

# Son Preference in India: Trends, patterns and determinants

## Introduction

In the recent past, from a demographic viewpoint, India has been consistently showing inequality in the sex ratio. According to Census data, the sex ratios (female/ 1000 male) for the last couple of decades, i.e. from 1971 to 2011 were 930, 936, 929, 933 and 943 respectively. According to the sociologists and development economists, it is the reflection of high son preference that has been prevalent for the last century in India (Klaus and Tipandjan, 2015). Son preference refers to the attitude of preferring male children to female children. It is the belief that boys are more valuable than girls. A number of practices and problems like denying of property rights, access to quality education, health care, dowry system, etc. exist due to son preference in the society. Preference for sons is linked to various factors such as social custom, religious belief, and the perception of the family's needs. It is widely prevalent in Asian countries such as South Korea (Chung and Dasgupta 2007), China (Tuljapurkar et al. 1995), Vietnam, Taiwan and India (Jha et al. 2006).

In India, parents are more likely to prefer sons over daughters due to various social and economic factors. One of these is the belief that sons will perform important religious roles. There has been a strong preference for sons in India. This preference has been thoroughly established through various studies (Arnold, Choe, and Roy 1998; Mitra, 2014; Clark, 2000). The main factors that have led to a sharp decline in the CSR in the country are the increasing son preference and declining fertility. These factors are considered the main factors that could lead to gender biased sex selection. While parents consider their daughters as contributing little to the household income, they are also considered as a dowry burden due to their high expenses involved in getting married. When a girl reaches adolescence, her chastity becomes a concern. The parents also feel uncomfortable if the groom is not found early enough. Since a girl is usually living with her husband's family after marriage, the connection between the family and the child is often reduced. This leads to a neglectful attitude towards the girl child. The data collected by the National Family Health Survey suggests that the son preference of Indian women has declined over a period of time. Hence, this paper endeavours to understand the trends, differentials and determinants of son preference over a period of time in India.

## Data and Methods

The data for this study were derived from the National Family Health Survey, which is a vital source of information about India's population. It includes information about maternal and child health, as well as reproductive health. In the first round of NFHS I (1992-93), interviews were conducted with a nationally representative sample of 88,562 households and 89,777 ever married women aged 13-49 years across India. The NFHS II (1998-99) covered a representative sample of 91,196 households and interviewed 89,199 ever-married women aged 15-49 years while NFHS III (2005-06) collected information from a nationally representative sample of 109,041 households and 124,385 women aged 15-49 years. The NFHS IV (2015-16) covered a larger representative sample of 601,509 households and 699,686 women aged 15-49 years. The present study was restricted to currently married women aged 15-49 years with at least one ideal child. Each women was asked about her ideal number of children, ideal number of sons, ideal number of daughters and the number of children for which she did not express a gender preference. The question was: "If you could go back to the time you did not

have any children and could choose exactly the number of children to have in your whole life, how many would that be?” And to know about ideal no. of sex composition of the children, they were asked how many of these children they would like to be boys, how many they would like to be girls and for how many the sex would not matter. To identify gender preference, only the ideal number of boys and girls has been considered. Son preference in a mother is identified when their ideal number of sons is more than the ideal number of daughters whereas no preference for sons is identified when their ideal number of sons is less than or equal to their ideal number of daughters. The covariates are women’s age group, education, caste, area of residence (rural/urban), religion, media exposure to family planning awareness, number of members in a household, sex of the household head, and Indian geographical region. The bivariate and multivariate (binary logistic regression) analyses were used to find out the factors responsible for determining the son preference over a period of time.

## **Results**

Our analysis from NFHS I, II, III and IV shows that there is an increase in the education level of women. For example, among married women the secondary level of education shows an increase from 23.43% in NFHS I to 42.2% in NFHS IV. Similarly, among married women the higher level of education increased from 4.83% in NFHS I to 9.11% in NFHS IV. Media exposure to family planning messages hiked from 48.93% in NFHS I to 60.60% in NFHS IV (data not shown). We present the adjusted odds ratio for association of outcome variable (son preference) with other covariates over a period of time and also done the pooled data analysis. Table 1 shows strong son preference in all four rounds of NFHS, although it indicates a declining trend over a period of time. For example, in pooled data analysis among studied women in NFHS II, NFHS III, and NFHS IV had significantly lower odds (0.76, 0.50, 0.46 respectively) for son preference compared to NFHS I. The results indicates that as the women gets older the son preferential attitudes rises in all survey rounds as well as in pooled data. The odds for son preference with increased educational attainment of the women declines compared to those women who were illiterate. Similarly the women belongs to rural area were more likely to have son preference in all survey round. In multivariate analysis we found that women with greater media exposure to family planning awareness were less likely to have son preference. When the household members in the household were more than 5, then the women were slightly more likely to have son preference whereas when the sex of the household head is female, women were slightly less likely to have son preference compared to the male household head in all survey except NFHS IV. Coming to different geographical regions of India, we found that the women of west region and south region have significantly lower odds for son preference compared to north region in all survey round as well as in pooled data.

## **Conclusion**

This study indicates a trend in reduction in son preferential attitudes over a period of time among younger, educated and urban women and also it is affected by some other social and economic characteristics of the population. Although there is a declining trend in the level of son preference during a period but still we found that there is strong son preference in all survey round. The conclusions from this study also reveals the significance of education among women which is helping to challenge gender stereotypes and discrimination. Expanding educational opportunities for girls provide them with skills and shape their attitudes towards decision making in matters of reproduction in a culture steeped in patriarchy. India is one of the most diverse country in the world, having more than 100 languages, 700 different tribes, every major religion in the world, and some of the world’s largest cities as well as remote

regions with almost no people. So to see regional variation in son preference we have done regional analysis and from the findings we can conclude that western and southern region stands at better place in weakening of son preference. This study reveals the trends, patterns and determinants of son preference over a period of time. Although culture tends to remain persistent, even a deeply rooted norm can weaken extensively throughout a generation when incentives change.

## References

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**Table 1**

Adjusted odds ratios for son preference with selected demographic and socio-economic characteristics in NFHS I, II, III and IV, India.

	NFHS I	NFHS II	NFHS III	NFHS IV	Pooled data
<b>Background characteristics</b>	O.R	O.R	O.R	O.R	O.R
<b>Age group</b>					

<b>15-19 (Ref.)</b>					
<b>20-24</b>	1	1.03	1.08*	1.13***	1.04***
<b>25-29</b>	1.09***	1.09**	1.21***	1.36***	1.18***
<b>30-34</b>	1.15***	1.14***	1.27***	1.52***	1.28***
<b>35-39</b>	1.22***	1.23***	1.38***	1.66***	1.38***
<b>40-44</b>	1.2***	1.29***	1.43***	1.76***	1.44***
<b>45-49</b>	1.2***	1.32***	1.55***	1.82***	1.49***
<b>Education</b>					
<b>No education (Ref.)</b>					
<b>Primary</b>	0.69***	0.73***	0.72***	0.74***	0.72***
<b>Secondary</b>	0.47***	0.51***	0.52***	0.56***	0.52***
<b>Higher</b>	0.2***	0.29***	0.33***	0.4***	0.33***
<b>Caste</b>					
<b>SC (Ref.)</b>					
<b>ST</b>	0.77***	0.9***	0.99	0.92***	0.95***
<b>Others</b>	0.9***	0.88***	0.89***	0.92***	0.91***
<b>Residence</b>					
<b>Urban (Ref.)</b>					
<b>Rural</b>	1.33***	1.35***	1.35***	1.18***	1.25***
<b>Religion</b>					
<b>Hindu (Ref.)</b>					
<b>Muslim</b>	1.09***	1.07***	1.3***	1.39***	1.25***
<b>Other</b>	0.83***	0.84***	0.88***	1.03**	1.02**
<b>Media (FP Awareness)</b>					
<b>No (Ref.)</b>					
<b>Yes</b>	0.87***	0.8***	0.77***	0.79***	0.78***
<b>Household member</b>					
<b>&lt;=5 (Ref.)</b>					
<b>&gt;5</b>	1.15***	1.15***	1.2***	1.2***	1.2***
<b>Sex of household head</b>					
<b>Male(Ref.)</b>					
<b>Female</b>	0.89***	0.89***	0.93**	1.09***	1.04***
<b>Region</b>					
<b>North (Ref.)</b>					
<b>Central</b>	1.23***	1.49***	1.37***	1.72***	1.58***
<b>East</b>	0.91***	0.91***	1	1.75***	1.41***
<b>North East</b>	0.75***	0.78***	0.83***	1.38***	1.09***
<b>West</b>	0.36***	0.3***	0.39***	0.77***	0.53***
<b>South</b>	0.77***	0.98	1.15***	0.85***	0.89***
<b>NFHS Survey Round</b>					
<b>NFHS 1(Ref.)</b>					
<b>NFHS 2</b>					0.76***
<b>NFHS 3</b>					0.5***
<b>NFHS 4</b>					0.46***

Note:(Ref.): Reference Category; (O.R): Odds Ratio; \*\*\*, \*\*, \*: <1%, 5% and 10% level of significance