

Sex Preference and Fertility: A Study among the Ansaris of Meerut District, Uttar Pradesh

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ABSTRACT In the present study, 'sex preference' and its effects on fertility were studied among the Ansaris of rural part of Meerut district, Uttar Pradesh. Using interview schedules, the data on fertility and related aspects was collected from 296 ever married women (15-49 years of age) and their husbands. The study confirms the presence of son preference among the members of the community. Most of the respondents (both women and men) expressed a desire for more number of sons as compared to daughters. Almost 62% women and 56% men prefer a son as the first child. Similarly, a large number of respondents expressed a preference of son for any new born child. The reasons that were traditionally responsible for preference of sons over daughters still continue to be the guiding force behind such a perception in present context. The preference for sons over daughters has resulted in an increased level of fertility. However this effect has been found to be modest.

INTRODUCTION

Parents' preferences for sons may have a significant impact on children's welfare and may affect demographic behavior as well. A strong preference for sons may be an obstacle to fertility decline if couples continue having children after reaching their overall family-size goal because they are not satisfied with the sex composition of their children. However, research on the relationship between son preference and fertility is confounded by the observation that the link is weak in both high-fertility and low-fertility populations. In high-fertility societies, most couples continue to have children regardless of the number of sons and daughters they already have. In low-fertility societies, the influence of son preference is also weak because few couples want to have more than one or two children even if they do not achieve their ideal number of sons and daughters. The effect of son preference on fertility, therefore, is thought to be most pronounced in countries like India that are in the middle of the fertility transition. In India, parity progression driven by the desire for sons accounted for 7% of births (Chaudhuri 2012). In the same study it was reported that at any given

parity, the last-born child of women who had stopped childbearing was more likely to be a son than a daughter.

A strong preference for sons has been found to be pervasive in Indian society, affecting the choice regarding number and sex composition of children (Clark 2000; Bhat and Zavier 2003; Varma and Babu 2007). Of particular importance is the fact that son preference has been found to be consistently stronger in northern India than in the South (Khan and Gupta 1987; Basu 1992). Overall, the northern and western states uniformly show low child sex ratios across decades and demonstrate very high son preference (Bhat 2002; Retherford and Roy 2003; Bhaskar and Gupta 2007). At the same time a substantial increase in number of sex related abortions has been observed, even though such acts are considered illegal in India. Among the educated and wealthy, sex selective abortions have increased significantly, especially when the first born child is a daughter (Jha et al. 2011).

Several factors are responsible for son preference. One is the economic utility of sons. Sons are more likely than daughters to provide family labor on the farm or in a family business, earn wages, and support their parents during old age. Upon marriage, a son brings a daughter-in-law into his family, and she provides additional help around the house as well as an economic reward in the form of dowry payments. Another important advantage of having sons is their socio-cultural utility. In the context of India's patrilineal and patriarchal family sys-

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tem, having one son is imperative for the continuation of the family line, and many sons provide additional status to the family and finally the utility of having sons arises from the important religious functions that only sons can provide (Kapadia 1966; Dyson and Moore 1983). Although daughters are often considered to provide more emotional satisfaction to parents than sons, they typically become a member of their husband's family after marriage and may have little continuing contact with their natal family. Parents also bear a large burden (heavy dowry) in arranging a suitable marriage for their daughters and protecting their chastity before marriage (Kishor 1995; Dharmalingam 1996).

Keeping this background in view the present study intends to assess the existence of sex preference and its influence on the overall fertility among the Ansaris of Meerut district, Uttar Pradesh

Objectives

- To examine the existence of sex preference among Ansaris of Meerut district.
- To assess the effect of sex preference on fertility among Ansaris of Meerut district.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The information for the present study was obtained from 296 married Ansari women (15-49 years of age) and their husbands from seven villages in Rajpura and Jani khurd blocks of Meerut district, Uttar Pradesh using random sampling. Meerut District is one of the five districts, those come under Meerut division. The head quarter of Meerut division is also at Meerut District. For planning purpose Meerut district is divided into 12 blocks. According to general and revenue administration Meerut is divided into three *tehsils* namely – Meerut, Mawana and Sardhana. According to 2001 census, population of Meerut district is 29, 73, 877 (Rural – 15, 21,894; Urban - 14, 51,983). Scheduled Caste (SC) population of the district is 5, 46,933. The population of Hindus in the district is 19, 64,504 and that of Muslims is 9,75,715. Literacy rate in the district is 65.96 (Males – 76.31; Females – 54.12).

Ansaris, who are referred to as Momin, Julaha, Momin Ansari, Jola etc. are identified as Muslim Julaha or weavers. Julaha is a Per-

sian word for weaver. Weaving, their traditional occupation is no longer practiced by all because of the development of modern and well-equipped cloth mills. Now a days many of them are in government and private jobs. Others work as skilled or unskilled laborers while some are self employed in small-scale and cottage industries. They prefer to marry within the group (that is, Ansaris). Parallel and cross cousin marriages are preferred.

The information pertaining to fertility and related socio-economic characteristics was collected through in-depth interviews with interview schedules. The interview schedule included questions on number of pregnancies and live births to a woman (age group 15-49), number of children desired by woman and her husband (number and sex of children), treatment with sons and daughters in the family, preference for sex of a child, preference for sex of first child and also the possible reasons for preference of child of a particular sex. Regarding the desired number of children, the respondents were asked to state the number of children they would like to have if they could start the process afresh. However; given the difficulty in answering such a hypothetical question, a slight conceptual difference between the two measures ('ideal number of children' and 'desired number of children') could be ignored (Bhat and Zavier 2003). In the present study the analysis was carried out in two phases. The first phase examines the existence of sex preference while the second phase aims at finding out the effect of sex preference on fertility. Data has been analyzed using SPSS 12 version.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sex Preference

The ensuing analysis tries to find out the existence of sex preference among the Ansaris of Meerut district. Responses of both men and women are taken to assess the preference for children of a particular sex.

Table 1 presents the number of children desired by women (15-49 years of age) and their husbands. Majority of the women (75.0%) and men (60.8%) expressed a desire for three to four children. A relatively higher number of men (34.8%) as compared to women (17.2%) wanted more than four children.

Table 1: Number of children desired by Ansari women and men

Number of children desired	Ansari			
	Number of women	%	Number of men	%
1-2	23	7.8	13	4.4
3-4	222	75.0	180	60.8
≥ 5	51	17.2	103	34.8
Total	296	100.0	296	100.0

As is evident from Table 2, majority of women (65.2%) had a desire for two or less than two sons. However, the number of men with desire for two or less than two sons were found to be equal to the number of men who wanted more than two sons.

Table 2: Number of sons desired by Ansari women and men

Number of sons desired	Ansari			
	Number of women	%	Number of men	%
≤ 2	193	65.2	148	50.0
> 2	103	34.8	148	50.0
Total	296	100.0	296	100.0

From Table 3 it can be seen that most women (96.6%) and men (93.9%) had a desire for two or less than two daughters. Only a few wanted to have more than two daughters. A few women (1.4%) and men (3.7%) expressed no desire for a daughter.

Table 3: Number of daughters desired by Ansari women and men

Number of daughters desired	Ansari			
	Number of women	%	Number of men	%
≤ 2	286	96.6	278	93.9
> 2	6	2.0	7	2.4
None	4	1.4	11	3.7
Total	296	100.0	296	100.0

One simple measure of the degree of son preference is the expressed desire for the ideal number of sons and daughters, converted into the ideal proportion of sons (ideal number of sons / ideal total number of children) (Clark 2000). Table 4 presents the percentage of men and women with no preference, weak preference and strong preference of sons over daughters, based

on the proportion of sons desired by them. Around 41.2% women and 29.1% men expressed no preference for sons over daughters. Most of the women (54.0%) and men (54.5%) expressed a weak preference for sons over daughters. A lesser number of women (4.8%) and men (16.5%) expressed a strong preference for sons over daughters.

Table 4: Son preferences: Proportion of sons desired by Ansari women and men

Proportion of sons desired	Number of women		Number of men	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
No son preference	122	41.2	86	29.1
Weak son preference	160	54.0	161	54.5
Strong son preference	14	4.8	49	16.5
Total	296	100.0	296	100.0

If proportion of sons desired is: = 0.5 then no son preference
> 0.5 but ≤ 0.75 then weak son preference
> 0.75 then strong son preference

The above description clearly shows that there is a preference for more boys than girls in desired number of children. This is in agreement with the NFHS data. The NFHS-2 data for northern India (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana) showed that 47% of the women in this region have a preference for more boys than girls in their ideal number of children, and only 2% reported a preference for more girls than boys (Bhat and Zavier 2003). According to NFHS-3 data for Uttar Pradesh, 33.5% women and 27.8% men want more sons than daughters. However, only 1.7% women and 1.2% men want more daughters than sons (NFHS 2007).

Table 5 presents the preference of men and women for sex of first child. It is evident that most of the women (61.8%) and men (55.7%) wanted son as the first child. A reasonable number of people (34.5% women and 42.2% men) expressed no such preference. However, very few people (3.7% women and 2.0% men) preferred daughter as the first child.

Table 6 presents the preference of men and women for sex of any new born child. Most of the women (63.2%) and men (69.3%) expressed a preference for male child. 33.1% women and 28.7% men expressed no such preference. However, only 3.7% women and 2.0% men preferred a daughter over a son.

Table 5: Preference of Ansari women and men for sex of first child

Preferred sex of first child	Ansari			
	Number of women	%	Number of men	%
Male	183	61.8	165	55.7
Female	11	3.7	6	2.0
Either	102	34.5	125	42.2
Total	296	100.0	296	100.0

Table 6: Preference of Ansari women and men for sex of a child

Preferred sex of a child	Ansari			
	Number of women	%	Number of men	%
Male	187	63.2	205	69.3
Female	11	3.7	6	2.0
Either	98	33.1	85	28.7
Total	296	100.0	296	100.0

Table 7 provides information about the treatment that the sons and the daughters of a family get with respect to freedom and restrictions in certain spheres. While in 98.6% of the families, the sons are allowed to go and play outside the house, a much lower (52.7%) number of families permit the daughters to do the same. As far as permission to go alone to a friend's/relative's house is concerned, sons in 84.1% families enjoy this freedom while only 9.8% families allow their daughters to do so. In all the families the sons enjoy the freedom of wearing dress of their own choice while a relatively lesser proportion (72.0%) of daughters are permitted to do so. While in only 2% families, the sons face the restrictions of coming in front of the visitors, the daughters face similar restrictions in 22.6% families. In 31.4% of the families, the daughters face outrage of elders of the family and are often rebuked for being born a girl. Boys on the contrary face such a situation only in rare cases (0.7%). As far as participation in household works is concerned, 95.6% families expect their daughters to do so. In this regard expectations from son come from 52.0% families. While in most of the families (98.6%) the sons are sent to school, relatively lower number (68.9%) of families send their daughters to school.

Table 8 throws light on the reasons (given by women and their husbands) for general perception (in the society) of not wanting daugh-

Table 7: Treatment with sons and daughters (in Ansari families) with respect to aspects related to every day life.

Variables	Sons		Daughters	
	Number of families (Yes)	%	Number of families (Yes)	%
Allowed to go to play outside the house	292	98.6	156	52.7
Allowed to go to friend's/relative's house alone	249	84.1	29	9.8
Allowed to wear dress of one's choice	296	100.0	213	72.0
Not allowed to come in front of visitors	6	2.0	67	22.6
Rebuked for being born a boy or a girl	2	0.7	93	31.4
Participation in household works	154	52.0	283	95.6
Sent to school	292	98.6	204	68.9
Total responses-296				

ters. For most women (63.9%) the main reason for this perception is the lack of respect that a woman gets on giving birth to a girl child. Another important reason given by a large number (56.1%) of women is the problem of dowry. Besides this, lack of safety of the daughters is also a reason according to 47.6% women. Other reasons given by a lesser number of women include; 'bringing up a girl is an expensive affair' (11.8%), 'investing in a girl is a waste' (2.0%), 'even if she is educated and earns money, it goes to her in-laws' (2.0%). For a majority of men (73.6%), dowry is the main reason behind this perception. Around 48.6% of men think that lack of safety of girls is an important reason. For 23.0% men, expensive upbringing of a girl child is the reason for such a perception. Besides these a few men gave some other reasons which include: 'investing in a girl is a waste' (12.2%), 'even if a daughter is educated and earns money, it goes to her in-laws' (9.8%) and 'woman is not respected for giving birth to a female child' (7.4%).

Table 9 presents the reasons given by men and women for general perception (in the society) for preference of sons over daughters. For majority of women (68.6%) and men (76.7%), the most important reason for this perception is the need for carrying forward the family name which in turn could be achieved only through sons. Besides, a large number of women (68.6%) and men (72.3%) feel that the 'need for son as a support and provider in old age' is an important reason for such a perception. A few women

Table 8: Reasons for general perception (among Ansaris) of not wanting daughters

Reasons for not wanting daughters	Ansaris			
	No. of women	%	No. of men	%
Woman is not respected if she gives birth to a girl	189	63.9	22	7.4
Investing in a girl is a waste	6	2.0	36	12.2
Bringing up girls is an expensive affair	35	11.8	68	23.0
Even if she is educated and earns money, it goes to her in-laws	8	2.7	29	9.8
Dowry	166	56.1	218	73.6
Lack of safety	141	47.6	144	48.6

Total adds to more than 100% because of multiple responses.

(3.4%) and a higher number of men (14.9%) think that the desire for dowry (which comes at the time of son's marriage) leads many couples to prefer sons over daughters.

Table 9: Reasons for general perception (among Ansaris) of preference for sons

Reasons for preferring sons	Ansaris			
	No. of women	%	No. of men	%
Carries forward family name	203	68.6	227	76.7
Brings in dowry	10	3.4	44	14.9
He is a support and provider in old age	203	68.6	214	72.3

Total adds to more than 100% because of multiple responses.

Thus it can be inferred from the above description that there is a clear cut preference for sons over daughters among the Ansaris of Meerut district. A number of studies indicate the existence of son preference. The cross-cultural study by Freedman and Coombs (1974) and the worldwide survey of Williamson (1976) are among the better known studies and point towards existence of son preference in almost all communities. Miller (2001), with an anthropological approach, discussed the features of Asian culture that support son preference. Numerous studies have found that most Indian couples have a strong preference for sons over daughters (Cleland et al. 1983; Clark 2000; Bhat and Zavier 2003; Varma and Babu 2007). In an effort to have sons, many couples continue to have children after achieving their desired family size.

Data from NFHS 1 shows that son preference is evident throughout India, although it is relatively weak in Goa and South India (except for Karnataka). Son preference is especially strong in Haryana, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh; but it is at least moderately strong in all the states of northern, central, and eastern India (Mutharayappa et al. 1997). According to NFHS 3, the strength of son preference varies substantially across the states. Son preference tends to be stronger among both women and men in the northern part of the country, especially in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan (NFHS 2007). The reasons that were traditionally responsible for preference of sons over daughters still continue to be the guiding force behind such a perception in present context.

Effect of Son Preference on Fertility

Having confirmed the preference of sons over daughters, the following analysis tries to assess the effect of son preference on fertility. Table 10 presents correlations between desired number of children / sons / daughters and number of pregnancies / live births.

Table 10: Correlations between desired number of children / sons / daughters and number of pregnancies / live births

	Number of pregnancies	Number of live births
Number of children desired by woman	0.515**	0.526**
Number of sons desired by woman	0.431**	0.453**
Number of daughters desired by woman	0.283**	0.277**
Number of children desired by men	0.431**	0.425**
Number of sons desired by men	0.383**	0.334**
Number of daughters desired by men	0.205**	0.264**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

For both women and men, a stronger positive correlation of number of pregnancies / live births has been found with number of sons desired as compared to number of daughters desired. Thus the number of sons desired in comparison to number of daughters desired shows a stronger association with fertility level (expressed through number of pregnancies and live births) and hence is more likely to affect it.

Table 11: Mean number of pregnancies and live births in relation to the number of sons desired by Ansari women (15-49 years of age)

	<i>Number of sons desired</i>	<i>Number of women</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D</i>	<i>t values (d.f.=294)</i>
Number of pregnancies	≤ 2	193	3.8031	2.06977	6.7**
	>2	103	5.6796	2.66500	
Number of live births	≤ 2	193	3.3782	2.05065	7.2**
	>2	103	5.3786	2.59001	

**p< 0.01

Further, effect of son preference on fertility has been assessed by calculating the differences in the mean number of pregnancies and mean number of live births with respect to certain indicators of son preference. The statistical significance of these differences has been tested through t-test.

Table 11 present the mean number of pregnancies and mean number of live births of women with desire for two or less than two and more than two sons. The differences between the mean values (>2 and ≤ 2) have been found to be statistically significant.

Table 12 present the mean number of pregnancies and mean number of live births (of women of 15–49 years) in relation to husband's desire for two or less than two and more than two sons. The differences between the mean values (>2 and ≤ 2) have been found to be statistically significant.

The data from Tables 11 and 12 clearly shows that desire for more number of sons leads to more number of pregnancies and live births.

For other three indicators of son preference that have been used here, the difference between the mean values for number of pregnancies and for number of live births depicts the effect of son preference on fertility. Table 13 presents the mean number of pregnancies and live births viz-a-viz 'proportion of sons desired', 'preference for sex of first child' and 'preference for sex of a child'. Besides, the t values have also been presented.

The differences in mean number of pregnancies and mean number of live births in relation to women's preference for the sex of first child and men's preference for sex of a child were found to be statistically significant. The difference in mean number of pregnancies with respect to the proportion of sons desired by men was also found to be statistically significant. The differences in mean values that were found to be statistically non-significant were for number of pregnancies and for number of live births with respect to women's preference for sex of a child, men's preference for sex of first child, proportion of sons desired by women and for number of live births with respect to the proportion of sons desired by men.

Thus it can be said that son preference does have an impact on fertility among the Ansaris of Meerut district. However, the impact is not very strong and in some cases is not statistically significant. Similar findings were made by a number of other studies whose results do not demonstrate a consistently strong effect of son preference on fertility (Repetto 1972; Srinivas 1977; Bairagi and Langsten 1986; Park 1986; Das 1987; Arnold 1992; Parasuraman et al. 1994). Using data from Jordan, India and Bangladesh; Repetto (1972) concluded that fertility decisions are less influenced by preference for one sex over the other than by the economic costs and benefits associated with children per say. According to a NFHS report, if gender preferences for children could be entirely eliminated,

Table 12: Mean number of pregnancies and live births in relation to the number of sons desired by Ansari men (husbands)

	<i>Number of sons desired</i>	<i>Number of men</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D</i>	<i>t values (d.f.=294)</i>
Number of pregnancies	≤ 2	148	3.6554	2.19682	5.9**
	>2	148	5.2568	2.45260	
Number of live births	≤ 2	148	3.3851	2.16190	5.0**
	>2	148	4.7635	2.51894	

**p< 0.01

Table 13: Mean values of pregnancies and live births with respect to proportion of son desired, preference for sex of first child and preference for sex of a child.

<i>Dependent variable</i>	<i>Independent variable</i>				
	<i>Proportion of sons desired by women</i>	<i>Number of women</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D</i>	<i>t values (d.f.=294)</i>
Number of pregnancies	=0.5	122	4.3525	2.34581	0.6
	>0.5	174	4.5287	2.53912	
Number of live births	=0.5	122	4.0164	2.33190	0.3
	>0.5	174	4.1149	2.52353	
	<i>Proportion of sons desired by men</i>	<i>Number of men</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D</i>	<i>t values (d.f.=294)</i>
Number of pregnancies	=0.5	86	4.0116	2.39850	2.0*
	>0.5	210	4.6381	2.46555	
Number of live births	=0.5	86	3.8372	2.29506	1.0
	>0.5	210	4.1714	2.49960	
	<i>Women's preference for sex of first child</i>	<i>Number of women</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D</i>	<i>t values (d.f.=283)</i>
Number of pregnancies	Son	183	4.6831	2.52854	2.8**
	Either of the two	102	3.8333	2.23865	
Number of live births	Son	183	4.2404	2.47340	2.1*
	Either of the two	102	3.5882	2.31377	
	<i>Men's preference for sex of first child</i>	<i>Number of men</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D</i>	<i>t values (d.f.=288)</i>
Number of pregnancies	Son	165	4.6727	2.56183	1.8
	Either of the two	125	4.1200	2.33694	
Number of live births	Son	165	4.1939	2.49364	1.1
	Either of the two	125	3.8480	2.40650	
	<i>Women's preference for sex of first a child</i>	<i>Number of women</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D</i>	<i>t values (d.f.=283)</i>
Number of pregnancies	Son	187	4.4920	2.27272	0.3
	Either of the two	98	4.3776	2.88800	
Number of live births	Son	187	4.1327	2.87412	0.2
	Either of the two	98	4.0588	2.23168	
	<i>Men's preference for sex of first a child</i>	<i>Number of men</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D</i>	<i>t values (d.f.=288)</i>
Number of pregnancies	Son	205	4.6341	2.56634	2.1*
	Either of the two	85	3.9529	2.19255	
Number of live births	Son	205	4.2293	2.49924	1.9*
	Either of the two	85	3.6000	2.31043	

**p< 0.01 *p< 0.05

the level of fertility in India would fall by about 8 percent. This rather modest effect, in the face of a strongly articulated preference for sons, is due both to a rather weak effect of son preference on fertility in some of the most populous states and to the fact that by sheer biological chance most couples are able to have their minimum desired number of sons without exceed-

ing their overall family-size goals (Mutharayappa et al. 1997). Moreover, fertility has declined dramatically in some countries where son preference is still widespread—for example, in South Korea and China. The fertility decline in Korea, China and India suggests that strong son preference does not prevent fertility decline, but simply slows it down a little while increasing

discrimination against girls of higher birth orders (Larsen et al. 1998).

CONCLUSION

In the present study it has been found that an explicit preference for sons over daughters exists among the Ansaris of Meerut district, Uttar Pradesh. The major reasons that are responsible for this perception include 'lack of respect for women who give birth to daughters', 'dowry', lack of safety of girls' and a need for sons to carry forward the family name and to support the parents in old age. The 'number of sons desired' has been found to affect the fertility level. More number of sons desired leads to more number of pregnancies which subsequently result in more number of live births. However, the preference of sons over daughters has been found to have only a modest effect on the fertility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Intensification of the campaign for promoting the perception (among masses) of equality with respect to male and female children. Focus should be on making patriarchal values less stringent and on improvement of status of women.
- Provision of incentives for families/ institutions which assist in promoting education and general well being of girl child.

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