

GENDER PREFERENCE AND FACTORS AFFECTING GENDER PREFERENCE OF MOTHERS ATTENDING ANTENATAL CLINIC OF AGARTALA GOVERNMENT MEDICAL COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

Background: Consecutive decline in sex ratio of our country signals an impending crisis. Gender preference of women may have a role in determining sex ratio.

Aims & Objective: To study the gender preference and the factors affecting gender preference of mothers.

Material and Methods: A hospital based study was conducted during August – September 2013 among 390 pregnant women attending antenatal clinic of Agartala Government Medical College using a pretested semi-structured interview schedule. Descriptive statistics, χ^2 test and logistic regression were used.

Results: 40.8% had son preference, 29.7% preferred daughter and the rest had no particular preference regarding the outcome of their current pregnancy. Significantly higher son preference was observed among the rural, illiterate and nullipara or women having no male child (68.24%, 58.33% and 68.24% respectively, $p < 0.05$). Higher son preference was also observed among housewives (58.00%), primigravida (54.61%) and women from joint families (61.18%), though it was not significant. Preference for son was higher in both the presumed situation of having either one or multiple children. Reasons for son preference were 'better security in old age' 39.1%; 'generation continuation' 31.1%; 'status symbol' 18.8%; and 'better earning' 11.1%. Reasons for daughter preference were, 'daughters are more trust worthy' 55.1%; 'daughters help in household work' 19.67%; 'daughters are laxmi of family' 15% and non-specific reasons 10.23%.

Conclusion: Improving social security at old age, facilities favouring girl children and steps for elimination of dowry from the society may help in improving the preference for girl children leading to a balanced population.

Key-Words: Gender Preference; Son Preference; Sex Ratio; Girl Child; Dowry

Introduction

India is a patriarchal society where men are seen as the role models and are the ones to look after the parents in the old age. Sex ratio is an important social indicator measuring status and equity between male and female in the society. Changes in sex-ratio reflect socioeconomic and cultural practice of a society. In India, deaths of young girls exceed those of young boys over three lakhs each year, and every sixth infant death is specifically due to gender discrimination.^[1] The United Nations Children's Fund states that systematic gender discrimination has resulted in up to 50 million girls & women "Going Missing" from India's population.^[2]

As per Census 2001 prevailing sex ratio of India was 933, which still lags behind and the lowest among the top 10 most populous countries of the world. There has been continuous decline in sex ratio since 1901 to 2011. In 1901 sex ratio was 972, which has decreased to 933 in 2001 and has further decreased to 914 in 2011. In Tripura, over all sex ratio has increased from 948 in 2001 to 961 in 2011, but the birth of girl child has declined from 966 to 953.^[3,4]

The bias against females in India is grounded in cultural, economic and religious roots. Sons are expected to work in the fields, provide greater income and look after parents in old age. In this way, sons are looked upon as a type of insurance. In addition, in a patriarchal society, sons are responsible for "preservation" of the family name. Also, as per Hindu belief, lighting the funeral pyre by a son is considered necessary for salvation of the spirit.^[5]

The evil practice of dowry is widely prevalent in India. As a result, daughters are considered to be an economic liability. The dowry system is more rigid in the northern states of India which is likely to contribute to the lesser child sex ratio. Women have little control over economic resources and the best way for a young north Indian bride to gain domestic power mainly comes from her ability to produce children, in particular, sons.^[6]

Desire for male child manifests so blatantly that parents have no qualms about repeated, closely spaced pregnancies, premature deaths and even terminating child before it is born. The constitution of India guarantees equality to women. It empowers the states to adopt measures for affirmative discrimination in favor of women

and also impose a fundamental duty on its citizens to uphold the dignity of women but despite all this, India's deep rooted "sons only" ethos continues and girls and women face inequity and inequality everywhere. They are devalued as human beings from the day they are born but what is worse is that they are even denied the right to be born if their families do not wish them to be born.^[7]

Gender preference of women may have a role in determining the sex ratio. In this context to know the gender preference for the offspring and to study the factors affecting gender preference, this study was conducted among the expectant mothers attending antenatal clinic of Agartala Government Medical College.

Materials and Methods

It was a hospital based cross-sectional study conducted during 1st August – 30th September 2013 among pregnant women attending Antenatal Clinic of Agartala Government Medical College. Institutional Ethics Committee of Agartala Government Medical College has approved the study. Minimum sample size requirement for this study at 95% confidence, fixing 10% allowable error and considering son preference as 56%^[8], was found to be 363 including additional 20% to compensate for non-response or incomplete questionnaire. Every third newly registered pregnant women attending Antenatal Clinic during the study period were selected by concurrent sampling. During the study period we could select as many as 397 pregnant women. But five women refused to participate and two were physically unfit to make any statement, so were excluded. Thus final sample size was 390. After obtaining informed consent, they were interviewed confidentially using a pretested semi-structured interview schedule allowing equal time for all. Data were analyzed using Epi Info version – 6. Descriptive statistics were expressed in frequencies and percentages. Chi-square test and binary logistic regression analysis were applied and p - value of ≤ 0.05 was considered significant.

Results

Out of the 390 study women, 56.4% were from urban area, 56.2% from joint families and 96.7% were Hindu by religion. 92.8% were housewives and 7.2% were service holders. 34.4% were primary educated, 51.5% completed secondary education, 11% studied up to graduation or above and 3.1% were illiterate. 37.9% belonged to scheduled caste community, 31.8% were general caste, 24.4% were from other backward communities and 5.9% were tribal. Primigravida constituted 60.5% and

multigravida 39.5%. 75.6% pregnancies were planned and 24.4% were unplanned. Regarding the outcome of current pregnancy, 40.8% women preferred son, 29.7% preferred daughter and 29.5% women had no particular preference. In the given situation of having only one child, 42.3% women preferred to have a son, 26.2% preferred a daughter while 31.5% had no particular preference. Whereas, in the given situation of having more than one children, 46.2% women preferred to have equal number of sons and daughters, 17.7% preferred more number of sons, 12.8% preferred more number of daughters whereas 23.3% women had no particular preference.

Table-1: Gender preference by socio-demographic characteristics of mothers

Variables	Sub-Groups	Preference of the Study Women			p - value
		Son No (%)	Daughter No (%)	Any No (%)	
Residence	Rural	116 (68.24)	48 (28.23)	6 (3.53)	< 0.05
	Urban	109 (49.55)	68 (30.91)	43 (19.54)	
Family Type	Nuclear	102 (59.65)	40 (23.39)	29 (16.96)	> 0.05
	Joint	134 (61.19)	50 (22.83)	35 (15.98)	
Literacy	Illiterate	7 (58.33)	3 (25.00)	02 (16.67)	< 0.05
	Primary	76 (56.72)	35 (26.12)	23 (17.16)	
	Secondary	99 (49.25)	55 (27.37)	47 (23.38)	
	Graduate & above	18 (41.86)	13 (30.23)	12 (27.91)	
Occupation	House wife	212 (58.57)	90 (24.86)	60 (16.57)	> 0.05
	Service	12 (42.86)	09 (32.14)	07 (25.00)	
Gravida	Primigravida	148 (54.61)	65 (23.99)	58 (21.40)	> 0.05
	Multigravida	57 (47.90)	29 (24.37)	33 (27.73)	
Sex of the Previous Child	Male child	106 (48.18)	64 (29.09)	50 (22.73)	< 0.05
	Nullipara or don't have male child	116 (68.24)	43 (25.29)	11 (6.47)	

Table-2: Result of binary logistic regression analysis

Continuous Variables		Odds Ratio (95% C. I.)	p - value
Age of Women		1.041 (0.983 – 1.101)	0.167
Per-capita Monthly Income (₹)		1.124 (1.027 – 1.230)	0.011
Categorical Variables		Odds Ratio (95% C. I.)	p - value
Residence of Women	Rural	2.373 (1.388 – 4.056)	0.002
	Urban	1	
Occupation of Women	Housewife	1.698 (0.675 – 4.272)	0.261
	Other	1	
Occupation of Husband	Daily labourer	4.998 (3.275 – 7.627)	0.000
	Other	1	
Previous Issue	Nil or Daughter	3.627 (2.787 – 3.365)	0.003
	Son	1	
Women's Literacy	Illiterate & Pry.	4.613 (2.580 – 8.249)	0.000
	Sec. & higher	1	
Gravida	Primi-gravida	1.699 (0.548 – 5.265)	0.358
	Multi-gravida	1	
Type of Family	Joint family	1.461 (0.871 – 2.452)	0.151
	Nuclear family	1	
Type of Marriage	Arranged marriage	1.845 (0.794 – 4.290)	0.155
	Love marriage	1	

The reasons for son preference were 'better security in old age' 39.1%; 'generation continuation' 31.1%; 'bearing son is a status symbol' 18.8% and 'more earning' 11.1%. Whereas the reasons for daughter preference were 'daughters are more trust worthy' 55.1%; 'daughters help in household work' 19.67%; 'daughters are laxmi of family' 15% and 'non-specific reasons' 10.23%. Reasons for not preferring daughter as an outcome of the current

pregnancy were 'daughter will not stay with parents in future' 50.01%; 'difficulty to find a suitable groom' 20.3%; 'problem of dowry' 15.06% and 'difficult to rear a daughter' 14.63%.

Table 1 shows that son preference was significantly higher among the rural, illiterate and nullipara women or women having no male child (68.24%, 58.33% and 68.24% respectively, $p < 0.05$). Higher son preference was also observed among housewives (58.00%), primigravida (54.61%) and women from joint families (61.18%), though it was not significant. Table 2 binary logistic regression analysis shows that rural residence (OR = 2.373, 95% CI = 1.388 – 4.056, $p = 0.002$), husband being daily labourer (OR = 4.998, 95% CI = 3.275 – 7.627, $p = 0.000$), having no previous child or having daughter (OR = 3.627, 95% CI = 2.787 – 3.365, $p = 0.003$), being illiterate or primary educated (OR = 4.613, 95% CI = 2.580 – 8.249, $p = 0.000$) were the significant determinants for a women to prefer a male baby.

Discussion

The present study detected son preference to be 40.8%, which was higher than the daughter preference. Similarly, Indira Dey (Pal) et al, 2009^[9] also found the son preference to be 39.2%. But S Puri et al, 2007^[8] and BN Vadera et al, 2007^[10] found higher son preferences, 57.8% and 58.5% respectively. These two studies were conducted in the Northern part of India and these much higher son preferences were truly reflecting the poorer sex ratio prevalent in that region compared to this region. In the present study son preference among rural and urban women was found to be 68.24% and 49.55% respectively. Similarly BN Vadera et al, 2007^[10] also found it to be 70.68% and 53.28% respectively. In this study, women who did not have male child, 68.24% of them preferred to have son; similarly Vadera et al, 2007^[10] also found it to be 65.28%. Expectedly women who already had male child, only 48.18% of them preferred to have son again; similar lower son preference was observed by Vadera et al, 2007^[10] also, which was 42.5%. The important reasons for son preference were social responsibilities taken by males, propagation of family name, support in the old age, getting another earning hand etc. This was similar with the report of Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India, 2003.^[11] Lower son preferences were observed among women, who already have son. This behaviour reflects the typical secured feeling attitude of patriarchal society after having a male child.

Conclusion

Preference for male children was higher than female. Literacy and residence of the pregnant women and sex of the existing child etc. were important determinants of the gender preference of expectant mothers. More capability of supporting the parents during old age, continuation of generation's name, etc were the important reasons in favour of son preference and the social custom of departing from parents after marriage and dowry problems were the main reasons for not preferring daughters. Some system of social security needs to be developed so that people who do not have son need not worry about care and attention during old age. Social customs like 'dowry' and 'old parents are the responsibility of son' need restructuring and side by side better opportunities for girl children should also be created to facilitate daughter preference for parents.

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