Original Research Article

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Determinants of gender preference among women of Belagavi: a cross sectional study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Sex ratio in India, has always remained unfavorable to females. Changes in the sex ratio, reflects the underlying socioeconomic, cultural patterns of a society. A number of factors influence the relative benefits and costs of sons and daughters and ultimately the parent's gender preferences. Objective was to study the factors that determine gender preferences among women of reproductive age group and to formulate preventive measure against gender bias.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted by interviewing married women of reproductive age group (15-49 years) attending general OPD and antenatal clinics in urban field practice (n=400) areas of Belagavi. All married women with at least one child were included in the study.

Results: Son preference was seen among 137 (34.25%) women participants. Socio-economic factors like religion, literacy status, occupation, socio-economic status were significantly associated (p<0.001) with gender preference. Awareness about PCPNDT act (p<0.0001), self-deprived image (p<0.001) and the gender of previous child (p<0.00001) which was highly significant were the other factors that determined the gender preference among women. Old age dependency and growth of family were the main reasons given by women for existence of son preference and no dowry and security of girls were the two important preventive measures as opined by women for prevention of female feticide.

Conclusions: This study clearly infers that son preference is prevalent among women of Belagavi and there is an intricate association of many factors which determine this gender preference. Efforts to address patriarchal gender norms, strengthening the existing laws against dowry, PCPNDT Act, educational and occupational opportunities for females are the dire needs if girls are to be perceived as important and desired in our society.

Keywords: Gender preference, Son preference, Female foeticide, Female infanticide

INTRODUCTION

The growth of population has decreased in almost every country as a result of excessive fertility control measures with the view that it can increase the value of the human capital, to accelerate the socioeconomic development. However, in some countries, the low fertility rate is contributing to gender disequilibrium, the special

preference being a male child. Nature does not discriminate between male and female. Hence in an ideal society their number seems to be almost equal. Sex ratio in India, has always remained unfavourable to females. According to the 2011 census reports, the national child sex ratio (CSR) is 914 girls per 1000 boys (children aged 0–6 years) as compared to 927 in 2001. This CSR at India level is lowest since independence.

Gender is defined as a social construct of the set of qualities and behaviours expected from male and female.³ While an individual's sex, does not change, gender roles are socially determined and change over the time period. A child's sex is determined before birth whereas gender is learned.⁴ Preference of son in India has been expressed in terms of female infanticide that has now being replaced by female foeticide or sex selective abortion with the availability of the newer technologies.⁵ Son preference is also one of the reasons given for high fertility rate and is believed to have a strong effect on the number of additional children above the desired minimum size.⁶ The declining number of females in a society may lead to an increase in sexual abuse and social crimes against women, such as: rape, abduction and bride selling which will disturb the social fibre of the society and also the value systems. Also, due to female foeticide women may have to bear repeated pregnancies and forced abortions. Studies have shown that a number of factors influence the relative benefits and costs of sons and daughters and ultimately the parent's gender preferences.8 It becomes important to look at this problem objectively in order to understand the causative factors, and to suggest the remedial measures. Hence this study was designed with the objective of studying the factors that determine gender preferences among women of reproductive age group and to formulate preventive measure against gender bias.

METHODS

A cross-sectional study was conducted among women of reproductive age group (15-49 years) attending general OPD and antenatal clinics in three urban field practice areas of Belagavi, for a period of six months i.e., August 2014- January 2015. At a confidence interval of 95%, considering the population of the three urban health centers, the sample size using "survey system" software was N= 400. Proportional sampling technique was used to obtain the required sample size. A pre-designed pretested questionnaire was used to obtain information after making necessary modifications following the pilot study. Questionnaire for the survey included information on socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of women, their gender preference towards children, awareness about PCPNDT Act, feeling of selfdeprivation, reasons for son preferences and measures to prevent this gender bias. A written informed consent was obtained from every participant. Data analysis was done with SPSS 19.0 version expressed as percentages, Chisquare test for proportions. All married women with at least one child were included as study participants and non-permanent residents of the respective places were excluded from the study.

RESULTS

Total respondents in our study were four hundred married women having at least one child. Around 121 (30.25) women belonged to 25-29 age group and the average age

of women was 29.13 (SD ±1.09) years. A higher proportion 151 (37.8) had completed secondary schooling. Majority of the respondents 296 (74%) were housewives and 253 (63.2) Hindu by religion. According to the modified B.G. Prasad's classification maximum 172 (43%) of study participants were from families of socioeconomic class IV, followed by 91 (22.8%) who belonged to class III. Son preference was seen among 137 (34.3%) women, 250 (62.5%) considered both equal and only 13 (3.2%) preferred daughters (Figure 1).

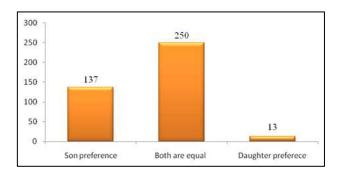


Figure 1: Distribution of women according to gender preference.

Our study showed, an inverse relationship between literacy status and son preference among women which was statistically significant (p<0.001). With increase in literacy status of the women, son preference decreased. Around 100 (75.2) women belonging to Muslim religion showed son preference as compared to 37 (14.6) of Hindus, showing son preference was more among Muslims as compared to Hindus which was statistically significant (p<0.001). Son preference was seen among 112 (37.8%) of housewives, followed by 22 (32.4%) daily wage workers and was least among 3 (8.3) working women. Only a few 56 (14) women were unaware of the PCPNDT Act and nearly half 194 (48.5) of them had a self-deprived image. Few of them were not aware about this perception which was persisting in the hidden form so leading questions like their level of satisfaction with their position/status in the family, feeling discriminated, need of dowry/expenses during marriage and also lack independence were asked to know about the self-deprived image. Lack of awareness about the PCPNDT Act and a self-deprived status among women were important factors for son preference which was statistically significant (p<0.001). Son preference increased if the previous gender of the child in the family was female which was highly significant. Previous male child and composition of both male and female in the family showed a decrease in son preference 17 (13) and 39 (40.2) respectively (Table 1).

In our study, two important reasons given for son preference were old age dependency (258) and further growth of the family (246), followed by son brings status to family (121), required to perform the rituals (76) and easy to raise (43) when compared to daughters (Figure 2). To curb this gender bias, some of the preventive

measures as opined by the women were no dowry (313), security of girls (292), education of women (270), employment of women (219), continuation of law (185)

and simplification of marriage (121) in decreasing order of frequency (Figure 3).

Table 1: Distribution of women according to the factors determining their gender preference.

Variables	Son preference (%)	No preference (%)	Total	P value
Literacy status				
Illiterate	53 (88.3)	7 (11.7)	60	
Primary school	36 (29.5)	86 (70.5)	122	$\chi^2 = 114.5$;
Secondary school	48 (31.8)	103 (68.2)	151	df=4 p<0.001
PUC/Diploma	0	59 (100)	59	
Graduation	0	8 (100)	8	
Religion				
Hindu	37 (14.6)	216 (85.4)	253	$\chi^2 = 149.5;$ df=2
Muslim	100 (75.2)	33 (24.8)	133	
Others	0	14 (100)	14	p<0.001
Occupation				
Housewife	112 (37.8)	184 (62.2)	296	$\chi^2 = 12.54;$
Working	3 (8.3)	33 (91.6)	36	df=2
Daily wage workers	22 (32.4)	46 (67.6)	68	P<0.001
Socio-economic Status				
Class I	0	14 (100)	14	χ^2 (for linear trend)=62.85, p<0.001
Class II	0	61 (100)	61	
Class III	21 (23.1)	70 (76.9)	91	
Class IV	83 (48.3)	89 (51.7)	172	
Class V	33 (53.2)	29 (46.8)	62	
Awareness about PCPNDT	Act			
Know	129 (37.5)	215 (62.5)	344	$\chi^2 = 11.5$; df=1
Don't know	8 (14.3)	48 (85.7)	56	p<0.001
Self-deprived status				
Yes	123 (63.4)	71 (36.6)	194	$\chi^2 = 142.2$; df=1
No	14 (6.8)	192 (93.2)	206	p<0.001
Gender of previous child				
One male	17 (13)	114 (87)	131	
One female	58 (47.2)	65 (52.8)	123	$\chi^2 = 40.87;$ df=4
One male, one female	39 (40.2)	58 (59.3)	97	
Two female	14 (43.8)	18 (56.2)	32	p<0.0001
More than two female	9 (52.9)	8 (47.1)	17	- p<0.0001

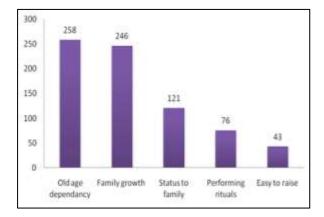


Figure 2: Distribution of women according to reasons given for son preference (*multiple answers).

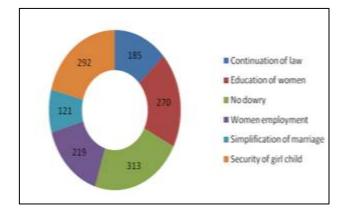


Figure 3: Distribution of the women according to their responses for preventive measures against gender bias (*multiple answers).

DISCUSSION

In our study, son preference was seen among 34.3% of women which was less when compared to the studies done in Gujarat and Ahmedabad where it was 53.28% and 87.53% respectively.^{8,9} Socio-cultural factors like religion, occupation of women, literacy status, socioeconomic status influenced son preference which was similar to a study conducted in Ahmedabad.⁸ Muslims as compared to Hindus were more likely to prefer son which was contradicting the results of a study conducted in Maharashtra where, Muslim women were less likely to prefer the male child.⁵ The same study conducted in Maharashtra showed son preference was significantly less in health workers and other working women than field workers and home makers which was similar to our study.⁵ With the increase in socio-economic status, male preference decreased which followed a linear trend in our study, similarly; women belonging to low socioeconomic status were having more than twice the probability to prefer male child than upper-socioeconomic status according to the study conducted in Maharashtra.⁵ In some places the economic relationship is more curvilinear where middle income couples have both adequate means to access the technology and stronger son preferences to motivate its use; lower income couples lack the means and higher income couples, the desire for sons. Also according to study conducted by Basu et al in Delhi, there is also likely to be a positive association between women's employment and access to knowledge about better childbearing and childrearing practices, as well as a greater confidence and freedom in translating this knowledge into behavior. 10 A self-deprived status among women was an important factor for son preference in our study which shows that gender inequality brings in some sort of lack of confidence among women's inculcating inability, to welcome another female life as her own child in the family, to the extent of willingness to even get rid of it. On a contrary, a study conducted by Jha et al showed, the decline in conditional sex ratio for second-order births when the first born was a girl were much greater in mothers with 10 or more years of education than in mothers with no education, and in wealthier households compared with poorer households.¹¹ Whereas, no decline was detected in sex ratio for second order births if the first born was a boy. In our study, increase in the awareness about the PCPNDT Act and the immorality of gender selection may be a reason among the literate and economically sound women for not disclosing son preference. Our study showed that, son preference increased if the previous gender of the child in the family was female which was the strongest determinant of gender preference which was similar to the studies conducted Nepal and Maharashtra which showed presence of only female children in family significantly increased the desire for male or more children.^{5,12}

Old age dependency (258) and further growth of the family (246) were two important reasons in our study for

son preference which was similar to the study conducted in Maharashtra ⁵ were age security was the most common reason followed by lineage i.e. keeping family line (23.42%). Few of the preventive measures as opined by the women to curb this gender bias were no dowry (313), security of girls (292), education of women (270), employment of women (219). Similarly, most common idea about prevention was change in the system of marriage especially in regards to dowry 98% and expenses of ceremony 93%, also total social reformation was recommended by 96% women to make today's woman more confident, empowered and secured along with continuation of law 81% by the study conducted in Maharashtra.⁵

CONCLUSION

This study clearly infers that son preference is still prevalent among women and there is an intricate association of many factors which determine this gender preference. The focus of most our Indian government policy related to son preference has been to reduce the sex-selective abortion. It may be equally important to address the underlying factors than just the means through which it is implemented. We need to understand the motivation and social norms of the women who did not express a son preference and harness the apparent power of education and media to influence the practice of gender preferences. Efforts to address patriarchal gender norms, strengthening the existing laws against dowry, PCPNDT Act, educational and occupational opportunities for females are the dire needs if girls are to be perceived as important and desired in our society.

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