



Women's Attitude for a Male Offspring and Related Family Planning Practices

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ABSTRACT

Background: Son preference in India is widespread and deep rooted. Parents' expectations of benefits and costs are biased in favour of sons. This therefore acts as the key motivation for the preference of male offspring. Women might continue to bear children until the desired number of sons is reached.

Methodology: A community based, cross-sectional study was carried out among 718 married women of reproductive age group selected by systematic random sampling.

Results: The present study revealed that 63.1% women were of the opinion that it was necessary to have a male child. Women were more likely to be acceptors of contraception even if they had one son (38.8%) as compared to women having no sons (17.9%) and the relationship was found to be significantly associated. Women who accepted terminal method of contraception over spacing method was significantly higher among women having male offspring.

Conclusions: The findings demonstrate that in settings like Uttar Pradesh, focusing solely on family-size limitation may not be an effective strategy to promote family planning because it is women's preference for sons – and not just family size – that plays a key role in determining if, when and how a woman regulates her fertility.

Key words: Gender preference, family planning, attitude, contraceptive choice

INTRODUCTION

A significant body of research has shown that women's reproductive behaviour is strongly influenced by their normative environment. In India, a strong preference for sons is one such norm. Depending on the social and cultural context in which the family is embedded, children enhance parent's status attainment.¹In social structures where the continuance of the lineage is a highly salient goal, the birth of a child increases the parental status and provides behavioural confirmation. In patrilineal societies like India, only male offspring can carry on the family name, continue the family line and therefore, reproduce the family's social status. Moreover, religious customs and traditions in India

bear a high religious bias towards sons. A son provides prestige not only during parents' lifetime but above all, after their death²⁻⁵.

For Hindus, who make up the majority of Indians (81 percent), having a son is imperative⁶. He is the only one who can light the funeral pyre of his deceased parents, offer ancestral worship and thus ensure the salvation of their souls.

Son preference interacts with family size and a desired ratio of sons to daughters to influence what is considered to be an 'ideal' family which, in turn, plays an important role in shaping reproductive behaviours⁷⁻⁹. Women's reproductive choices in India over the last six decades or more have also

been shaped by India's family planning policy, implemented in the early 1950s. In particular, the family planning programs historical focus on female sterilization as a form of birth control.

This paper addresses how the son preference norm influences decisions about family size, composition and family planning practices among women in Uttar Pradesh, India. Specifically, we analyse the extent to which having sons plays a role in whether women get sterilised.

METHODS

The present community based cross-sectional study was conducted in the field practice areas of the Department of Community Medicine, Jawaharlal Nehru medical college, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh in Uttar Pradesh for a period of one year during 2008. Sample size was estimated at 718 women using the couple protection rate of Uttar Pradesh. Systematic random sampling was done among ever married women (15-49yrs) present in the household and who gave consent for the interview. Total numbers of households covered during the study were 396. A preformed and pre tested structured interview schedule was used for the study. The study was approved from the institutional ethical committee. Informed verbal consent was taken from each woman. The woman was told about the nature and purpose of the survey. Confidentiality was assured to the woman before the interview. The interview was conducted in a non-judgmental manner. If the woman had any queries they were given the appropriate advice and treatment. Data compilation, tabulation and analysis were done using statistical software, SPSS version 16 (Chicago, SPSSInc.).

RESULTS

Majority of the women (47.8%) were in the age group of 20-29yrs, only 6% of the women were in 15-19 years bracket. Among the study population, 57.2% women were Hindus and 42.3% were Muslims. The study population consisted of 45.4% women belonging to the general category, 33.7% to backward classes and 20.9% belonged to the scheduled caste. Women who were illiterate amounted to 58.8% while only 5.3% women were graduates or had completed even higher education. Husbands of 61.1% of the women had received Secondary school or higher education. Among the sample 90.5% women were housewives, 5.2% were working in clerical jobs/ shop/farm, and 3.2% were skilled workers while 1.1% was professionals. Women's husbands were in clerical jobs/ shopkeepers/ farmers in 31.6%, 21.9% were unskilled workers/ labourers, 19.1% were skilled workers, and 10.3% were professionals. Husbands of 1.9% women were not alive. Lower socio-economic class women were 84.8%, middle class were 15% while only 0.1% belonged to the High class. Women were living in joint families in 50.1% whereas 49.9% had nuclear families. The average number of children per woman was 3.11. Among the sample 36.2% women had 3-4 children, 32.3% had 2 or fewer children, and 23.8% had 5 or more children while 7.7% had no children. The study population consisted of 97.4% currently married women, 1.9% were widows and 0.1% women were separated from their husbands.

The perception of a low social status of females in societies is reflected in the replies given by women about the desired sex of the child.

Table 1: Current Use of contraceptives in relation to number of male children (N=718)

Male children	Non users (n=247) (%)	Current Users (n=313) (%)	Not applicable* (n=158) (%)	Total (n=718) (%)
No son	68 (27.5)	26 (8.3)	51 (32.2)	145 (20.2)
1 son	79 (31.9)	83 (26.5)	52 (32.9)	214 (29.8)
2 sons	47 (19)	99 (31.6)	37 (23.4)	183 (25.5)
≥3 sons	53 (21.5)	105 (33.5)	18 (11.4)	176 (24.5)

*Women who are currently pregnant, menopausal, in fecund, sub fecund, widows, had hysterectomy or are not cohabiting with their husbands. $\chi^2 = 47.379, df=3, p < 0.05$, Significant

Table 2: Use of various contraceptives according to number of sons (N=313)

Sons	Spacing methods					Terminal methods			Total of Both methods	
	OCP	Male condom	Copper-T	Natural methods	Folk methods	Total	Female sterilization	Male sterilization		Total
No son	2 (11.1)	24 (14.2)	-	-	-	26 (10.7)	-	-	-	26 (8.3)
1 son	3 (16.7)	55 (32.5)	7 (53.8)	10 (29.4)	-	75 (30.9)	7 (10)	1 (100)	8 (11.3)	83 (26.5)
2 sons	3 (16.7)	49 (28.9)	6 (46.2)	14 (41.2)	5 (62.5)	77 (31.8)	22 (31.4)	-	22 (30.9)	99 (31.6)
≥3 sons	10 (55.5)	41 (24.3)	-	10 (29.4)	3 (37.5)	64 (26.4)	41 (58.6)	-	41 (57.7)	105 (33.5)
Total	18 (100)	169 (100)	13 (100)	34 (100)	8 (100)	242 (100)	70 (100)	1 (100)	71 (100)	313 (100)

$\chi^2 = 31.725, df=3, p < 0.001$, Significant (calculated for spacing and terminal method categories); Figure in bracket indicate percentage

Findings of the present study, show that 63.1% women were of the view that it was necessary to have a male child, 16.9% said it was desirable, while 19.6% said that the sex of the child did not matter to them. Preference for having a male child motivates women to continue childbearing until they have at least one male child resulting in higher fertility and increased family size.

The current users for contraceptives among women increased with increase in the number of male children and the relation was found to be statistically significant. Further, maximum women were users if they had three or more sons (59.7%).

Adoption of spacing methods was seen to be more when they did not have male children or their number was low. On the other hand acceptance of terminal methods was higher with increasing number of male children (Table 2). Given the terminal nature of the method, the sheer magnitude of the likelihood of using sterilization when women already have two boys demonstrates a commitment to the pursuit of an ideal sex composition, rather than family size per se.

DISCUSSION

India has a male-dominated society; where women are held in high esteem by their families by virtue of their sons. The presence of a son is considered essential for carrying forward the family name. The importance of having sons also influences their choice of contraceptives

In contrast to our findings 50% women in rural areas and 41.5% women in urban areas preferred a male child which was less than that reported in the present study where 63% women thought that it was necessary to have a male child¹⁰.

According to the findings of National Family Health Survey-3 within the number of children of a woman, contraceptive use increases with the number of sons¹¹. Their findings also support the present observations.

Kansal et al observed similar increasing pattern of acceptance of female sterilization as that of the present study¹². Agarwal found the use of condom and oral pill improved after the couple had one son which was also observed in the present study¹³. Rajaretnam found that women in Goa and Kerala were more likely to adopt sterilization if they had one living male child¹⁴. The proportion of women using terminal methods was not seen to differ between one and two or more male living children in Kerala but in Goa such differences persisted. The present findings were similar to that of Goa. Similar adoption of terminal methods after one male child was seen in the present study. The use of traditional and temporary methods was not

seen to be dependent on the presence of a male child although they were seen to increase with number of sons in the present study. The magnitude of the effect of sex composition on sterilization as compared with the other behaviours may be partly a reflection of the fact that sterilization is one of the predominant means of family planning in the study area.

CONCLUSION

Presence of sons was also seen to influence the current use of contraceptives by a woman significantly. Spacing methods were preferred by women if they did not have male children or their number was low. The acceptance of terminal method increases with increase in number of male children.

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