

SHORT ARTICLE

Perception regarding child gender preferences among mothers in Dakshina Kannada district: A mixed methods study

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Abstract

Background: A reflection on the census 2011 data tells us that gender preference has only been on the rise these past years. **Objective:** To assess perception regarding gender preference among mothers in Dakshina Kannada district. **Materials & Methods:** 2 tertiary care centres attached with medical college were selected in Dakshina Kannada district. Quantitative variables were collected using a questionnaire and qualitative component was done through focused group discussion. **Results:** Child preference was seen among 32.2% of the subjects. Preference for Male child if the first child was a girl was significantly associated with lower education and low income ($p < 0.05$). **Conclusion:** Son preference is still existent in the society but not universally. It is more so when the first born is a female child.

Keywords

Gender Preference; Focused Group Discussion; Qualitative Study Son Preference; Abortion

Introduction

A deep-rooted preference for sons exists in our society irrespective of caste, religion and socio-economic status. In India girl child is considered as liability and as source of expenditure. The economic survey 2017-18 estimated that 63 million girls were missing in the Indian population and 21 million girls

are unwanted. (1) The parents continued to have children till they had a boy, calling this as Meta preference for son, which resulted in 21 million unwanted girls. India being one of the developing countries where alongside an improvement in education status, GDP and other indicators, the number of missing girls is also on the rise. The 2011 census report shows a decrease in 0-6 child sex ratio

by 5 points registering 947 female children to 1000 male children in Dakshina Kannada district as compared to 2001 census. This ratio increased in rural areas by 4 points and decreased 17 points in urban areas.(2) Discrimination between girl and boy child is present in the prenatal as well as postnatal period resulting in female foeticide, infanticide and girl child neglect leading to early deaths. Many reasons have been stated for preference of male child motivated by economic, religious, social and emotional desires and norms that favour males like sons add to family wealth and property, sons continue the family lineage etc.(3)

Dakshina Kannada, one of the districts with high literacy rate showing declining 0-6 sex ratio begs the question as to what might be the cause for the same.

Aims & Objectives

To finding the child gender preference among the mothers attending tertiary care centres of Dakshina Kannada.

Material & Methods

Study was conducted for 4 months. A pre-tested semi structured questionnaire was used to collect data for the quantitative analysis. Sample size calculated was 327 using $4PQ/L^2$ taking $P = 73.5$ (4) as this was a part of study to assess the knowledge of mothers about Pre Conception Pre Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act (PCPNDT), absolute error of 5% and non- response of 5%. All mothers who consented to participate were involved and the total study population was 338. The Qualitative component consisted of focus group discussions among mothers attending field practice areas among 2 purposively selected Tertiary Care Hospitals of Dakshina Kannada. The FGD guide prepared based on literature review, was validated and the discussion was conducted in local language. For transcription, proceedings were audiotaped and used for verification of emerging themes. A total of two focus group discussions were carried out, one at each of the study site each lasting for 60 minutes. Participants were recruited by contact through Anganwadis.

Inclusion criteria: Any antenatal mother, any post-natal mother or female with at least one living child who consented to take part. Discussion was continued till the point of theme saturation. Institutional ethical clearance was obtained.

Inductive thematic content analysis was applied to analyse the data and draw conclusions from the emerging themes.

Results

Quantitative analysis:

Second male child preference was found to be 39.9% (135) if the first was a female child and 5% (17) in case the first was a male child ([Table 1](#)). With regard to sociodemographic factors, a male child preference for the second child when the first child was a female was seen to be significantly associated with annual income <50,000 and in those with an education less than 10th standard ($p < 0.05$). There were no statistically significant differences for child preference when first child was a Male ([Table 2](#)).

Qualitative analysis

Gender preference: Majority of the women said that a child should not be differentiated based on gender. However, on further probing some believed that male child is preferred over female child as sons take care of the family. "Daughters get married and go off, but sons will take care of the family". Mothers felt that in-laws have a major role in male child preference. One of the mother's said, "Mother-in-law and Father-in-law prefer their first grandchild to be boy, but mothers do not have preference". "Elderly people prefer male over a female child and if they find out that baby is going to be girl they want it removed". "When my daughter delivered a girl child her mother in law did not like it". Few believed that daughters take care of them in their old age rather than sons. "My daughter is taking care of me whereas my son went away after marriage" was what one of the mother's said. A participant mentioned that a woman who had just delivered her fourth female child was told not to get the new-born baby home but instead to leave it somewhere.

Disgrace about female child: Out rightly mothers felt that female child is not a disgrace. "Girl child is never a disgrace, in fact they are considered as good luck in the family". "In our religion if the first-born child is girl then it is considered very lucky". "Previously female child was considered as disgrace as parents have to spend a lot of money for the weddings but currently there are no such issues". Dowry was also not a major problem. They said, "Dowry practice is not currently present" and it's not a reason for male child preference.

Agreement for abortion: The participants opined that Sex selective abortions do take place. "They go to hospitals and get sex determination done and abort if it is female and keep it if it is male", "People give more money and get sex determination done. Rich people get this done". The mothers said that the rich had more options and wanted abortions as per sex determination.

Discussion

This study has tried to explore mother's perception towards gender preferences and factors associated with it. Our study showed that 197 (58.3%) of individuals had no gender preference compared to 32.75% in a study done at West Bengal.(5) Of those with preference, 42 (12.4%) preferred male child and 67 (19.8%) preferred female child which was higher as seen in another study(5,6) where preference for male child was more i.e 52.5%. These differences could be because that culturally too in Dakshina Kannada, female child preference is higher as compared to the rest of the country. In another study (7), 47.2% preferred a son in case the first child was a female while in our study 12.4% of the population preferred male child in case the first child was a female which was significant in case of low-income groups ($p = 0.03$). Similar findings were also seen in other studies(6,7,8) where preference for a son increased in case the first child was a female. A son preference of 83.2% was seen among homemakers in our study which was also seen in Belgavi.(8)

While some women were against son preference, they still acknowledged that sons played culturally specific role in providing for the family. and also found that there were violence against women if they failed to produce sons in the family.(3) Even in our study a woman quoted that there was verbal abuse after the delivery of a female child. A declining sex ratio tends to have a lot of effects, violence being one of them.(3,9) Also sex selective abortions require deeper investigations.(10)

It is evident from the study that son preference does exist in the society but is not universal. The preference for a male child increases if the first born is a female. If the first born is a male, the preference leans towards a female child. Girls are clearly not considered a disgrace in the society. We however could not find the reason for a decline in sex ratio in the district which could also be because of the natural phenomenon of nature producing more males as compared to females showing its effect.

Conclusion

Preference for a male child was higher for the second child (39.9%), showing that male child preference still exists in the society. Sex selective abortions were also not uncommon according to the participants views.

Recommendation

More stringent actions through PCPNDT Act and there is need to address requirement of Wide Awareness programs to the general public regarding PCPNDT Act and Gender equality.

Limitation of the study

The study was limited to assessing the gender preference among mothers.

Relevance of the study

The study shows that though the study area was a matriarchal society largely, son preference was present. Study participants also were in agreement that sex selective abortion is not an uncommon phenomenon

Authors Contribution

All authors have contributed equally in this research.

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Tables

TABLE 1 CHILD PREFERENCE AMONG STUDY POPULATION

Child preference		Frequency (%)	Total	Percent
Preference	Boy	42(12.4%)	109	32.2
	Girl	67(19.8%)		
No preference			197	58.3
Not answered			32	9.5
Total			338	100.0
Child preference if first child is a girl				
Preference	Boy	135(39.9%)	159	47.0
	Girl	24 (7.1%)		
No preference			133	39.3
Not answered			46	13.7
Total			338	100.0
Child preference if first child is a boy				
Preference	Boy	17(5%)	161	47.6
	Girl	144 (42.6%)		
No preference			130	38.5
Not answered			47	14
Total			338	100.0

TABLE 2 ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS AND GENDER PREFERENCE

	Preference*		Total N (%)	P value	Preference**		Total N (%)	p Value
	Boy n (%)	Girl n (%)			Boy n (%)	Girl n (%)		
Age (in years)								
<=30	12(10.6)	101 (89.4)	113 (100)	0.510	93 (86.9)	14 (13.1)	107 (100)	0.351
>30	2 (6.7)	30 (93.3)	30 (100)		29 (80.6)	7 (19.4)	36 (100)	
Education								
<=10 th Std	8 (11.3)	63 (88.7)	71 (100)	0.479	53(77.9)	15 (22.1)	68 (100)	0.015*
>10 th Std	5 (7.7)	60 (92.3)	65 (100)		63 (92.6)	5(7.4)	68 (100)	
Occupation								
Homemaker	8 (7.9)	93 (92.1)	109 (100)	0.371	84 (83.2)	17 (16.8)	101 (100)	0.304
Working	5 (12.8)	34 (87.2)	39 (100)		36 (90)	4 (10)	40(100)	
Annual Income								
<50,000	66(44.8)	81(55.2)	147 (100)	0.334	53 (34.9)	13 (65.1)	66 (100)	0.030*
50000-100000	26(63.4)	15(26.6)	41 (100)		20 (76.9)	6 (23.1)	26 (100)	
>100000	28(11.3)	19(88.7)	47 (100)		28 (100)	0 (0)	28 (100)	
Religion								
Hindu	14 (11.6)	106 (88.4)	120 (100)	0.759	100 (84.7)	18 (15.3)	118 (100)	0.834
Muslim	3 (9.1)	30 (90.9)	33 (100)		29 (85.2)	5 (14.8)	34 (100)	
Christian	0 (0)	3 (100)	3(100)		2 (100)	0 (0)	2 (100)	
Type of Family								
Nuclear	7 (11.6)	53 (88.4)	60 (100)	0.540	44 (78.6)	12 (31.4)	56 (100)	0.155
Joint	6 (8.5)	65 (91.5)	71 (100)		65 (87.8)	9 (12.2)	74 (100)	

Note: Preference * - Child preference for the second child when the first born is a male child

Preference ** - Child preference for the second child when the first born is a female child