

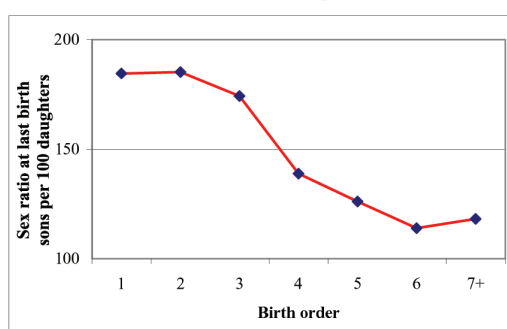
Son preference is alive in Nepal, limiting contraceptive use and keeping fertility high: Evidence from Nepali survey data

Background

In the South Asian context, researchers have estimated that there are millions of women "missing" from the population, leading to an unusually high ratio of males to females. In some countries with a strong sex preference, couples stop having children only when they are satisfied with the sex composition of their family—typically, after the birth of a son. Consequently, the sex ratio of last-born children can be much higher than the biological constant of 106 sons per 100 daughters.

Sex preference in Nepal has received little attention, possibly because the overall sex ratio at birth (estimated at 105) is similar to the expected value. In addition, Nepal is in the early stages of fertility decline; hence, sex-selective abortion is rare. However, the sex ratio at last birth in Nepal for women who claim to have completed their families or to have been sterilized is estimated at 146 sons per 100 daughters, suggesting that stopping behaviour among these women is driven by son preference.

Sex ratio at last birth by birth order



Source DHS 1996: for women with completed families



Research Aims

This study aimed to assess the extent of son preference in Nepal using the sex ratio at last birth as a basis. Also it aimed to estimate the depressing effect that son preference has on contraceptive use and to what extent fertility is maintained at a high level by continuing son preference.

Further investigation focused on the characteristics of women who stop childbearing after the birth of a son. Such information is useful for campaigns aimed at increasing contraceptive use in Nepal.

Data and Methods

Data for this study came from the 1996 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey. Of the 8,429 ever-married women aged 15-49 included in the NDHS, we selected the 4,661 women who desired no more children or who had been sterilized at the time of the survey. Because these women had decided to stop childbearing, we could examine their completed families in terms of size, sex composition, birth order and the sex of the last child born.

The effect of son preference on contraceptive prevalence was estimated by applying the Arnold method to data from all women interviewed. To determine the effect of sex preference on fertility, a recently developed method was used, which assumes that the population does not practice sex-selective abortion and that childbearing stops when the desired number of children of a certain sex is reached. Logistic regression analysis was finally applied to identify women's socioeconomic and demographic characteristics that were associated with having a son as the last child.

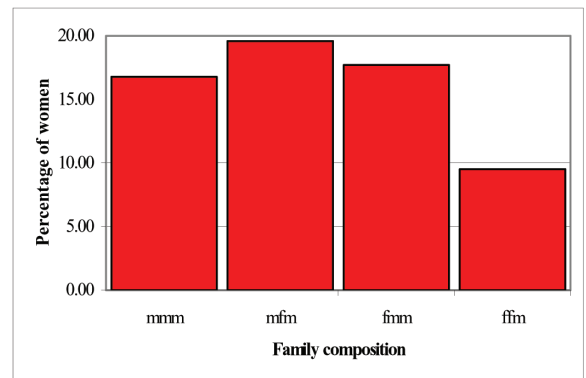
Results

Commonly used indicators of gender bias, such as sex ratio at birth and sex-specific immunisation rates, do not suggest a high level of gender discrimination in Nepal. However, son preference is estimated to depress the contraceptive use rate substantially and this has kept fertility high. The regression analysis found that more exposure to the television and better educational levels decrease the likelihood that childbearing stops with a boy. Muslim women are less likely to stop with a boy, and the ethnic makeup of communities is also an important factor in the levels of son preference. To summarise:

- Son preference in Nepal is not highly visible because there are few indications of a rising sex ratio at birth or of high mortality rates among female children
- A high sex ratio at last birth in Nepal shows that families choose to stop childbearing only after there are enough sons
- Son preference depresses contraceptive use by 24% and increases the total fertility rate by more than 6%.

- Women's contraceptive use, exposure to the media, parity, last birth interval, educational level and religion are linked to stopping childbearing after the birth of a boy, as is the ethnic makeup of the local area.

Percentage of third parity women with completed families who stopped childbearing with a boy (63.6% of total women)



Source Nepal DHS 1996

Conclusions and Policy Implications

- The level of son preference in Nepal is substantial. Sex preference is an important barrier to the increase of contraceptive use and decline of fertility in the country;
- The impact of son preference will be greater as desired family size declines and this will further delay the fertility transition.
- Geographic and economic barriers to contraceptive service use in Nepal are well known, but the additional barrier of sex preference should also be understood by service providers.
- In the light of a possible increase in the availability of ultrasound technology, sex preference may have an impact on sex-selective abortion, a practice that has risen with declining fertility in other cultures with a strong sex preference.
- The improvement of women's status and education and the importance of raising the value of girls in society should be policy imperatives.

Further reference

Leone, T., Matthews, Z. and Dalla Zuanna, G. Impact and Determinants of Sex Preference in Nepal, *International Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol 29, No 2, June 2003, <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/2906903.html>

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