothers-in-law. As per the report published by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the important reasons for son preference include social responsibilities that are taken by the male child, propagation of family name, support in the old age, performing cremation of parents, and dowry given for girls' marriage.<sup>[16]</sup> Chauhan<sup>[14]</sup> and Dyson and Moore<sup>[17]</sup> also reported similar findings. Rationally, this would mean that fondness for sons coexists with discrimination against daughters; the stronger the son preference, the more extreme the daughter discrimination would be. Further research is warranted to know how the desire for sons, whether sturdy or feeble, is directly related to daughter discrimination and neglect.

### Education Status

This study indicates that education status of the respondents of both the generations was indirectly proportional to the discriminatory preference to gender of child. Mothers-in-law exposure to primary- and secondary-level schooling reduces

son preference when compared with illiterate mothers, but still female preference alone was negligible. The younger cohorts acquired much more education than their older counterparts and, hence, showed weaker son preference and stronger gender neutrality. Evidently, education is the single most vital factor in reducing son preference. Similar findings were found by the studies of Halder *et al.*,<sup>[18]</sup> Chavada and Bhagyaxmi,<sup>[19]</sup> and Echávarri and Ezcurra.<sup>[20]</sup> Current generation will not only replace the older generation but also dominate the society and, eventually, the society's son preference will decline.

### Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. First, the gender preferences of daughter-in-law were not analyzed in this study. Second, although the use of cross-sectional data allows us to assess any associations between variables, it does not let us to find out the causal factors. Third, inaccurate recall bias, especially regarding children who had died in the case of mothers-in-law and especially if the death occurred soon after birth.

### Conclusion

In this study, fertility behavior appears to be influenced by a strong desire to acquire a male child. Son preference makes family to opt for larger number of children in order to ensure at least one male child in family, thus increasing the family size. Education is the most important factor in reducing son preference. Our results indicate the importance of not only targeting the reproductive age married couples to encourage them to remove gender differences but also to target the mothers-in-law. Policies and programs should include mechanisms to make daughters more valuable to families and within households through family planning, education, and social programs. IEC (information, education, and communication) needs to be strengthened, especially through interpersonal contacts, mass media, and involvement of local influential persons such as panchayat members, school teachers, NGO, self help groups, health-care providers, and counselors to recognize the value of the girl child at all levels of society and reduce gender disparities at the family and community levels.

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