Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research 19 (11): 1538-1545, 2014
ISSN 1990-9233

DOI: 10.5829/idosi.mejsr.2014.19.11.11425

Does Son Preference Affect Family Size? Evidences from Hanumangarh District Rajasthan (India)

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Abstract: In the present study, the ideal number of children and son preference and their socio-economic and demographic determinants were studied among currently married couples from Hanumangarh district in Rajasthan state of Indian republic. The data were collected from 610 currently married couples from both rural and urban areas of Hanumangarh district. 70.17 percent of the respondents have a son preference over the girl child. The data also showed that more than eighty percent of the respondents opted for at least one son. These parameters are associated with some of the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the respondents. The present study measures the degree of son preference among currently married couples and analyse the impact of son preference on ideal number of children. It concludes that son preference has its higher dominance on desired family size as compared to other socio- economic and demographic variables.

Key words: Dowry · Foeticide · Ideal number of children · Son preference and two-child family norm

INTRODUCTION

Preference for sons or more number of sons than daughters has been documented in several countries in the world [1]. Particularly in India, son-preference is very strong and pervasive and has been frequently cited as one of the major obstacles for reducing the national fertility level [2]. Hence, eligible couples usually adopt one or the other family planning method, only after having their desired number of sons. Studies conducted in India and abroad have revealed that son preference has a significant influence on the acceptance of contraceptive practices. In northern India, women's desired fertility is positively associated with their level of son preference, according to analyses based on data from two successive rounds of a nationally representative survey [3]. A number of cultural and socio-economic factors influence the relative benefits and costs of sons and daughters and ultimately effects the parents' gender preferences. Chavada, et al. [4] factors like economic utility of sons, old age security, economic reward, socio-cultural utility, inheriting property, etc. influence the decision for the preference for sons [5-8]. In the traditional agrarian societies, particularly in patriarchal

societies, sons are preferred for many reasons such as sons contribute to the family's income by working in the farm, family continuity (lineage) remain intact through the sons, sons are expected to perform last rites, sons support the parents during illness and old age and provide physical strength to the family. In addition to this, the value dimensions for son (s) are deeply rooted with superstitious and traditional beliefs and values. In the context of India's patrilineal and patriarchal family system, having one son is imperative for the continuation of the family line and many sons provide additional status to the family [9-10]. It has often been argued that strong son preference is one of the major barriers in the adoption of family planning, particularly in the rural areas. The study area has a male dominated society where women find low status in all the social, economic, cultural and political matters. Due to strength of son preference, a couple in Indian society usually produce more number of children to have the desired number of sons.

It's painful to confess that this trend still exists in various parts of the country. States like Maharashtra, Haryana, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Punjab are infamous for practising female foeticide and infanticide. Discriminations against female for nutrition and education has led child marriages. Poor nutrition during adolescence results into various reproductive health disorders. The effect of these disorders further accentuate by early marriage, closely spaced pregnancies, pregnancy

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complications, poor access to information about family planning etc. Social insecurity, huge dowry, patriarchal society, low status and empowerment of women in society etc. are responsible for disliking girl child. In traditional society no one celebrates the birth of a female child and as she grows she has to face discrimination on various grounds. Girls do not receive desired attention since they have to go away to her husband's family. They are called as *Paraya Dhan* (other's property and wealth). Although a daughter provides help in housework before marriage, she is considered to be an economic liability to her parents mainly because of the heavy dowry payment demanded by the groom's family [11].

In this context an attempt has been made here to know the reasons for son preference and disliking girl child from the female respondents (mothers) of the study area.

Study Area: The study area, i. e., Hanumangarh district, lies in semi-arid desert laden northern part of the Rajasthan state where availability of water plays a decisive role in shaping the course of sustenance and development. It consists of seven tahsils, six urban centres and 1773 inhabited villages and characterized by sandy, ill watered and unproductive area. Provision of irrigation facilities through *Gang*, *Bhakra* and *Indira Gandhi canals* have made most of it bristle with ripening blades of corn. But still a large portion of the area remains arid and full of sand dunes. The northern part of the district comprises *Ghaggar* flood plain with thick layer of alluvial sand. Southern part, on the other hand, is characterised by sand dunes and interdunal plains. The study area contains 2.68 per cent of total population of the Rajasthan state whereas it possesses 2.82 per cent of total area of the state. The district under study is witnessing gradual economic growth since the inception of *Indira Gandhi Canal* but the pace of demographic development is not upto the desired level. Though the study area has registered lower population growth rate (24.39% in 1991-2001) and better performance in family welfare as compared to Rajasthan but still it is facing various obstacles in achieving the total fertility rate at replacement level. Population growth rate of the study area is declining since 1971 but still it poses a serious threat to development process in general and human development in particular. There exist significant intra-district variations in several key demographic attributes.

The district has a predominantly rural and agrarian society as 80% of the total population live in rural areas where about 75% of the total workforce is engaged in agriculture and its allied activities. Similar to India, here too agriculture is the mainstay of its population. On the basis of agricultural prosperity, the district may be divided into two parts: Canal irrigated northern part which possesses comparatively higher level of agricultural development and better position on the economic, social and demographic front while desert laden southern part still lags behind in terms of various indicators of development. Though initiation of economic development has improved the standard of living in northern part but this lopsided development gave birth to some serious challenges e.g. decline in child sex ratio, gender disparity and inequality in the distribution and access to health care facilities. The southern part is still struggling for economic as well as infrastructural development due to scattered habitations, disproportionate health and educational facilities and poor transport facilities which are hindering the path of human development and social well-being. Religious composition also varies. Though both the parts have dominance of Hindus but northern and southern part has Sikhs and Muslims as largest minority groups respectively. Scheduled castes with their distinct population characteristics comprise a large proportion (about 26%) of population of the district.

Objectives: The two fold objectives of the present study are as follows:

- To measure the degree of son preference among currently married couples and
- To analyse the impact of son preference on ideal number of children.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study is exclusively based on primary data.Intensive field work from September to December, 2010 has been conducted to collect the primary data. The primary data have been collected through sample survey of 610 households selected from fourteen villages (two villages from each tahsil) and two urban centres of Hanumangarh district. The villages under study (possessing at least 50 households) have been selected according to their distance from Primary Health Centres (PHCs). First of all two PHCs have been selected from each tahsil. After selecting PHCs, villages in the vicinity of both PHCs have been categorised according to their distance from concerned PHC. Out of these distance categories, two villages from each tahsil have been selected in such a way that one village must lie (within a radius of 1km) to the first PHC while the second village must lie farther (7-8km) from the second PHC. This

technique has been applied in every tahsil on the rotation basis, so as to make the sum of distances of both villages from their respective PHCs remains equal. It has been tried that selected villages should not lie in the vicinity of any other PHC/CHC/district hospital except the selected PHC.

While selecting villages, it has been cared that the entire sample must represent the physical, social, economic, cultural and religious characteristics of the study area. Accordingly, at least one village has been selected in such a way that which comprise more than 80 per cent Muslims, Sikhs, scheduled castes and other backward castes households respectively. From each selected village, on the basis of age, caste, religion, education, occupation and income; 35 households and 70 currently married respondents (one currently married couple from each household) have been chosen for an in-depth interview through a structured questionnaire. In this way, 490 households (980 respondents) have been selected from rural areas of all the seven tahsils of the study area.

120 households have been selected from two urban centres according to their socio-economic status. As the urban centres in the district have small spatial extension, so the distance categories have not been considered. According to socio-economic status households have been categorised into three classes, i.e. high, medium and low.

Further, 20 households have been selected from each socio-economic class in both the urban centres. In this way, 120 households and 240 respondents (one currently married couple from each household) have been selected from urban areas. Altogether a total of 610 households (1,220 respondents) have been selected from various parts of the study area.

Primary data thus obtained have been analysed using SPSS 16.0 softare. Multivariate (Logistic Regression) analysis has been used to know the important predictors of adoption of two-child family norm.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 depicts that more than seventy per cent of total female respondents (mothers) have a son preference. When they were asked about the reasons behind son preference, 48.36 per cent reported that they want son to supplement family income. Another 23.13 per cent preferred son for continuation of paternal clan while 17.29 preferred sons for old age security. In this context it may be noted here that in Indian society there is a strong social prejudice against the parents living with their daughters.

Table 1: Son preference and disliking girl child

	Son preference		Disliking girl child	
Response	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Yes	428	70.17	425	69.67
No	182	29.83	185	30.33
Total	610	100.00	610	100.00

Source: Based on personal survey, 2010.

Table 2: Reasons for son preference

Reason	Number	Per cent
Supplement family income	207	48.36
Old age security	74	17.29
Gaining physical strength	12	2.80
Continuation of parental work	28	6.54
Continuation of paternal clan	99	23.13
No definite answer	8	1.87
Total	428	100.00

Source: Based on personal survey, 2010.

Table 3: Reasons for disliking girl child

Reason	Number	Per cent
Dowry	209	49.18
Social insecurity	99	23.29
No definite answer	117	27.53
Total	425	100.00

Source: Based on personal survey, 2010.

In the study area 69.67 per cent mothers dislike a girl child (Table 1). Table 3 shows that dowry is the prime reason for dislike a girl child. Social insecurity also contributed negative attitude towards girl child.

Ideal Number of Children: The desire for additional children decreases with increase in number of living children. In many cases the desire to have a son increases the family size. It reflects the attitudes of men and women regarding number and sex composition of children. People want to have a son for a variety of reasons such as to strengthen the marital bond, to support the parents in livelihood, to provide old age security and to perform last rites of the deceased parents. The attitude towards ideal number of children shows the willingness of the couple to accept or reject the family planning. Higher ideal number of stated children by men and women reveals that couples do not have faith in small family size. One of the pioneering and exhaustive studies on population dynamics in India was the Mysore Population Study sponsored by the United Nations. It concluded that the economic advantage of children to the parents either in the immediate future or in the old age was the most

Table 4: Ideal number of children

	Husband		Wife	
Number of children	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
One son & one daughter	249	40.8	170	27.9
Two sons & one daughter	254	41.6	335	54.9
Two sons & two daughters	101	16.6	103	16.9
More than five children	6	0.98	2	0.32
Total	610	100	610	100

Source: Based on personal survey, 2010.

important reason for having large family size. To assess the attitudes of parents towards the ideal number of children, a question was asked about the number of children they would like to have and how many of these children they would like to be boys and girls.

Table 4 shows that about forty per cent of men (husbands) considered two (one son and one daughter) as ideal number of children. In contrast, only 27.9 per cent of women (wives) considered this as ideal size. More than 50 per cent women consider three (two sons and one daughter) to be ideal whereas 41.60 per cent of men stated to this as their ideal size of children. 16 per cent of both men (husbands) and women (wives) considered four children (two sons and two daughters) to be ideal. Less than one per cent of total men and women considered more than five to be ideal number of children. It is evident that a sizeable proportion of men and women in the study area are still in favour of large number of children. Such attitudes of parents may be due to their consistent preference for sons over daughters. It suggests that there is ample scope for popularization of advantage of family welfare programmes and small family among the various population sub-groups. Additionally, it offers scope for empowerment of both men and women in the study area.

Table 5 further shows the ideal number of children with sex preference (son and daughter) among both men and women according to background characteristics. While considering the impact of religious belief on ideal number of children it has been found that more than forty per cent of men among Hindus consider one son and one daughter to be the ideal number of children. The corresponding percentage is 31.4 and 26.7 per cent for Muslims and Sikhs respectively. More than half of men among Sikhs consider two sons and one daughter as their ideal composition of children whereas 41.4 and 28.6 per cent of men in Hindus and Muslims respectively favour to this composition. More than half of women in both Hindus and Sikhs consider two sons and one daughter as their ideal number and sex preference of children. Two sons and two daughters have been considered as ideal number of children by more than 40 per cent Muslim women. Poor educational attainment among Muslim women is the root cause behind the high number of ideal children. Different social groups have their own beliefs and practices regarding ideal number of children. In the study area 46.9 per cent of men of general castes responded that one son and one daughter is their ideal composition of children while the corresponding figure is 39.6 and 33.1 per cent for OBCs and SCs respectively. Two sons and two daughters have been considered as ideal composition by 29.1 per cent of total SCs men while this percentage is 16.3 per cent and 9.4 per cent for OBCs and general castes men. While considering caste wise view of women on ideal number of children it has been noticed that 34.7 per cent women belonging to general castes considered one son and one daughter as their ideal size of children while it was found as 27.4 per cent and 17.3 per cent for OBCs and SCs respectively. More than half of total women in all the social groups considered two sons and one daughter as their ideal composition of children. Two sons and two daughters have been preferred by 12.2, 17.0 and 24.4 percent of women belong to General castes, OBCs and SCs respectively. It is evident from the foregoing discussion that SCs still prefer large number of children as ideal size because most of the scheduled castes are landless and work as agricultural labourers on daily wages. For them additional hands are economic asset rather than liability. Both men and women in joint and nuclear families like lesser number (two or three) of children. Household income has significantly changed the attitude of men and women in the family about the ideal number of children in the study area. With the increase in household income the degree of preference (judgement) regarding ideal number of children has also changed. Members of well to-do families like lesser number of children as compared to members of low income group families. High and middle income group people do not require economic support from their children. Education of both husband and wife plays a decisive role in framing attitude (like or dislike) for something, be it ideal children number of children, sex preference, age at marriage or age at birth. Illiterate and poorly educated men and women are in favour of large family size while men and women of 10 or more years of education prefer two or three as ideal number of children. While considering the occupation of husbands and their wives and their attitudes towards the ideal number of children, it was found that cultivators and agricultural labourers prefer bigger size (three or more children) of family (Table 6).

Table 5: Ideal number of children according to background characteristics

Socio-economic characteristics			Husband				Wife			
			A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D
Religion	Hindu	Number	226	221	83	-	153	295	80	2
		Per cent	42.6	41.4	15.7	-	28.9	55.7	15.1	0.4
	Muslim	Number	11	10	8	6	4	15	16	-
		Per cent	31.4	28.6	22.9	17.1	11.4	42.9	45.7	-
	Sikh	Number	12	23	10	-	13	25	7	-
		Per cent	26.7	51.1	22.2	-	28.9	55.6	15.6	-
Social-group	General	Number	100	91	20	2	74	113	26	-
		Per cent	46.9	42.7	9.4	0.9	34.7	53.1	12.2	-
	OBC	Number	107	115	44	4	74	150	46	-
		Per cent	39.6	42.6	16.3	1.5	27.4	55.6	17.0	-
	SC	Number	42	48	37	-	22	72	31	2
		Per cent	33.1	37.8	29.1	-	17.3	56.7	24.4	1.6
Family structure	Nuclear	Number	148	165	67	-	99	213	68	-
		Per cent	38.9	43.4	17.6	-	26.1	56.1	17.9	-
	Joint	Number	101	89	34	6	71	122	35	2
		Per cent	43.9	38.7	14.8	2.6	30.9	53.0	15.2	0.9
Income	< 1000	Number	14	41	32	-	2	48	37	-
		Per cent	16.1	47.1	36.8	-	2.3	55.2	42.5	-
	1000-5000	Number	34	53	19	4	24	60	26	-
		Per cent	30.9	48.2	17.3	3.6	21.8	54.5	23.6	-
	5000-10000	Number	127	121	42	2	90	171	29	2
		Per cent	43.5	41.4	14.4	0.7	30.8	58.6	9.9	0.7
	10000-15000	Number	68	34	8	-	48	51	11	-
		Per cent	61.8	30.9	7.3	-	43.6	46.4	10.0	-
	> 15000	Number	6	5	-	-	6	5	-	-
		Per cent	54.6	45.5	-	-	54.4	45.5	-	-
Education	Primary	Number	13	41	11	-	35	61	20	-
		Per cent	20.0	63.1	16.9	-	30.2	52.6	17.2	-
	Middle	Number	58	107	41	-	68	108	8	-
		Per cent	28.2	51.9	19.9	-	37.0	58.7	4.3	-
	High School	Number	53	31	7	-	38	23	2	-
		Per cent	58.2	34.1	7.7	-	60.3	36.5	3.2	-
	Intermediate	Number	56	27	4	-	10	1	-	-
		Per cent	64.4	31.0	4.6		90.9	9.1	-	-
	Graduate and above	Number	65	20	4	-	4	2	-	-
		Per cent	73.0	22.5	4.5	-	66.7	33.3	-	-
	Illiterate	Number	4	28	34	6	15	140	73	2
		Per cent	5.6	38.9	47.2	8.3	6.5	60.9	31.7	0.9

Source: Based on personal survey, 2010.

Note: A-1 son and 1 daughter, B-2 sons and 1 daughter, C- 2 sons and 2 daughters, D-More than five children.

These people utilize their children's support in agricultural activities. More number of children for them are assets in near future rather than social and economic liability. This in turn hinders the success of family planning.

It may be inferred from the preceding discussion that majority of the couples irrespective of their background characteristics in the study area want moderate size (two or three children) of family with one or two sons and will strive to achieve their desired family composition before using irreversible family planning methods. Family building continues until the births of two sons and their survival. The strong preference for son in the society for a variety of reasons has pushed up the unwanted fertility. It is satisfying that despite having a preference for sons, a substantial proportion of men and women want to have

Table 6: Occupation of husband and wife and their attitudes towards ideal number of children

		Husband				Wife			
Occupation		A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D
Cultivator	Number	66	100	43	6	2	39	2	2
	Per cent	30.7	46.5	20.0	2.8	4.4	86.7	4.4	4.4
Agricultural labourer	Number	4	16	11	-	8	76	43	-
	Per cent	12.9	51.6	35.5	-	6.3	59.8	33.9	-
Industry	Number	5	5	2	-	-	9	-	-
	Per cent	41.7	41.7	16.7	-	-	100.0	-	-
Business	Number	74	53	17	-	-	2	-	-
	Per cent	51.4	36.8	11.8	-	-	100.0	-	-
Construction	Number	4	10	4	-	-	-	-	-
	Per cent	22.2	55.6	22.2	-	-	-	-	-
Service	Number	70	31	4	-	8	2	-	-
	Per cent	66.7	29.5	3.8	-	80.0	20.0	-	-
Transport	Number	8	12	2	-	-	-	-	-
	Per cent	36.4	54.5	9.1	-	-	-	-	-
Others	Number	18	27	18	-	-	4	2	-
	Per cent	28.6	42.9	28.6	-	-	66.7	33.3	-
Non-workers	Number	-	-	-	-	152	203	56	-
	Per cent	-	-	-	-	37.0	49.4	13.6	-

Source: Based on personal survey, 2010.

Note: A-1 son and 1daughter, B-2 sons and 1daughter, C- 2 sons and 2 daughters, D-More than five children.

Table 7: Ideal number of children stated by men and their wives according to the number of living children

		Number of living children													
		Men							Women						
Ideal number of children		Zero	One	Two	Three	Four	Five +	Total men	Zero	One	Two	Three	Four	Five +	Total women
One	Number	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
	Per cent	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00	100.00
Two	Number	1	78	118	45	5	1	248	1	68	89	10	1	0	169
	Per cent	0.40	31.50	47.60	18.10	2.0	0.00	100.00	0.60	40.20	52.70	5.90	0.60	0.00	100.00
Three	Number	0	14	72	133	30	5	254	0	16	95	178	41	5	335
	Per cent	0.00	5.50	28.30	52.40	11.80	2.00	100.00	0.00	4.80	28.40	53.10	12.20	1.50	100.00
Four	Number	0	2	6	49	33	11	101	0	10	13	38	27	15	103
	Per cent	0.00	2.00	5.90	48.50	32.70	10.90	100.00	0.00	9.70	12.60	36.90	26.20	14.90	100.00
Five +	Number	0	0	1	1	1	3	6	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
	Per cent	0.00	0.00	16.7	16.7	16.7	50.00	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
Total	Number	1	94	197	228	70	20	610	1	94	197	228	70	20	610
	Per cent	0.20	15.40	32.30	37.40	11.50	3.30	100.00	0.20	15.40	32.30	37.40	11.50	3.30	100.00

Source: Based on personal survey, 2010.

at least one daughter. But at the same time it is worrisome to record that among couples with two or less living children, 32.53 per cent of men (husbands) and 46.57 per cent of women (wives) consider three or more children to be ideal (Table 7).

To determine the contribution of selected variables with fertility, logistic regression has been applied in this study. The dependent variable (adoption of two-child family norm) is dichotomous, indicating whether or not a woman has adopted two-child family norm. Multivariate (logistic regression) analysis is an appropriate estimation procedure and is often used to investigate the relationship between the response probability and the explanatory variables in a way that indicating how the response probabilities are affected by the covariates [12].

Table 8: Logistic regression results predicting the likelihood of adoption of two-child family norm in the study area by selected socio-economic and demographic variables

Covariates and category	Odd Ratio Exp(β)	95% confidence interval	
Religion***			
Muslim (RC)	1.00		
Hindu	1.413	0.127	2.338
Sikh	2.011	0.49	8.259
Caste*			
Scheduled Caste (RC)	1.00		
Other Backward Caste	1.337	0.167	1.683
General	2.569	0.185	4.689
Family structure			
Nuclear (RC)	1.00		
Joint	0.24	0.010	0.59
occupation			
Cultivator (RC)	1.00		
Agricultural Labourer	0.245	0.078	0.767
Industry	1.213	0.124	2.368
Business	1.824	0.001	3.534
Construction	1.583	0.311	2.092
Service	3.504	0.22	4.153
Transport	0.179	0.043	0.742
Other	0.132	0.035	0.503
Female education***			
Illiterate (RC)	1.00		
Up to high school	3.374	1.178	9.664
High school and above	5.796	2.993	11.226
Household income (Rs)**			
Less than 5000 (RC)	1.00		
5000-10000	1.242	0.568	1.91
More than 10000	1.367	0.368	2.004
Age			
Less than 30	1.00		
30-39	0.881	0.613	1.268
More than 40	0.16	0.08	0.25
Age at marriage (Years)***			
Less than 18 (RC)	1.00		
18-21	3.169	0.075	6.38
More than 21	4.569	0.0897	7.48
Son preference***			
Yes	1.00		
No	16.547	7.898	34.664

Note: ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Dependent variable: Adoption of two-child family norm: having two or less children (1); more than two children (0)

RC: Reference Category

Comment: Religion, caste, education, household income, age at marriage and son preference are the important predictors of the adoption of two-child family norm.

Table 8 portrays the factors affecting to the adoption of two-child family norm in the study area. It shows that Religion, caste, education, household income, age at marriage and son preference are the important predictors in all the covariates which affect the size of family in the study area. It is clear from the table that son preference has its very high bearing on the size of family. The odd ratio is 16.54 times more for women who have equal preference for sons and daughters both as compared to women having strong preference for sons.

CONCLUSION

People in the study area have showed very high son preference. Among the various factors patriarchal society, poor status of women, social taboos against the girl child, orthodox ideology, huge dowry are the major social evils which are contributing significantly to very high son preference in the study area. Demand of huge dowry especially in upper castes of the study area is also affecting the number and status of girl child. A woman is allowed to adopt an irreversible family planning method only if she has delivered a desired number of sons as considered ideal by the family members, no matters how many girls she has delivered prior to birth of a male child. Population planners and policy makers should accord top priority to social and economic empowerment of women to enable them to take decisions on fertility regulation and family planning.

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