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Sex Preference and its Effect on Family Size and Child Welfare



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In many parts of the world, sex discrimination begins before birth. Parents desperately want a first-born boy, a son after a string of daughters or a boy as an only child. Many cultures have myths about how parents can increase their chances of having a boy. During the pregnancy, folk predictions are made about the sex of the coming child.

Only recently has a scientific method of determining sex before birth been available. This test, amniocentesis, involves examining the chromosomes in the amniotic fluid. Up to now, little advantage has been taken of this knowledge, since amniocentesis is still very uncommon around the world and most doctors would object to its being used for sex selection. However, recent news reports assert that in India female fetuses are being aborted; the same has been rumored for China.

Although now rare, sex selection may become more widespread, especially as the technology of sex detection improves. Today, an abortion for the purpose of sex selection must be performed in the second trimester of pregnancy because the test can be done only after the third or fourth month of pregnancy, when there is a sufficient amount of amniotic fluid. A technology which allows very early sex detection could, when combined with early menstrual regulation, have very widespread ramifications, especially since the preference for sons is so widespread.

Son preference is common throughout the world and is unusually strong in Arab countries and in South Asia. It is fairly mild in Latin America and Southeast Asia (for example in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines). Sex preference has not become a public issue in Africa where

fertility is still so high; when families include seven or eight children, it is very likely that parents will have several of each sex. Also, modern family planning methods are not yet available to many African couples. Only when family size ideals are declining and parents have the ability to control their fertility does sex preference become a critical factor affecting fertility.

Policymakers in countries such as Bangladesh, China, India, Pakistan, South Korea and Taiwan have recently become concerned about sex preference, since their goal is to reduce their countries' population growth rates. The leaders of most Arab countries, where son preference is also very strong, are not yet concerned because reducing population growth is not as high a priority.

The most poignant case is that of China, which is trying to popularize the concept of the one-child family. After decades of vacillation in population policy, China has finally realized that it must seriously address the population issue. Despite the country's relatively low birthrate, the absolute numbers added to its population each year (about 14 million) represent a serious problem. At a time when most developing countries have not yet popularized the two-child family, China is trying to persuade couples to pledge to have only one child, regardless of its sex. In rural China especially, this is a radical idea. Sons have been the backbone of the rural family: they have provided labor and protection for the family, have carried on the family name, and have performed religious rituals. Parents have expected to live with their eldest son in their old age and to be assured of social security. The parents of an only child have no assurance that when that child marries, they will have a place to live. When only children marry each other, unless both sets of parents live with the young couple (which is rather unlikely), one set of parents will need to rely on their commune or on their own resources. Some communes can assure their older members of support, but less prosperous ones cannot.

Already in China, there have been some rumors of female infanticide and wife abuse in cases where the only child has been a daughter. These remain at the anecdotal level, but the country's 1982 census figures may provide documentation if they show an unusually high ratio of boys to girls among young children.

Among countries with son preference, China is unusual in that the government has seriously tried to undermine the basis for son preference. It has encouraged families with an only daughter to adopt a son-in-law and have him take the family name. It has tried to equalize women's position in marriage and the economy, and has discouraged ancestor-worship and traditional religion. New family planning posters show only one girl, and family plan-

ning workers put pressure on grandparents and others to modernize their views.

Policymakers in other countries, such as South Korea, have been concerned about son preference, but they assume that it will diminish with modernization. As couples move to the city, gain education, engage in modern occupations and plan to rely on their own savings in old age, the obsession for sons is likely to decline. In still other countries, such as India and Bangladesh, policymakers have not directly dealt with the problem. In the coming years, they may need to do so.



Discrimination against girls in education deprives both them and their societies of women's potential contribution to development.

Only in this century have scientists known that the male of our species determines the sex of the child (according to which of his sperm penetrates the woman's egg), and this fact has been slow to reach the world's masses. Women are routinely "blamed" and often abandoned for not producing sons. Sometimes sex determination is perceived as the outcome of a struggle between spouses, so that the wife in a family with daughters is considered to have the dominant personality. This belief may even coexist with the traditional view that the man plants his seed and the woman is merely the soil and thus has little to do with the characteristics of the child.

Effect on Fertility

Does sex preference actually affect family size? Family planning workers, in most Asian countries at least, assume it does, although demographers debate its effect. One



Many assume that a personal and cultural preference for sons contributes to higher birthrates, but demographers still debate the issue.

cross-cultural study including data from Bangladesh, India and Morocco found that families starting out with a string of sons were as likely to have more children as those families beginning with a string of daughters. The author did not deny that son preference existed, but asserted that it may not operate in a simple fashion. However, few of the respondents in this study had access to family planning. For sex preference to have a clear effect on family size, couples must have good control over their fertility once they have achieved their ideal sex composition. Couples must also want small- or moderate-sized families. If

they want large families, as did the couples in this study, they usually do not need to worry about sex composition.

There is a further complication. For families in India, for example, a couple having an early string of daughters may stop childbearing because they fear the economic consequences of having daughters. The daughters they already have will require expensive dowries.

For son preference to lead a couple to have more children, the couple must also believe that there is a reasonable chance of having a son. Suppose two families had three daughters each. Both had a strong preference for sons. The first set of parents, assuming that they were just unlucky and were doomed to have more daughters, might stop childbearing, while the second set of parents might assume that it was *their turn* for a son and might continue childbearing. In short, sex preference can be a powerful motivation but it is not necessarily expressed unambiguously in ultimate family size.

Sex preference (for example, for a child of each sex) could also stop some couples from having more children. If parents in the United States have one child of each sex, they may feel there is no socially acceptable reason for going on. Friends or neighbors might say, "But why did you have a third when you already have a boy and girl?"

When one thinks of sex preference and excess fertility, one recalls families who have produced many children of the same sex and who have continued childbearing in order to get a child of the other sex. However, from a demographic point of view, such families are fairly rare. The most significant demographic effect is probably from couples who want small or moderate-sized families but also want at least one or two boys or at least one child of each sex.

In the Western world, where family size is small and the cost of raising children is high, many parents are now stopping at two children, regardless of sex. Despite possible disappointment, they recognize that they cannot adequately provide for more children.

Does anyone prefer daughters? Universally, women are less likely than men to prefer sons, although sometimes women want a son just to please their husbands. In Latin America and the Philippines, there is a tendency for women to prefer girls. The same is probably true of women with a feminist orientation in some developed countries, although there has been little research on this. There are also five very small societies studied by anthropologists where girls have been preferred.

Even though it is encouraging that in some places daughters are valued, the reasons for daughter preference are often rather traditional. Daughters may be preferred because they help with housework or help care for youn-

ger children. They may also be preferred for short-term companionship and presumed personality traits ("sugar and spice and everything nice"). Boys, on the other hand, are preferred for longer-term benefits, such as the family's fortune and perpetuation of the family name. The small societies preferring daughters were matrilineal and matrilocal. Women were economically productive and were considered a form of wealth, just as cattle might be in other societies.

Social scientists disagree on how sex preference should be measured. One can ask people about their ideal numbers of boys and girls or, if a woman is pregnant, about her hope for the sex of her next child. One can ask respondents to rank different size and sex compositions of hypothetical families. An interviewer can show pictures of girls and boys or pink and blue dolls and ask people their preferences. Or one can ask about people's retrospective feelings about having had girls or boys.

Alternatively, sex preference can be inferred from behavior. For example, it can be shown that until recent years, American families with one child of each sex were less likely to have another child than families with either two girls or two boys. This indicated, by inference, a preference for the heterogeneous-sex family. There are other behavioral indicators as well. Many societies have traditionally practiced female infanticide, and the practice probably still exists in some countries. On a milder level, a boy's birth may be celebrated and a girl's birth, ignored.

After the children are born, it is not uncommon for boys to receive better care. This is reflected in the unusually high mortality rate for female children in South Asia, including Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. Surprisingly, the exact causes for this excess female mortality are not known (are boys breastfed longer or fed more? are they given better parental care or quicker medical attention?). Much more research is needed on the causes of this mortality differential.

Changing Attitudes

How can attitudes about sex preference be altered? China is attempting to reorganize society and reform the patriarchal family. It remains to be seen how well this radical and controversial approach will succeed, but the seriousness of the attempt is impressive. Another approach is to emphasize economic development in the hope that both fertility and sex preference will naturally diminish. The problem with this approach is that fostering economic growth in today's economically troubled world is extremely difficult, and some countries are in danger of going backward rather than forward. Son preference can also be discouraged through family planning programs; in China,

Hong Kong and Singapore couples are actively encouraged to stop childbearing after one or two children regardless of sex.

Another approach has been to simply ignore the problem. The advantage of this approach is that the family planning program then does not incur the animosity of traditionalists by directly attacking the institution of son preference. A disadvantage is that it makes the job more difficult for family planning workers. If they try to argue against couples having more children in order to have



Sex preference may determine the quality and quantity of parental care, particularly expenditures on health care for children.

sons, they have little support to effectively counter the views of older people and traditional leaders.

Sex preference can mean that a child is disadvantaged before it is even born. In extreme cases, sex preference may lead to selective abortion or infanticide; more often, it involves child neglect. For the child of the preferred sex, however, it means extra advantages, opportunities and privileges. Sex preference is the result of social organization, family structure, economic activities, religious beliefs and tradition. In many parts of the world, the "son barrier" remains a serious obstacle to lowered fertility. □

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