

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# A Study on Perception for Gender Preference among Married Women of Urban Field Practice Area of a Medical College in Davangere, Karnataka

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Sex ratio in India has always remained unfavorable to females. Variations in sex ratio reflect the underlying socioeconomic, cultural patterns of a society. The girl child faces the neglect of the family in the form of providing basic needs of life in terms of food, clothing, love, education, and medical care. The objectives of the study were to determine the gender preference and to describe factors influencing gender preference among married women of urban field practice area of a medical college, Davangere, Karnataka. **Materials and Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted by interviewing all married women ( $n=120$ ) with at least one child attending Urban Primary Health Centre. **Results:** In our study, 62% of the married women had son preference, 32% had daughter preference while only 6% of them had no preference for any gender. Old age dependency, growth of family, and women not staying with parents after marriage were the main reasons for preferring a son, while dowry and women unsafety were the reasons for not preferring a girl child. **Conclusion:** Son preference is still prevalent among women of urban Davangere and there is a complex association of many factors which determine gender preference. Efforts to address patriarchal gender norms, strengthening the existing laws against dowry and Pre-Conception Pre-Natal Diagnostic Test Act, and educational and occupational opportunities for females are crucial, if girls are to be perceived as important and desired in our society.

**Key words:** Gender preference, girl child neglect, married women, son preference

## INTRODUCTION

Unfavorable sex ratio is not unique to India. Sex preference especially the preference for sons is increasing in our country since ages. Over the past decade, gender equality has been explicitly recognized as a key factor not only for the improvement of the health of nations but also for their social and economic development. Its importance is further highlighted by the fact that “promotion of gender equality and women’s empowerment” finds itself as an important goal in the list of Millennium Development Goals.<sup>[1]</sup>

A couple’s gender preference for children is being usually influenced by traditional background, cultural practices, and patriarchal gender norms over generations. Women have a perceived belief that sons are the only breadwinners

and represent the power status of family, help and inherit family business, and continue their family name. Old age dependency, family status, women unsafety, marriage expenses like practice of dowry, and fact that girls will not stay with parents after marriage are some of the factors which influence non-preference for daughters. Thus, girl child faces the neglect of the family in terms of food, clothing, love, shelter, supervision, education, and even medical care. Preference for sons has also been associated with abortion of female fetuses and even female infanticide.<sup>[2]</sup>

The sex ratio is calculated as the number of males per 100 females in a population globally, whereas in India, it is

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defined as number of females per 1000 males. India is one of the few countries in the world which has not shown any improvement in the sex ratio over the year. Sex ratio has been declining in India through decades since 1901. The sex ratio has been estimated to be 940 in India during the recently conducted census of 2011.<sup>[3]</sup>

At birth, boys in India naturally outnumber girls by 3–7%, the expected female-to-male sex ratio is 0.93–0.97. However, the sex ratio at birth is skewed in favor of male babies, which indicates human intrusions by means of sex identification and sex-selective abortion. The current scenario of sex ratio in Punjab (860:1000) according to National Family Health Survey-4 (2015–2016) as shown in Figure 1, implies that there are only four women available for every five men. This also means that one of every five men will not have a local girl to marry in future. The need of women for productive and reproductive cause is being addressed through unconventional marriages. Men from Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Punjab are marrying women from West Bengal, Assam, and Andhra Pradesh. These unusual marriages are consequence of a combination of factors such as adverse sex ratio, acute poverty, and the want of parents to escape dowry.<sup>[4]</sup> Similarly Figure 2 shows deterioration of sex ratio in various states of our country.

Although it is hard to find alternate explanations for distorted sex ratio at birth, interpretation must be carefully anticipated. For example, larger families ( $\geq 3$  children) having greater gender equality than smaller families. This may be because if sons are born first, the couple may choose not to have any more children, whereas other couples continue having children until the desired number of sons is attained. It was also noted that couples often continue to have children until they have at least one son.<sup>[4]</sup>

Practice of sex-selective termination of pregnancy has had a number of negative demographic effects in countries such as India and China. For example, the large number of “missing women” in China has resulted in a large number of young men unable to find female partners. This has resulted in deterioration of the quality of life, impacted the social status, and has increased competition among men who would like to find a female partner. This has also resulted in an increase in sex trafficking and bride trafficking from neighboring regions and countries such as Vietnam.<sup>[5]</sup>

The Government of India introduced the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act (PNDT) in 1994 that was later amended as Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act (PCPNDT) in 2003 with the objective of preventing the misuse of diagnostic techniques and sex selection.<sup>[6]</sup> Facilities using prenatal-diagnostic technique were made to register compulsorily and strong penal provisions were introduced for people found to be violating the rules laid in the PCPNDT Act. Mass media were used to create awareness on the issues among the public. Help from the spiritual and religious leaders

was sought for creating awareness in the public. Still all these measures and efforts have failed to achieve the desired results with no apparent improvement in the sex ratio.<sup>[7]</sup>

Thus, the present study was undertaken to assess and to know the reasons for gender preference among married women attending Urban Primary Health Centre.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A community-based, descriptive, cross-sectional study was conducted in urban field practice area attached to SSIMS and RC, Davangere, for a period of 3 months from June 2019 to August 2019.

All the married women having at least one child, attending Urban Primary Health Centre, were included in the study and those not willing to participate were excluded from the study. The sample size was calculated taking the prevalence (60.6%) of the previous study on son preference (Nithin *et al.*),<sup>[2]</sup> with 5% level of significance and 95% confidence interval. Using the formula  $(Z_{\alpha})^2 pq/d^2$  and relative precision of 15%, the final sample size obtained was 117 which was rounded off to 120.

A sampling frame of all the married women attending urban health center was made. A systematic random sampling technique was used to select the required number of participants.

A pre-designed pre-tested semi-structured questionnaire was used for data collection. The sociodemographic features such as education status, type of family, number of children, socioeconomic status, and the various cultural reasons for preferring/not preferring specific gender were obtained and reviewed. Socioeconomic status of the family was calculated using modified BG Prasad classification. Strict confidentiality in regard to the anonymity and privacy of the participants was maintained.

Data were collected in the Urban Primary Health Centre with the help of the tool (semi-structured questionnaire) after obtaining prior consent until the desired number of participants was achieved for the study.

The data were entered into MS Excel and analyzed using SPSS version 20.

## Ethical Consideration

Ethical clearance from the Institutional Ethics Committee of SSIMS and RC was obtained.

## RESULTS

A total of 120 married women were interviewed during the study period.

Table 1 shows majority (63.33%) of them belonged to the age group of 21 years–40 years. Most (34.17%) of the participants had completed their primary school. Majority (91.67%) of them belonged to Muslim community.

Table 2 shows, majority (73.33%) of the participants were housewives, 40% of them belonged to Class IV, and none belonged to Class I according to Modified BG Prasad classification.

Table 1: Distribution of married women according to sociodemographic features	
Variables	Total (%)
Age	
<20	2 (1.7)
21–40	76 (63.33)
41–60	35 (29.17)
>60	7 (5.8)
Literacy status	
Illiterate	24 (20)
Primary school	41 (34.17)
Secondary school	25 (20.83)
PUC/diploma	30 (25)
Religion	
Muslim	110 (91.67)
Hindu	10 (8.33)

Table 2: Distribution of married women according to occupation and socioeconomic status	
Variables	Total (%)
Occupation	
Homemaker	88 (73.33)
Employed	32 (26.67)
Socioeconomic status	
Class I	0 (0)
Class II	36 (30)
Class III	32 (26.67)
Class IV	48 (40)
Class V	4 (3.33)

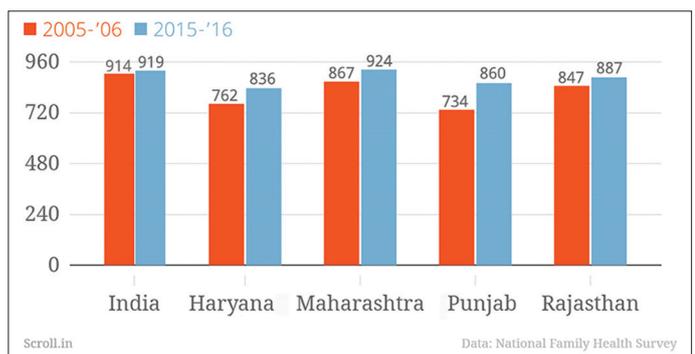


Figure 1: Increasing trend of sex ratio at birth

In the present study as shown in Figure 3, we found that majority of the participants (62.14%) had son preference while only 5.86% of them had no preference for any gender.

Figure 4 shows out of 75 women who had only son preference, majority (91%) of them stated that sons are the sole breadwinners and look after the parents at their old age, 72% and 42% of participants told women not staying with parents after marriage and women unsafety, respectively, as the reasons for preferring sons over daughters.

As shown in Figure 5, out of 38 women who opted only daughters, majority of them (70.40%) stated that sons change

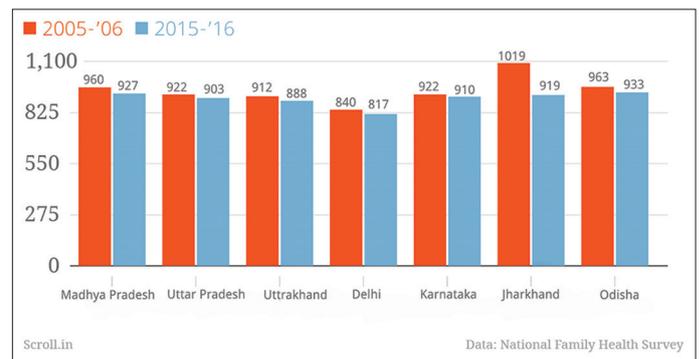


Figure 2: Decreasing trend of sex ratio at birth

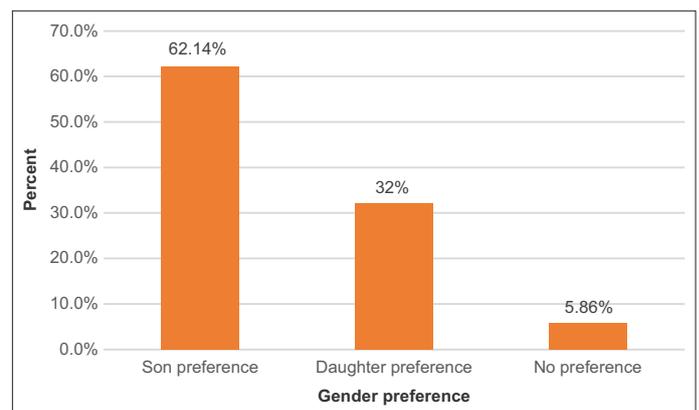


Figure 3: Distribution of women according to gender preference

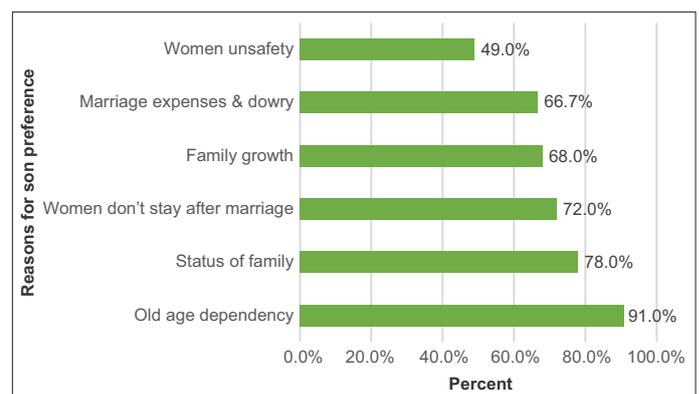
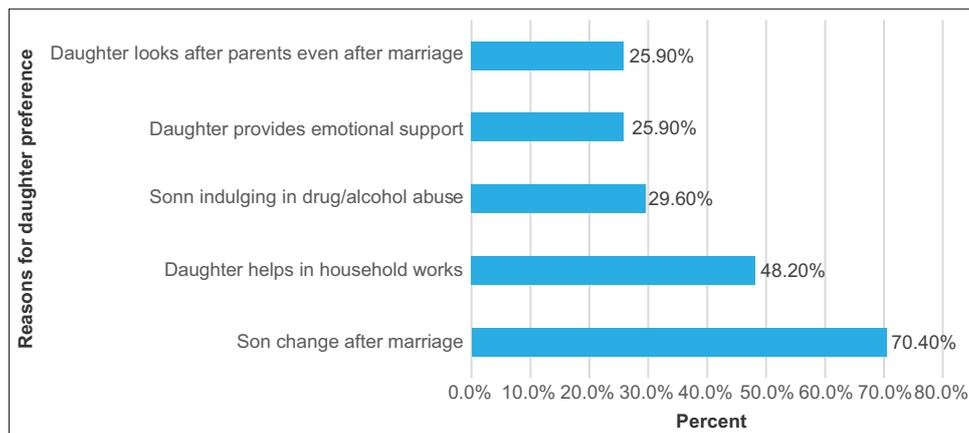


Figure 4: Distribution of women according to reasons given for son preference (n = 75)



**Figure 5:** Distribution of women according to reasons given for daughter preference ( $n = 38$ )

completely once they get married and 25% of them stated that daughters provide emotional support and look after the parents even after marriage.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, gender preference for male child was found to be 62.14%, for female child 32% and no preference was seen in 5.86% of cases. This varied in the study done in Kolkata where only 25.71% preferred male, 5.71% preferred female, and the majority (68.57%) had no preference.<sup>[8]</sup> A study in Meerut, UP, shows that about two-thirds (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> However, a study in Chandigarh shows similar findings with male preference seen in 56% of women and a study in Jamnagar shows 58.5% of women gave preference to male child.<sup>[10,11]</sup> However, the preference toward male child was found to be the highest in Ahmedabad in which a study showed male preference of 87.53%.<sup>[12]</sup> A study in UP by Shalini *et al.* showed 93.25% of preference for son among illiterates.<sup>[13]</sup>

The present study showed majority (91%) of them stated that sons are the sole breadwinners and look after the parents at their old age, 72% and 42% of participants told women not staying with parents after marriage and women unsafety, respectively, as the reasons for preferring sons over daughters. Similarly, a study done in Egypt, showed that son preference was mainly related to the belief that the sons represent the power status of the family, help and inherit family business, and continue family name.<sup>[14]</sup>

However, the increasing trend of preference for sons in India is disturbing, which is frequently associated with the neglect and death of millions of girl children through infanticide, sex-selective abortions, improper nutrition, and lack of medical care.

With ever rising population in India, having a gender preference for children or if couples continue to have children till they achieve their desired family composition or expected

number of sons will never be able to achieve two child norm set by the National Family Planning Program.

It's clearly understood that gender preference in the society does not merely depend on its socioeconomic development but on the deeply rooted sociocultural factors which dominates all the other factors. These sociocultural factors need to be explored at the national as well as at the microlevel to detect the causes for gender preference, which may vary with each woman. Policies need to be framed and executed which can bring about a change in attitude of the society toward gender preference and achieve the two child norm.

As a developed society, we need to ensure that both the genders get equal respect and are free from any sort of preferences and prejudices. To achieve this, more and more people need to be made aware of the consequences of gender inequality and adverse sex ratio in a society.

## Limitations

Since the sample size is less, the findings of the study cannot be generalized.

Majority of the participants belonged to Muslim community, so the perception and attitude toward gender preference may vary greatly among different religions.

## CONCLUSION

The present study clearly infers that son preference is still prevalent among women due to many related factors such as old age dependency, status of family, women not staying with parents after marriage, family growth, marriage expenses, dowry system, and women unsafety.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Strict implementation of the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act.

- Increasing safety/security for women against rape and all kind of assaults on women.
- Increase in educational and occupational opportunities for females and empowerment of women.
- Awareness about consequences of gender inequality and adverse sex ratio in the society.
- Strengthening the existing law against dowry system.
- Provision of pension for old age also an effort should be made to save the money for any future emergencies or requirements.

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