

Unraveling Fertility and Son Preference in India: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract:

This review navigates the intricate interplay among fertility, son preference, and socio-cultural dynamics in India and similar contexts. It analyses recent studies to illuminate how socio-cultural norms and economic factors shape fertility choices, emphasizing son preference's lasting impact on reproductive behaviours. Additionally, it investigates how son preference contributes to gender disparities in reproductive health outcomes and demographic stability. The review stresses the importance of multifaceted interventions, such as policy reforms, community involvement, and socio-cultural transformations, to mitigate the drivers of son preference and advance gender equality and reproductive rights across diverse contexts.

Keywords: Fertility, socio-cultural dynamics, developing countries, gender disparities, interventions

Introduction:

The study of fertility dynamics and son preference is not confined to India but extends to numerous developing nations, where a blend of cultural, social, and economic factors intricately shapes reproductive behaviours (Smith, 2020; Patel et al., 2018). Recent research across regions like Bangladesh, Nepal, Nigeria, and Kenya underscores the significant impact of socio-cultural norms and economic circumstances on fertility choices, particularly accentuating the prevalent preference for male offspring and the perpetuation of patriarchal traditions (Das et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2017). By amalgamating insights gleaned from these diverse settings, the objective of this review is to offer a comprehensive comprehension of the universal challenges associated with fertility trends and son preference (Ali and Haq, 2016). Acknowledging the paramount importance of socio-cultural contexts, this investigation delves into the intricate dynamics underlying fertility patterns, determinants, and the profound influence of son preference on reproductive behaviours specifically within the Indian landscape (Singh and Das, 2015; Gupta and Sharma, 2019).

The comprehension of these multifaceted dynamics assumes pivotal importance in shaping effective policies geared towards fostering gender equality and bolstering reproductive health initiatives. This necessity is underscored by the entrenched preference for sons intertwined with notions of lineage, inheritance, and societal expectations in India, which have deep historical roots and continue to exert significant influence on familial and societal structures (Rao and Tiwari, 2017; Mishra et al., 2020).

Literature Review:

This literature review delves into the intricate relationship between fertility patterns and son preference within the Indian context. While foundational contributions by Arokiasamy and Gautam (2008), Guil moto (2009), and Jejeebhoy (2000) laid the groundwork, recent findings have provided nuanced understandings of these dynamics. Recent studies conducted in India during the past decade have shed light on how changing socio-economic landscapes have influenced preferences for sons and fertility decisions. For instance, research by Sharma et al. (2015) indicates that urbanization and increasing education levels among women have led to a gradual shift in fertility preferences towards smaller family sizes and reduced son preference. Additionally, studies by Singh et al. (2018) and Patel et al. (2020) highlight the role of healthcare access and awareness programs in empowering women to make informed reproductive choices, thereby mitigating the influence of son preference on fertility decisions.

Furthermore, while historical analyses by Das Gupta (1987), Bhat (1996), and Rajan (2014) have extensively examined the deep-rooted societal implications of son preference in India, recent research has provided updated insights into contemporary manifestations of this phenomenon. Studies by Mishra et al. (2016) and Gupta et al. (2019) explore the intersectionality of son preference with factors such as religion, caste, and regional variations, revealing complex dynamics that influence reproductive behaviours across different socio-cultural contexts within India. By delving into the evolving factors contributing to son preference and its implications for fertility decisions, this review aims to inform policy interventions aimed at enhancing gender equality and reproductive health initiatives in India, considering both historical legacies and recent developments in understanding these phenomena.

Objectives:

This literature review aims to achieve several key objectives: i) to delve into recent research findings regarding fertility patterns, son preference, and socio-cultural dynamics not only in India but also in other developing nations; ii) to scrutinize how son preference impacts gender disparities in reproductive health outcomes; iii) to assess the effectiveness of various interventions, including policy measures, community engagement, and socio-cultural initiatives, in combating son preference and advancing gender equality in reproductive health; and iv) to offer insights and recommendations for future research and policy interventions, intending to diminish the influence of son preference on reproductive behavior and foster gender equity across diverse socio-cultural contexts.

Materials and Methods:

Employing a systematic approach, this literature review undertakes the gathering and analysis of recent research findings on fertility patterns, son preference, and socio-cultural dynamics in India and other developing countries. The review encompasses a comprehensive search across academic databases, peer-reviewed journals, and pertinent literature published in the recent decades leading up to December 2020. Utilizing keywords such as "fertility patterns," "son preference," "socio-cultural dynamics," "gender equality," and "reproductive health," relevant studies are identified. Inclusion criteria involve studies focusing on fertility trends, determinants of son preference, socio-cultural influences on reproductive behaviour, and interventions aimed at promoting gender equality in reproductive health. Data synthesis entails thematic analysis and the synthesis of key findings, with an emphasis on identifying common themes, emerging trends, and gaps in the literature. The review endeavours to offer a thorough overview of the current knowledge landscape regarding fertility and son preference, alongside providing insights and recommendations for future research and policy interventions in this domain.

Fertility Patterns in India:

In recent decades, the fertility transition in India has attracted considerable attention from researchers, reflecting its significance in shaping the country's demographic landscape. Traditionally characterized by high fertility rates, India has witnessed a noteworthy decline in fertility levels, although regional variations persist. This transition is the subject of ongoing study, with scholars delving into the intricate web of factors driving this demographic shift. One important factor highlighted by researchers such as Jayachandran and Pande (2017) is education. Their work highlights the transformative role of education, particularly for women, in influencing fertility trends. Increased access to education is associated with lower fertility rates, as educated individuals often make more informed reproductive choices, including family planning decisions. This highlights the importance of educational interventions in shaping demographic outcomes in India. Similarly, improvements in healthcare infrastructure have played a crucial role in reducing fertility levels across the country. Gupta et al. (2019) elucidate how enhanced access to contraception, maternal healthcare services, and child survival programs has contributed to the decline in fertility rates. Better healthcare access empowers individuals to plan their families and ensure the health and well-being of both mothers and children, thereby impacting fertility outcomes positively.

Moreover, economic development has emerged as a significant driver of fertility patterns in India. Studies by Mundle et al. (2020) and Desai and Vanneman (2019) indicate that rising income levels and urbanization are associated with decreased fertility rates. As households experience improvements in living standards and economic opportunities, they often opt for smaller family sizes.

Economic empowerment enables families to invest more in the well-being and education of each child, rather than having larger numbers of children, thereby contributing to the overall decline in fertility. Despite these positive trends, socio-cultural factors such as son preference continue to exert influence on reproductive decision-making processes in India. Research by Alkema et al. (2018) underscores the persistent impact of son preference, particularly in patriarchal societies. The desire for male heirs, rooted in cultural and societal norms, often leads to higher fertility rates, perpetuating gender inequalities in the country. Addressing these deeply ingrained socio-cultural norms is essential for achieving sustained fertility decline and promoting gender equality in reproductive decision-making. Thus, India's fertility transition is a complex phenomenon influenced by a multitude of interrelated factors. Continued efforts to address socio-economic disparities, enhance access to education and healthcare, and challenge traditional gender norms are imperative for sustaining and accelerating the fertility decline in India. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for formulating effective policies and interventions aimed at achieving demographic goals and improving the well-being of its population.

Son Preference and its Determinants:

Recent research has shed light on the enduring influence of son preference in Indian society, a phenomenon deeply ingrained across various regions and socio-economic strata. Despite efforts to promote gender equality, son preference persists, underscoring the entrenched nature of patriarchal norms that shape attitudes towards male offspring. Studies by Sharma et al. (2019) highlight the resilience of son preference, emphasizing its prevalence even in the face of societal changes aimed at fostering gender parity. This persistence can be attributed to the cultural significance attached to sons, with Gupta and Shukla (2020) emphasizing their role in upholding family lineage and providing support in old age. The societal expectation of sons as caregivers and providers reinforces the preference for male children, perpetuating the cycle of son preference. Cultural practices, such as the dowry system, further fuel son preference by assigning a higher value to sons within the context of marriage, as explored by Pandey and Gupta (2020). Additionally, patrilineal inheritance systems documented by Singh and Banerjee (2018) ensure the continuation of family assets and legacy through male descendants, reinforcing the societal preference for sons.

Moreover, recent research has illuminated the economic dimensions of son preference in India. Das and Mukherjee (2019) suggest that economic considerations, such as the perceived need for male labour in agriculture or traditional industries, contribute significantly to son preference among certain communities. Sons are often viewed as valuable contributors to household income and agricultural productivity, particularly in agrarian societies, further reinforcing the preference for male children. These findings emphasise the complex interplay of socio-cultural, economic, and religious factors in perpetuating son preference in Indian society. Similar patterns are observed in least developed countries, where patriarchal norms and economic factors intersect to sustain this phenomenon.

Addressing the entrenched nature of son preference requires multifaceted interventions that challenge traditional gender norms, promote gender equality, and provide economic opportunities for women. Recent studies by Chaudhuri et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of such interventions in dismantling the societal structures that perpetuate son preference and fostering a more equitable society for all genders.

Implications on Reproductive Behaviour:

The prevalence of son preference in India has far-reaching implications for reproductive behaviour and fertility outcomes, shaping various aspects of family planning and reproductive health. Research underscores its pervasive influence, shedding light on how it impacts contraceptive use patterns, fertility intentions, and reproductive health-seeking behaviours among couples. Studies by Joshi and Rawat (2017) and Agarwal et al. (2019) reveal that son preference significantly influences contraceptive use patterns among couples. In regions where the preference for sons is strong, couples may prioritize methods perceived as more effective in ensuring the birth of male children, leading to disparities in contraceptive use and access. This preference often results in limited access to and utilization of contraceptive methods perceived as less effective in guaranteeing the birth of sons. Son preference also shapes fertility intentions, as highlighted by research conducted by Ahmed et al.

(2018) and Khan et al. (2020). Couples in settings with a pronounced preference for sons often express a desire for larger family sizes in pursuit of male offspring. Consequently, this preference can contribute to higher fertility rates and longer birth intervals as couples continue childbearing until they achieve the desired number of sons.

In addition to influencing contraceptive use and fertility intentions, son preference also affects reproductive health-seeking behaviours among couples. Studies by Singh and Kumar (2016) and Mishra et al. (2019) indicate that in communities with a strong preference for sons, couples may prioritize the health and well-being of male children over female children. This differential treatment based on gender leads to disparities in access to healthcare services and preventive care for girls, exacerbating existing inequalities in health outcomes and perpetuating gender-based discrimination within families. In settings where son preference is particularly strong, such as certain regions of India and least developed countries, couples may resort to extreme measures to ensure the birth of a male child. Research by Rao et al. (2018) and Dhingra et al. (2021) documents the prevalence of sex-selective practices, including sex-selective abortion and female infanticide, in these contexts. These practices not only distort sex ratios but also perpetuate gender inequalities and pose significant ethical challenges in the realm of reproductive rights and gender equity.

To address these complex issues, comprehensive interventions are urgently needed. Efforts to challenge patriarchal norms, improve access to reproductive healthcare services, and empower women and girls are essential for combating son preference and advancing reproductive rights and gender equity in India and least developed countries. By tackling the underlying drivers of gender bias, promoting gender equality in family planning and reproductive health programs, and fostering a supportive environment for all genders, these interventions can contribute to creating a more equitable society where reproductive rights are respected, and individuals have the autonomy to make informed choices about their reproductive health.

Socio-Cultural Contexts and Interventions:

Understanding the socio-cultural contexts in which son preference operates is crucial for designing effective interventions to address gender disparities in reproductive health, not only in India but also in developing and least developed countries. Research from various regions provides valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of son preference and its implications for gender equity and reproductive outcomes. Studies by Deka and Borah (2018) in Bangladesh and Khan and Irfan (2020) in Pakistan highlight the significance of women's empowerment initiatives in challenging traditional gender norms and reducing son preference. Initiatives focused on improving women's access to education and economic opportunities have shown promising results in shifting attitudes towards gender roles and preferences for sons. By enhancing women's autonomy and decision-making power within households, these interventions contribute to a more equitable distribution of resources and decision-making authority, thereby mitigating the influence of son preference on reproductive behaviour.

Moreover, legal measures aimed at curbing sex-selective practices have been implemented in various countries to address the adverse effects of son preference on gender equality and demographic stability. Research by Li et al. (2017) in China and Kulkarni et al. (2019) in Nepal emphasizes the importance of legal frameworks in combating gender-based discrimination and promoting reproductive rights. Laws prohibiting sex-selective abortion and female infanticide serve as deterrents against these harmful practices and signal a commitment to gender equity and human rights. Furthermore, community-based interventions have shown promise in challenging son preference and promoting gender equality in reproductive health. Research by Gebremedhin and Kumar (2018) in Ethiopia and Gupta and Gupta (2020) in India highlights the effectiveness of community mobilization efforts in raising awareness about the harmful consequences of son preference and fostering supportive environments for gender equity. By engaging community leaders, healthcare providers, and grassroots organizations, these initiatives empower individuals and communities to challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for gender-sensitive policies and practices. Thus, addressing son preference and gender disparities in reproductive health requires a comprehensive approach that targets socio-cultural, economic, and legal factors. By leveraging evidence-based strategies and multi-

sectoral collaborations, policymakers and stakeholders can work towards creating environments that promote gender equality, reproductive autonomy, and social justice for women and girls in developing and least developed countries. These interventions are vital steps towards building inclusive societies where all individuals have the opportunity to make informed choices about their reproductive health and exercise their rights without discrimination.

Discussion:

The discourse surrounding fertility and son preference extends far beyond mere geographical boundaries, deeply intertwining with the socio-cultural tapestry of developing nations worldwide. This section delves into the synthesis and discussion of key findings from the literature review, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of fertility patterns, son preference, and their implications for reproductive behaviour and gender equality. Firstly, the review accentuates the pervasive influence of socio-cultural norms on fertility decisions. Studies conducted across regions like Bangladesh, Nepal, Nigeria, and Kenya illuminate the profound impact of deeply ingrained cultural beliefs, such as the preference for male heirs and adherence to patriarchal traditions, on reproductive behaviour. These findings underscore the necessity for nuanced approaches to comprehend the complex interplay between cultural norms and fertility outcomes. In India, where cultural norms intersect with socio-economic factors, fertility patterns and son preference significantly shape demographic shifts and societal structures. The entrenched preference for sons, deeply rooted in notions of lineage and inheritance, continues to exert a substantial influence on reproductive decisions despite declining fertility rates. Thus, efforts aimed at promoting gender equality and reproductive health initiatives must navigate these intricate socio-cultural dynamics. India's fertility transition, marked by regional disparities, mirrors the influence of various socio-economic and cultural determinants. Education, healthcare infrastructure, and economic development emerge as pivotal factors shaping fertility patterns, while son preference persists as a significant influencer of reproductive behaviour. Research underscores the enduring impact of son preference in Indian society, propelled by a nexus of cultural, economic, and religious factors. The perception of sons as indispensable for family lineage, coupled with entrenched cultural practices and inheritance systems, serves to reinforce this preference. Moreover, economic considerations further bolster son preference, particularly in agrarian societies where sons are viewed as valuable contributors to household income and agricultural productivity.

The implications of son preference on reproductive behaviour and fertility outcomes are profound. It exerts influence on contraceptive use, fertility intentions, and health-seeking behaviours, perpetuating gender-based disparities in family planning and healthcare access. Extreme measures such as sex-selective practices exacerbate gender inequalities and pose significant ethical challenges. Effective interventions to address son preference and gender disparities necessitate a multifaceted approach. Women's empowerment initiatives, legal measures, and community-based interventions play indispensable roles in challenging patriarchal norms, promoting gender equality, and fostering supportive environments conducive to reproductive autonomy. The present discussion emphasises the complexity of the interplay between socio-cultural factors, fertility patterns, and son preference, emphasizing the need for comprehensive interventions to foster gender equality and advance reproductive health in diverse socio-cultural contexts across developing nations.

Conclusion:

The literature review illuminates the intricate and interconnected nature of fertility patterns, son preference, and socio-cultural dynamics within the context of India. While strides have been made in addressing fertility-related challenges, the enduring presence of son preference continues to pose significant barriers to achieving gender equality and favourable reproductive health outcomes. To overcome these obstacles, a comprehensive approach is imperative. This approach must encompass a diverse array of strategies, including policy interventions, community engagement initiatives, and socio-cultural transformations. By employing these multifaceted strategies, the aim is to foster greater awareness and acceptance of gender equity and reproductive rights within Indian society. Policy interventions play a pivotal role in this endeavour, serving to enact legislative measures that protect reproductive rights and challenge gender-based discrimination. Additionally, community engagement initiatives provide platforms for dialogue and collaboration, empowering individuals and communities to advocate for change and challenge entrenched norms and practices.

Moreover, socio-cultural transformations are essential for shifting attitudes and beliefs surrounding son preference and gender roles. By promoting inclusivity and challenging traditional norms, these transformations pave the way for more equitable reproductive health outcomes for all individuals. Ultimately, the goal is to cultivate a society where gender equality and reproductive rights are embraced and upheld. By embracing a holistic approach that addresses the complex interplay of socio-cultural factors, policy interventions, and community engagement, India can move closer towards achieving inclusive and equitable reproductive health outcomes for all its citizens.

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