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**Research Article**

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**GENDER PREFERENCE AND FERTILITY INTENTIONS AMONGST REPRODUCTIVE AGE FEMALES IN AN URBAN AREA OF DISTRICT ROHTAK (HARYANA)**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Background:** India has been grappling with the problem of declining sex ratio. While the total population of India has been growing at an alarming rate over the past 50 years, the number of women relative to the number of men has been steadily falling. Gender discrimination is a social evil and preference for the boy child is a matter of concern all over the world. Couples in developing countries tend to have higher fertility either because of poor access to contraceptives or due to gender preference for a particular sex.

**Objective:** To study the gender preference and fertility intentions of women in reproductive age group.

**Methods-** Community based cross sectional study among 250 mothers (15-49yrs) having children under 5years of age in an urban area of Rohtak (Haryana) from March 2015 to April 2015.

**Results:** Out of the 250 study subjects, majority of the women i.e. 71.5% of APL women and 76.3% of BPL women preferred to have a son and daughter. Women who had atleast one son showed a lower intention to have more children as compared to those who have only daughters.

A strong desire to have a son exists even in urban areas as 64.4% mothers wanting their first child as a baby boy.

**Conclusion:** A strong son preference has been observed in females belonging to different strata thus strong campaign across all sections of the society raising concern for "saving the girl child" is advocated.

**Keywords:** Gender preference, sons, daughters, fertility intentions.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Gender discrimination and son preference are the key demographic features of South Asia. India has the dubious distinction of leading the way. It is often established that couples in developing countries tend to have higher fertility either because of poor access to contraceptives or due to gender preference for a particular sex.

Gender equality has been a priority area of demographic research since the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development in 1994, and the Beijing

Conference on Women and the Girl Child in 1995. In the South Asian context, researchers have estimated that there are millions of women "missing" from the population, leading to an unusually high ratio of males to females. Indian Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen estimated that in India more than a hundred million women were "missing".<sup>1</sup> Failures to report the birth of girls, sex-selective abortions, neglect of daughters and female infanticide may all play a role. In some countries with a strong sex preference, couples stop having children only when they are satisfied with the sex composition of their family<sup>2</sup> - typically, after the birth of a

son. Consequently, in India the sex ratio is unfavourable standing at 108 males per 100 females.<sup>3</sup>

It is often established that couples in developing countries tend to have higher fertility either because of poor access to contraceptives, preference for a particular gender in their children or simply because high infant mortality forces the couples to have a higher fertility rate in order to maintain their family size. India too has been afflicted by these problems. Though the Infant Mortality Rate (40 per 1000 live births) has gone down but it is still higher than many other developing countries.<sup>4</sup> Several studies have shown that couples in India tend to have a strong preference for son over daughters. In an effort to have sons, many couples continue to have children until the desired number of sons has been reached, or get abortions done. Studies have shown that a large number of social, cultural and economic considerations are the root of such a preference pattern among couples.<sup>5</sup>

Even though the sex ratio (940 females per 1000 males) has improved but child sex ratio (914 females per 1000 males) is at all-time low in Census 2011.<sup>6</sup> Also the overall sex ratio and the child sex ratio in Haryana is unfavourable and standing at 879 females per 1000 males and 834 females per 1000 males respectively<sup>6</sup>. The impact of sex preference of the child has a much greater effect as the family size is on the decline. The present study was undertaken in Haryana which is the worst affected state (in terms of sex ratio) with the objective to study the gender preference and fertility intentions of women in reproductive age group.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Study Design:

#### Cross-sectional observational study.

### Study Area:

Urban field practice area attached to the Department of Community Medicine, PGIMS, Rohtak.

### Sample Size:

Considering that half of the mothers would want a boy child and the other half a girl child, the prevalence of wanting a child of the either gender as 50% and a relative error of 15% with 95% confidence interval, the minimum sample size required for study was calculated as 178 by using the formula:

$$n = 4pq/L^2$$

where, n = required sample size

p = expected or assumed prevalence

q = (100-p)

L = allowable error (15% of p)

But for the purpose of the study a sample size of 250 eligible participants will be taken.

### Study participants:

250 mothers (aged 15-49 years) having children under 5 years of age. Out of 15 anganwadi centres in the study area, 10 anganwadis were randomly selected and 25 mothers were selected from each anganwadi center were selected by systematic random sampling.

### Study period:

2 months (March 2015 to April 2015)

### Consent:

Participants who were willing to participate were enrolled after obtaining informed consent. The participants were ensured confidentiality about the information.

### Study Tool:

Information was collected by interview method using semi-structured schedule.

**Data Analysis:** Data was compiled and analysed by appropriate statistical tests using SPSS version 17.

## RESULTS

Out of the 250 study subjects, majority of the women i.e. 71.5% of APL women and 76.3% of BPL women preferred to have a son and daughter. Also this preference was more among women belonging to general category (83.3%), those belonging to nuclear family (79.8%), working women (93.3%) and educated upto senior secondary or above (79.2%). Significant association was found between gender preference and socio-economic status, caste, type of family and occupation. (Table 1)

Majority of APL mothers (65.5%) did not intend to have more children while 45.5% of BPL mothers do. Also, the desire to have more children is greater among women belonging to scheduled caste while working women (80%) and senior secondary and above (65.2%) and those belonging to backward class do not intend to have more children. A significant association was found with socio-economic status and occupation. (Table 2)

The table 3 shows a significant relationship between gender of the children and intention to have more children.

**Table 1:** Gender preference in relation to socio-demographic variables

Variables	Gender Preference			P value	
	Only one son N(%)	Son-daughter N(%)	Two sons N(%)		
<b>Socio-economic status</b>	APL	12(10.3)	83(71.5)	21(17.9)	0.04*
	BPL	02(1.0)	102(76.3)	30(22.2)	
<b>Caste</b>	GC	8(4.6)	143(83.3)	21(12.1)	0.008*
	SC	0	18(60.0)	12(40.0)	
	BC	6(12.5)	24(50.0)	18(37.5)	
<b>Type of Family</b>	Nuclear	8(9.5)	66(79.8)	9(10.7)	0.008*
	Joint	6(3.6)	119(71.4)	42(25.0)	
<b>Occupation</b>	Home-maker	12(5.4)	158(71.6)	51(23.0)	0.013*
	Working	2(6.7)	27(93.3)	0	
<b>Literacy</b>	Upto primary	6(8.0)	48(64.0)	21(28.0)	0.185
	Matriculate	3(3.7)	62(77.8)	15(18.5)	
	Sr Sec & above	5(5.2)	75(79.2)	15(15.6)	

(APL-Above poverty line, BPL-Below Poverty Line, GC-General Caste, BC-Backward Caste, SC-Schedule Caste)

**Table 2:** Fertility Intentions in relation to socio-demographic variables.

Socio-demographic variables	Intention to have more children (%)		P value	
	No	Yes		
<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>	APL	76(65.5)	40(34.2)	0.02*
	BPL	73(54.5)	61(45.5)	
<b>Caste</b>	GC	107(62.2)	65(37.8)	0.06*
	SC	12(40.0)	18(60.0)	
	BC	30(62.5)	18(37.5)	
<b>Type of Family</b>	Nuclear	44(53.6)	39(46.4)	0.17
	Joint	105(62.5)	62(37.5)	
<b>Occupation</b>	Home-maker	125(56.5)	96(43.5)	0.015*
	Working	24(80.0)	05(20.0)	
<b>Literacy</b>	Upto primary	45(60.0)	30(40.0)	0.176
	Matriculate	42(52.9)	38(47.5)	
	Sr Sec & above	62(65.2)	33(34.8)	

**Table 3:** Relationship of Fertility intention with the number of children

Presently having children (gender based)	Intention to have more children	
	No	Yes
<b>Only one son</b>	14(28.5)	35(71.5)
<b>Only one daughter</b>	06(11.5)	46(88.5)
<b>Two daughters</b>	09(25.7)	26(74.2)
<b>Son-daughter</b>	54(84.3)	08(15.6)
<b>Atleast two sons</b>	49(94.2)	03(5.8)

(Figures in parentheses are percentages)

\*P<0.001

**Table 4:** Relationship of Sex wise distribution of children with desire to have a son

	Desire to have a Son	
	No	Yes
Only one son	36(73.5)	13(26.5)
Only one daughter	06(11.5)	46(88.5)
Two daughters	01(2.8)	34(97.2)
Son-daughter	54(87)	08(13)
Atleast two sons	50(96.1)	02(3.9)

(Figures in parentheses are percentages)

\*P<0.05

**Table 5:** Relationship of sex of youngest child with the desire to have a daughter

Sex of youngest child	Desire to have a daughter	Total
Male	33(27.5%)	120(100%)
Female	03(2.3%)	130(100%)

Women who had atleast one son showed a lower intention to have more children as compared to those who have only daughters. Majority of the women with two daughters (74.2%) want to have more children as compared to those with two sons (5.8%). (Table 3)

The table 4 shows that the desire to have more sons was more amongst mothers having one or two daughters in comparison to those who have atleast one son. This desire is highest (97.2%) amongst those having two daughters and lowest (3.9%) among those having atleast two sons. This association between family composition (based upon sex of children) and desire for more sons was found to be statistically significant. (Table 4)

The table 5 shows the desire to have a daughter based upon the sex of the youngest child. The couples who had a daughter (2.3%) as the youngest child had far less desire to have more daughters as compared to those who had a son (27.5%) as the youngest child. The association between sex of the youngest child and desire to have a daughter was found to be statistically significant (P=0.000). (Table 5)

**DISCUSSION**

Gender preference is found across all sections of the society. In our study the desired family composition was atleast one son in all families whether above or below poverty line (Table1). None of the women wanted to have only one daughter or two daughters in their families. This shows that there is an intense desire to have atleast one son in the

family. A significant association was found between gender preference and caste, socioeconomic status, type of family.

Vadera et al (2007) in Gujarat found that the preference to male child was higher in women who had no male child previously (65.28%) than those who already had a male child (42.5%).<sup>7</sup>

Table 2 shows the fertility intention to have more children in relation to socio-demographic variables. This study showed a significant association between fertility intention with socio-economic status and occupation.

The study conducted by Vadera et al also showed that socio-demographic factors affect gender reference as the preference to male child was higher among rural women (70.68%) than that of the urban women (53.28%) and this association was statistically significant.<sup>7</sup>

Lakore et al (2014) who studied gender preference among pregnant women in Amrawati found a significant association of demographic factors including age, religion, education, socioeconomic status, number of abortions and number of living male children.<sup>8</sup>

Kansal et al (2010) conducted a study in Meerut among pregnant women and found majority (66.0%) of the pregnant women did not show any gender preference, followed by male preference (22.2%) and female preference (11.8%).<sup>9</sup>

Contrary to our findings, Yesmin et al (2015) in their study from Kamrup, Assam found that majority of the respondents

(56%) showed no gender preference but still the preference of a male child in the urban area (63.64%) was almost double to that of the rural areas (36.36%).<sup>10</sup> This difference between attitude of mothers may be because of better literacy and social status of women in a predominantly matriarchal society in this part of the country.

Table 3 shows that there is a strong son preference deciding fertility intentions of women as 74.2% of women with two daughters wanted to have more children as compared to those with two sons (5.8%). This can also be supported from the study conducted by Puri et al in Chandigarh who found that 79.5% of women with first child as a baby girl keenly wanted second baby as a boy & only 5.3% did not want any further child while only 33.3% women who had two baby boys previously wanted their third baby as a girl and 42.42% did not want to conceive further.<sup>11</sup>

Our study found a statistically significant association between sex of the youngest child and desire to have more daughters as only 2.3% of the couples who had a daughter as the youngest child had the desire to have more daughters as compared to 27.5% of couples who had a son as the youngest child. (Table 4)

Puri et al also reported that 57.8% of respondents intended to have their first child as a baby boy in comparison to 14.4% who wanted to have baby girl.<sup>11</sup> These findings are quite similar to our findings of 64.4% mothers wanting their first child as a baby boy. Thus a strong desire to have a son exists even in urban areas where majority of women are literate thus implying that far more societal pressures exist in causing a deep rooted problem of sex preference in favour of males.

Leone et al in Nepal observed that women's contraceptive use, exposure to the media, parity, last birth interval, educational level and religion were linked to stopping childbearing after the birth of a boy, as is the ethnic makeup of the local area.<sup>12</sup>

A strong son preference has been observed in females belonging to different strata. The existence of son preference at an alarmingly high rate in our society is reflected in the form of imbalanced sex ratio. Parental preference for male child has been significantly influenced by the psyche of our society in general which in turn influences the fertility intentions of the mothers. A strong

campaign across all sections of the society raising concern for "saving the girl child" is advocated. Government of Haryana has initiated the campaign of "Beti Bachao Beti Padhao" and involvement of all stakeholders to address the deep rooted concerns of our society against girl child.

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