

Parental Perceptions on Son Preference: A Qualitative Study in a Slum Community in South India

Introduction: Son preference refers to an attitude found on the belief that girls are inadequate and of lesser value than boys. As a major form of gender discrimination, it can give way to an array of practices harmful to girls and women.

Background: Son preference has been found to be the primary cause for increasing the unwanted fertility level of any country or region. The nature and levels of son preference depends upon the different values of children that the parents attach on male children and female children resulted through traditional believes and practices of the society in which they are living. The existence or level of son preference differs among communities of villages, towns/cities and slums based on their socio-economic and cultural characteristics. The parents from patrilocal and patrilineal systems of families are found to attach positive values to sons rather than daughters. Some studies reveal that the old age support, setting funeral pyre after death of parents, escaping from dowry problem are the main reasons for having male children

Objective: This study makes an attempt to understand the parental perceptions on son preference among slum-dwellers; examine the parental perceptions on values attached to sons and daughters; and examine the extent of discrimination of daughters among parents in the slum community

Methods: Qualitative research tool on 15 case studies and 4 focus group discussion with having daughter only family, having son only family and both children having family at Chennai slum.

Results and Discussions:

There was a question asked to every respondent on the importance of education for gild child. It was found that most of the participants knew about the importance of girl child's education, and many among them perceived that the girls should get equal opportunity for education as boys. It was noticed that only a few of the girls go for higher education because of the parental fear of unsafe / security and poor economic condition. No girl from this slum was allowed to go to outside the locality, i.e. district, state, other country either for education or employment.

One of the participants shared, "I have 4 daughters, and I stopped my elder daughter's education after her Class 12 due to less income and no required facility." Another participant opined, "Yes, parents are worried much about their daughter's safety when they go outside the slum. Harassment happens every day. For instance, Ms. Swathi's murder happened at Nungambakkam railway station last month. Even 6-year old child has sexually harassed in this society, then think of the situation of teenage girls".

Marriage and dowry

There was a discussion on the existence, prevalence and type of marriages and dowry in the study area. It was found that the people accept love marriages and some agree for inter-caste, inter-community marriages. Parents perceive that girl's marriage is difficult as it may cost a minimum of Rs.1 to 4 lakh. They have to give dowry in terms of gifts, motorbike, and engagement and other expenses. Some of the families, both brides and grooms, share the marriage expenses. Sometimes, the girl's parents feel difficult to find the groom due to the girl's higher education. But dowry-related harassment seems to be less as compared to 10 or 20 years back.

One of the participants stated that "an incident happened in our street. There was a girl named Mrs.Banu, and she committed suicide because of dowry issues. Husband's family members frequently used to fight with her for demanding huge dowry which resulted her committing suicide."

Childbearing and fertility behaviour

There was a discussion on childbearing and fertility behaviour of the couples and parents who are respondents residing in the study area. It was found that most of them desired to have 2 children consisting of 1 from each sex. It was noticed that many male participants expected male children only, whereas, female participants perceived that they desire both at least one male child and one female child. They opined that if they have two daughters they have to spend more money on their clothes, accessories, marriage expenses, and dowry, and there is subsequent expense even after marriage in terms of gift during Deepavali and Pongal festivals, and ceremonies during pregnancy and childbirth. Some perceived that they desire to have at least one male child as the son will look after their sisters during the presence and absence of parents. There seems to be not much difference in treating their children, with irrespective of gender.

One of the participants stated that "Near my house, Ms.Saroja is there whose husband is an alcohol addict. She has 4 daughters. She is working at the Balwadi centre and engaged in part-time housekeeping work. She gives good education to her daughters

Son-Preference and daughter-aversion

Most of the male participants believe that sons will continue family lineage, maintain family assets, give old age security, involve in setting funeral rites, provide safety and security to women. Most of the female participants believe that daughters only are taking care of the parents in old age. Rich and highly educated people are accepting girl child also as they are able to meet all expenses towards upbringing, educating and arranging a marriage for female children. Parents believe that sufficient economic condition will give safety and security to their daughters.

A participant expressed "Normally parents are with fear about the female child because of more expenses and their safety. If they have sufficient economic condition, then it may be possible to provide safety to daughters, which may not be possible for poor parents."

Another participant mentioned. "My neighbour is from the Nadar community. He is a counsellor of the locality. His family economic condition is sound. His family members readily accept girl child and they want girl child only. But the situation of the poor parents is just the opposite of this case, and they desire to have male child mostly."

Religious and social values of children

Many a times, the parents believe that from generation to generation sons only continues family lineage; and culturally daughters goes to husband's house after marriage. Some of them accepted the prevailing fact that daughters continue family lineage and take care of the family.

Sex determination, sex selection and their consequences

Some families go for sex-selection through the technology of ultrasound scan. The rich parents especially those who have more than one daughter are going for sex-selection, whereas the poor parents do not go for such sex-selection scan as they cannot afford for the same due to their poor economic condition. The Government hospital doctors do not disclose about the sex of the child, as there is strict law for prohibiting such practice. But some private hospital doctors are doing such things due to the greed for money. Most of the respondents are aware that they do not have the right to kill the baby or abort any pregnancy for sex selection.

Consequences of sex selection

Few of the respondents perceived that the sex selection will lead to low sex ratio unfavouring females. Half of the respondents agree with the fact that their daughters are also having an equal right to have property like sons. Some of the female respondents perceived that some daughters only prefer to get property from parents, and those daughters who have brothers and desire to establish a good relationship with them do not prefer to get their property share.

Safety and security of daughters/violence against women

Most of the respondents feel that there are no safety and security measures in society. The crimes against women and girl children have increased considerably in recent years.

One of the respondent's reports "Nowadays girls need to have protection when they go out. Last month, Ms. Sawathi's murder happened in our area. Even 6-year old child faces sexual harassment." Because of such a worst situation, parents are finding it difficult to protect their daughters and they don't want any more girl child.

Shortage of brides

As the number of females is decreasing in recent years due to many factors, there arises a shortage of brides for marriage. A respondent opines "Few highly educated

unmarried boys are searching brides, but they are not getting. We are normally seeing 33-37 year old unmarried boys but still, they are not able to find a girl matching to them.”

Adoption of child

Though there is the privilege of adopting a child legally, very few seem to adopt a child, especially those who are childless. It was noticed from the statement of a respondent that high-class people/community couples are adopting the child if they don't have. One couple adopts a female baby as they don't have any child.

Schemes and programmes

Some of them aware about the government welfare schemes and programmes which are specific to sustain and protect the welfare of the girl children and women, in terms of education, marriage, sterilization, childbirth, etc. But these facilities hardly reach the needy poor due to the improper and unfair implementation of such programmes.

Demographic profile: All respondents are from the marginalized community and no one working in any organized sector. Most of them staying in rented house and they belonged from backward castes.

Preference on gender of child: Husband and wife are having different desires about the gender preference of the child within the family. Very few of them try to find the sex of the child through ultrasound. Most of the parents are having more than 2 children.

Education: Parents are trying to give education to both sons and daughters equally, but few of the sons don't like to go for higher education. The reason to give education to the daughter is that she should be able to manage her life after marriage and become financially independent.

Gender discrimination: Parents are treating equally sons and daughters but household chores were given to daughter only mostly, rarely sons are doing some household work.

Marriage expenses: Parents are thinking marriage expenses about 1 lakh to 5 lakhs for sons and daughters. Daughters marriage is taking more expenses than sons marriage. Still this community following dowry system, parents gave motorbike, furniture and household materials to daughter during her marriage. Parents are borrowing money for meeting these expenses.

Old age security: Most of the parents believe that son will take care of them in their old age. Daughter will go to their husband's house after marriage and her earning will also be utilized by husband's family. Son will be with parents after marriage and son will look after them. At the same time, parents strongly believed that daughters only give more affection and care to parents.

Security of the daughter: Most of the parents are worried about safety of daughters. They feel that any kind of harassment will happen when girls are going out. The main reason for preference for son is there is no worry about son's safety and security because males are not facing much issues, but girls are facing more harassment in the society.

Conclusions

Son preference is prevalent in slum areas due to poverty, poor economic condition, girl's insecurity and cultural/traditional practices against gender equality. At the same time, perception about the value of girl child is gradually changing. The parents of this community believe that daughters are only taking care of parents during old age as compared to boys.