

Gender Preference towards Male Child among Uttar Pradesh Migrants in Ludhiana, Punjab, India

Anu Nag* and Praveen Singhal

Department of Human Biology, Punjabi University Patiala, Punjab, India

**E-mail: naganu111@yahoo.co.in, rythum12342000@yahoo.co.in*

KEYWORDS Sex Ratio. Female Feticide. Sex Determination. Abortion.

ABSTRACT The present study was conducted among 1000 couples to find out the level of their awareness regarding sex determination and attitude towards a male child among Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) migrants of Ludhiana district. Gender preference for children of a certain sex can have impact not only on fertility but also on mortality and sex ratio. There is evidence that the natural sex ratio has been distorted by man-made norms, customs, traditions, religious beliefs and more recently by sophisticated medical technologies which results in lower sex ratio in India. Out of 1000 respondents interviewed, 92.80% felt that male child is necessary in the family and the percentage abortion of female fetus is 9.75%.

INTRODUCTION

Census 2011 shows that the child sex ratios (females per 1000 males) have decreased as compared to data from the last five decades. Increasing son preference and neglect of daughters is occurring in many states in India despite of the advances made in education, literacy, health care, and income attainment. According to the Census of India (2011), 7 million fewer girls were born among children 0-6 years of age. Prenatal sex determination coupled with sex selective abortions largely account for this skewed sex ratio in India. The sex ratio is particularly low among couples whose first born is a daughter compared to couples who have a boy as their first born (Jha et al. 2011). A *sloka* of *Atharvaveda* says 'the birth of a girl, grant it elsewhere. Here grant a son'. Thousands of year later, this saying stands very true in modern times as well, when despite the so called modernity, industrialization, literacy and equality parents still pray this (UNICEF 1991). One of the most significant feature of the 20th century has been the dramatic decline in fertility and explicit preference for smaller families in most parts of East and South Asia; this rather than reducing, has exacerbated the preference for a son, leading to an increased discrimination against daughters (Pal et al. 2009). An analysis of sex preference of children is important from the sociological as well as demographic perspective. The degree of boy preference can thus serve as a rough but useful index of the status of women in a society (Bhatia 1982). In South Asian societies there is a universal atti-

tude for son preference, for economic, religious or social reasons. Adult sons are expected to provide economic support to their parents (Das 1984; Miller 1981). Sons are believed to be the carriers of lineage. Women tend to stop child-bearing only after they have given birth to the desired number of sons (Vlassof 1990). Old age security also motivates higher fertility (Vlassof et al. 1980; Goody 1981). The percent of women, at each parity, using contraception tends to increase with the number of living sons, suggesting preference for sons (Nag 1991). In India, gender disparity is common, especially in rural areas where at least one son is preferred (Das 1987). According to census 2001 there are 35 million female are missing as compared to male population, which was 2 million during 1991 where the sex ratio has declined from 940 in 1992-1993 to 925 in 1998-1999 female per thousand males. The most disturbing and alarming aspect of the census report (2001) of India is the sharp fall in the sex ratio of children between the ages of 0 and 6 years from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001. The adverse child sex ratio in the most prosperous states of the country is in grim situation. The child sex ratio for Punjab and Haryana which have highest per capita income is as low as 793 and 820, respectively (Census 2001). Amartya Sen (1990) highlighted taking gender imbalance in industrialized countries as his point of reference and he found the evidence of female deficit in Asia and Africa. He concluded that about 11% of women are missing in both these continents (Sen 1990). Gender preference for male children thus can be seen as undermining the success of the overall

development process; because it reflects discriminating on the basis of sex from the earliest to the later stages of life (United Nations 1995). India's low sex ratio is a stark indicator of the inferior position of women on the society. Pradhan, mentioned in early 1970s that the historical, cultural ecological and sociological causes are some reason behind of the low sex ratio in India (Bardhan 1982). The Committee on Status of women in India concluded that 'an increase in the neglect of female lives as an expendable asset' is the only reason for declination of females in the Indian society (1975). Discrimination against girls has widely reported in all states of India where son is preferred (NFHS-2 1998 -99). Sex ratio is an important indicator for the status of women in India. The last few censuses indicate that there is a clear decline in sex ratio (Census 1991). The important causes of decline in sex ratio are:

- ♦ Demand of more sons for the old age security and escape from the dowry problem.
- ♦ Unregulated use of prenatal diagnostic technologies in whole over the country.

The existing state laws, policies and program fail to comprehensively address issue of girls and women's survival (Census 2001). In India family planning programs contributed to the low sex ratio with its 'one boy or one girl's norm'. As a result of this the parents targeted elimination of all subsequent female fetuses till a male child was finally conceived (Subrahmaniam 2003). Sex ratio is an important social indicator which measures the extent of prevailing equity between males and females in society and is defined as number of females /1000 males. The drop in sex ratio has been largely due to the widespread but illegal practice of using ultrasound scans to identify female fetuses and then aborting them. In 1994, The Prenatal Diagnostic Technologies (PNDT) Act banned the practice but it has proved toothless several years after enactment, not a single conviction takes place. Today there are five states and one union territory which have low sex ratio, that is, Punjab (793), Haryana (820), Chandigarh (845), Delhi (865) and Gujarat (878) (Census 2001). Skewed sex ratio is an issue of major concern and has long term social and demographic consequences. At the heart of the problem is the low status of women in the society, a patriarchal social framework and value system based on son mania. The problem is getting worse as scientific methods of detecting the sex of the fetus and for the termination of pregnancy

is improving. This seems to be fulfilling the long felt need of the people through female feticide (Vadera et al. 2007). The important reasons for son preference are social responsibilities taken by males, propagation of the family name, support in the old age to perform cremation and dowry. As per a report published by United Nations Fund for Population Activities in conjunction with the ministry of family health and welfare, Office of Registrar general and Census Commissioner India 2003, there is a strong preference for a son in India, which is influenced by many socio-economic and cultural factors, such as son being responsible to carry forward family name and occupation, practice of dowry (UNPFA 2003).

In India the preference for son is very strong and has been frequently cited as one of the major obstacles for reducing the national fertility level (Rajaretnam 1994). Female foeticide resulting in decline of sex ratio has led to enforcement of preconception and prenatal diagnostic techniques act since February 2003.

Advances in technology and diagnostic facilities have opened up avenue for girl haters leading to serious disturbances in sex-ratio as a result of female foeticide. 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. Birth of female child is perceived as a curse with economic and social liability (Kanitkar and Mistry 2000). Therefore the present study was conducted among the Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) migrant families to find out their attitude regarding the sex of the child.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present study has been conducted on 1000 U.P. migrant families from Uttar Pradesh who inhabited various localities of Ludhiana in Punjab. Families included in the present study were having minimum stay of ten years or more at Ludhiana after their migration from original place of abode. The data collection was started in September 2005 and completed in March 2008. A descriptive study was undertaken to assess the attitude of couple towards birth of a son and also assess the knowledge and use of contraception methods and sex determination methods. Son preference was analyzed by using statistical methods, that is, Z-test and T-test. The data was collected from both husband and wife of the

family. An attempt was made to record the information as accurate as possible by applying various checks and crosschecks.

RESULTS

Table 1 depicts the distribution of respondents according to the number of living children among U.P migrant families of the present study. The number of male children (living) had been found significantly (t-value 3.74, $P < 0.0001$) higher than female children (living) in the family.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to number of living children

No. of living children	Count of male in family		Count of female in family	
	No.	%age	No.	%age
0	38	3.80	106	10.60
1	344	34.40	369	36.90
2	416	41.60	338	33.80
3	174	17.40	147	14.70
4	18	1.80	27	2.70
5	10	1.00	13	1.30
>5	0	0.00	0	0.00
Total	1000	100.00	1000	100.00
Average	1.82	1.66		
SD	0.89	1.02		
t-value	3.74***			

Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to their preference for son/daughter

Preference	No.	Proportion
Son	928	0.928
Daughter	0	0
Either son or daughter (both)	72	0.720

Table 3: Calculation for significance according to preference by Z value

Group	Z value
Son versus daughter	41.61***
Son versus both	38.28***
Daughter versus both	8.64***

Table 4: Female child pregnancies

Total Female Child Pregnancies	1784
Live female	1610
Aborted	173
% abortion of female child	9.75
Total no. of live male child	1820
Total no. of female child	1610
Sex ratio	$1610/1820 \times 1000 = 884.62$

Table 2 indicates clearly the preference of male child over female child among the U.P migrant families. Out of 1000 families interviewed, 92.80 percent felt that male child was necessary and had strong preference towards male child. Whereas only 7.20 percent families were having preference towards both, that is, the gender of the child did not matter to them. None of the respondents were having desire for female child. This shows that component of desire comes up as the main cause of declining sex ratio in the present study.

Table 3 reveals the Z- value for three groups based on sons and daughters of the families which clearly revealed that the maximum preference for son versus daughter was (41.61***) followed by son versus both (38.28***) and the least had been received for the third group, that is, for daughters versus both is (8.64***). It clearly revealed that the z- value was decreasing according to the preference towards son and daughters.

The researchers conclude that the proportion of preference for son was significantly greater than the proportion of preference of daughter at 1% level of significance was. Similarly, the proportion of preference of son is significantly greater than the proportion of preference of both and the proportion of preference of both is significantly greater than the proportion of preference of daughter. It is clearly indicated from Table 4 that 1820 total number of living male children had been found as compared to 1610 female living children. Total female child pregnancies were 1784 and number of willingly aborted female children was 173. By calculating we can conclude that 9.75% female got aborted and the child sex ratio of 884.62 females per 1000 boys had been found which shows their inclination towards male child.

DISCUSSION

Sex ratio is the proportion of females to males in a given population. As it is indicated in Table 4 that sex ratios for the present population was 884.62 which were low as compared to the sex ratio of Punjab (893) and Uttar Pradesh (898) according to census 2011. The low sex ratio of UP migrants was due to their strong preference towards male child in the family. According to census 2001 report, 35 million females were missing as compared to male population, which was 2

million during 1991 where the sex ratio had declined from 940 in 1992-1993 to 925 in 1998-1999 females per thousand males. Sex ratio is an important indicator for the status of women in India.

According to census 2001, the last few censuses indicate that there is a clear decline in sex ratio. The important causes of decline in sex ratio were demand for more sons for old age security and escape from the dowry problem in the society and unregulated use of prenatal diagnostic technologies in the country. All these results are in concordance with this study results which indicate low sex ratio among the U.P. migrant population.

The most disturbing and alarming aspect of the census report (2001) of India was the sharp fall in the sex ratio of children between the ages of 0 and 6 years from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001. The adverse child sex ratio in the most prosperous states of the country is a grim situation. The child sex ratio for Punjab and Haryana which have highest per capita income was as low as 793 and 820, respectively.

In India there is a strong preference for sons as are they expected to provide economic support for their parents. The present study's results are in concordance with the similar kinds of preferences which have been observed in different parts of the country and are evident from studies of Mumbai, Himachal Pradesh and other states (Mutharayappa et al. 1997; Sunday Times 2000; Malhi et al. 1999; Puri et al. 2007). Low child sex ratio had been found in the present study, that is, 884.62. This fact is fully supported by declining sex ratio in Punjab (793) and in Chandigarh (845) (Census of India 2001).

The Census reveals that sex ratio has fallen down sharply from 945 females per 1000 males in 1991 to 933 in 2001. In a country like India which is undergoing demographic transition; sex ratio at birth in combination with the under enumeration of female births as excess female mortality throughout life course has potentially large effect on the overall sex ratio (Agnihotri 1996).

According to Census of India 2011, sex ratio had shown some improvement in the last 10 years. It has gone up from 933 in 2001 to 940 in 2011 census of India. The state of Kerala with 1084 females for every 1000 males has the best sex ratio in India. It had shown a tremendous improvement in the sex ratio than the presently studied sex ratio. Haryana has the lowest sex

ratio of 877 females per 1000 males though higher than the sex ratio in the present study.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion, it may be clearly concluded that it showed the clear picture of recent scenario of the female feticide and a strong desire for male child among UP migrant families. The existence of son preference is dangerous for our society since this is the root cause of imbalanced sex ratio. Moreover, the inclination to female feticide is reported by the women in this study. This study revealed that there is strong preference of the families towards male child which results in adverse sex ratio among these migrants. This calls for a need to educate women from under privileged population about gender equality and recommendations under PNDT act in order to improve the declining sex ratio. There is gender bias in India which is responsible for this decline in female ratio though it has started to show some improvement in the last few years.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Financial assistance in the form of research fellowship from University Grants Commission, New Delhi.

REFERENCES

- Agnihotri SB 1996. Missing females: Disaggregated analysis. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31: 2074-2084.
- Audio-visual Review 1991. Born Female. Produced by UNICEF Regional Office for South Central Asia. Govt. of India. Directed by Nilanjana Mukherjee
- 1985. *Indian Journal of Social Work*, 52: 115-117.
- Bardhan P 1982. Little girls and death in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 17:(36): 1285-1290.
- Bhatia J C 1982. Determinants of desired family size in Rural Ghana (West Africa): A multivariate analysis. *Demography India*, 2: 237.
- Census of India 1991. *Series-1, India. Paper 2 of 1991. Provisional Population Totals: Rural-Urban Distribution*, Office of Registrar General, India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, and New Delhi.
- Census of India 2001. Population in the Age Group 0-6 Years by Sex and Sex Ratio (0-6), Office of Registrar General, India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India New Delhi From <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/A-Series/Series_links/t_00_004.aspx>. (Retrieved on 30th May 2010).

- Census of India 2011. *Provisional Population Totals, Paper 1, Series 1*, Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, Government of India, New Delhi.
- Gupta MD 1987. Selective discrimination against female children in rural Punjab, India. *Population and Development Review*, 13: 77-100.
- Das N 1984. Sex preference pattern and its stability in India: 1970-80. *Demography India*, 13(1 and 2): 108-119.
- Goody J R, Duly CJ, Beeson I, Harrison G 1981. Implicit sex preferences: A comparative study. *Journal of Biosocial Sciences*, 13(4): 455-466.
- Jha P, Kesler M, Kumar R, Ram F, Ram U, Aleksandrowicz L, Bassani DG, Chandra S, Banthia JK 2011. Trends in selective abortions of girls in India: Analysis of nationally representative birth histories from 1990 to 2005 and census data from 1991 to 2011. *Lancet*, 377(9781): 1921-1928.
- Kanitkar T, Mistry M 2000. Status of women in India – an interstate comparison. *The Indian Journal of Social Work*, 61: 386-383.
- Malhi P, Raina G, Malhotra D 1999. Preference for the sex of children and its implications for reproductive behaviour in urban Himachal Pradesh. *Journal of Family Welfare*, 45(1): 23-30.
- Miller B 1981. *The Endangered Sex: Neglect of Female Children in Rural North India*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Mutharayappa R, Arnold F, Roy T K 1997. Son Preference and its Impact on Fertility in India. *National Family Health Subject Reports No.3*. Mumbai: International Institute for Population.
- Nag M 1991. Sex preferences in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan and its effect on fertility. *Demography India*, 20(2): 163-185.
- National Family Health Survey–2, 1998-99. *Preliminary Report*. Centre for Operations Research and Training, Vadodara and International Institute for Population Sciences(IIPS), Mumbai, India, March 2000.
- Pal ID, Chadhuri RN 2009. Gender preference and its implications on reproductive behavior of mothers in a rural area of West Bengal. *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, 34(1): 65-67.
- Puri S, Bhatia V, Swami, HM 2007. Gender preference and awareness regarding sex determination among married women in slums of Chandigarh. *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, 32(1): 60-62.
- Rajaretnam T, Deshpande RV 1994. The effect of sex preferences on contraceptive use and fertility in rural South India. *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 20: 88-95. Registrar General of India, Census of India 2001. From <www.censusindia.net> (Retrieved on 18 December 2008).
- Sen A 2003. 'More Than 100 Million Women Are Missing', New York Review of Books, 37(20): 61-66. Online Resource Cited(03/02/07) From <http://ucatlas.ucsc.edu/gender/Sen100M.html> (Retrieved on April 2008).
- Subrahmaniam V 2003. India's Missing Girls. *The Times of India*, 11th June, P. 17.
- United Nations 1994. *Population and Development: Programme of Action Adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development*, Cairo, 5-13 September, 1994, Vol. 1 (ST /ESR).
- Vadera BN, Joshi UK, Unadakat SV, Yadav BS, Yadav S 2007. Study on knowledge, attitude and practices regarding gender preference and female feticide among pregnant women. *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, 32(4): 300-301.
- Vlassof C 1990. Fertility intentions and subsequent behavior: A longitudinal study in rural India. *Studies in Family Planning*, 21: 216-225.
- Vlassof M, Vlassof C 1980. Old age security and the utility of children in rural India. *Population Studies*, 34(4): 87-499.