

Factors Affecting Son Preference Phenomenon and Women Familial Status in Pakistan

Beenish Ijaz Butt¹ & Amir Zada Asad²

Abstract

Son preference is a tenacious phenomenon found in various countries around the globe. Following a brief overview of son preference, this paper presents a descriptive review of socio-economic topographies of son preference and women familial status in Pakistan. It describes that there are a number of socio-economic factors which presents a relationship between the women familial status and the birth of her son. Amongst the economic factors, old age economic source and family purse are the major contributors for her old age economic support. Additionally, socio-cultural factors, gives her an uplifted status and shift in power, family acceptance and certain uplifted roles in the family. Being a mother of a son is the only channel which is a source of her uplifted status in the patriarchal setup. This notion confirms the ideology of son as superior and daughter neglect; resulting in promotion of son preference culture in the country. State policies are still unable to uplift the women status and to eliminate discriminatory customs towards her at familial level in the country.

Key words: Son Preference, Mother Status, Familial Status, Economic Factors, Socio-Cultural Factors.

Introduction

In most of the societies, there is widespread son preference, although it is so mild to be detected (Williamson, 1976), as the statistics for such phenomenon are hard to find. The preference for a son's desire has deep rooted socio-

¹ Lecturer, Department of Social Work, University of Sargodha

² Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Peshawar

cultural and economic impacts in South Asian countries like China, India, and Pakistan (Caroll, 2000).

The reasons behind the son preference differ from society to society. As in India, the major reason behind this is the argument that parents have to pay dowries for daughters. In China it is believed that rigorous fertility regulation is accountable for intense gender disparity against daughters and featured with Confucian values (Caroll, 2000). In South Korea son preference is accredited more in patriarchal family systems and low female autonomy. In Pakistan, strong son preference has been found as a son is considered as an economic as well as a social and political asset particularly old age security (Ali, 1989).

A strong inclination is observed for son preference in the South Asia. Every family wishes to have a baby boy as their first child. If they have a son, then the desire gets stronger to have another son. Encyclopedia of birth Control defines that, in many cultures, son preference lead parents to have more children than family resources might comfortably support, in hopes of producing at least one son (Rangel, 2000). We define a woman as having a son preference if her ideal number of sons is larger than her actual number of sons at the time of pregnancy (Nie, 2009). This phenomenon is usually considered as *Target number of Sons* (Desai, 1998).

Son preference in Pakistan can be judged from the following comments as,

“In Pakistani society boys are regarded as a necessity for the continuation of the family name, for the strength and security of the family, for old age security of the parents, and for protecting the honor of the family and particularly its female component”(Shah, 1989).

Factors Affecting Son Preference Phenomenon and Women Familial Status in Pakistan

It is not so easy to define the phenomenon of son preference in Pakistan as here families are happy and prosperous with, at least 5-7 sons. If a mother has a son she will desire for more sons. This desire is based on the notion that the son must have a companion brother. Here a son is preferred biologically as well as socially. The birth of a son is a sign of countless happiness of a family. Socially, it raises the status of mother and of fathers in their respective circles. Culturally, a son is responsible for lineage and a reason of increased family honor in the society. Malik (2005) opines that,

“In Pakistani society, boys are more highly valued than girls; boys receive more preventive care and more timely attention when they fall ill. Boys have more access to schooling and lesser dropout rates as compared with girls. Girls receive less nutritious food than boys, leading to malnutrition and impaired physical development. They receive low attainment of education and experience poor health”.

This means boys are preferred over girls in Pakistani society and girls are given less value biologically, economically and socially. It increases the importance of sons in the family setup and strengthens the notion that the son is an asset in the Pakistani society. This son preference- culture assigns an elevated status to a mother, which she has not experienced before the birth of a son. So being a mother of a son is a ray of hope for every Pakistani woman which will be a high status symbol for her at familial level. This phenomenon has persisted in Pakistani society for generations and is worthwhile for both mothers and sons.

Review of Literature

This study focuses the Socio-economic Topographies of Son Preference and Women Familial Status in Pakistan. Literature related to son preference culture around the globe is available in bulk, but no specific study on the observed phenomenon is ever seen in the literature.

The choice for a male child is found in different configurations around the globe. It consists of a diversity of values and norms strongly entrenched in clear preference for a male child in the family with sometimes rejecting attitude for the girl child. In most parts of Pakistan, similarly as in several other countries, the birth of a male child is welcomed visibly.

However, unjustified son preference results in considerable levels of excessive female child mortality, being observed in East and South Asia, including India, China, and South Korea. Female infant mortality rate is found to be higher all around the world showing the valuable status of male child. Nearly more than one million female infants die every year due to not approached healthcare and improper feedings (Kapoor, 2000).

Navtej, K.P. (2012) points out that the preference for male child can be observed in many societies and cultures, creating a local and global issue. It is found in many parts of Asia and is found to have its roots in the history. The ultimate outcomes of the said phenomenon are social power relations interacting with culture and economy.

El-Gilany (2007) opined that much attention has been given to the issue of gender based preferences for children and concludes that parental gender preferences may result in discriminatory traditions against children

Factors Affecting Son Preference Phenomenon and Women Familial Status in Pakistan

having the less-desired sex i.e. female children, and these practiced approaches towards the unfavorable social and demographic consequences.

In Pakistan, the deep rooted cultural values dictate the prominence of the sons over daughters in numerous sub-cultures. Having a baby girl is not considered as profitable for the family and boys are thought to be more prestigious since their birth. Studies related to Son Preference are mainly focus the reproductive behavior in Pakistan as Hussain (2000) conducted a small scale study on the role of son preference in reproductive behavior in urban slums of Karachi. He pointed out that sex of surviving children especially the number of sons is correlated with pregnancies reported as unwanted and it also influences succeeding reproductive behavior.

Another study conducted by Sharif (2007) in district Faisalabad was conducted relating to family size and sex preference. It reveals that preference for son is considered to be beneficial both at social and economic level. The desire for sons is related with low contraceptive prevalence. So it is suggested that value of sons should be lowered in order to make family planning successful.

In consequence of all the different discussions of how families perceive the son preference in this section, this article will describe the socio-cultural and economic factors which present topography of son preference and women familial status in Pakistan.

Women Status being a Mother of a Son

It is a common practice that the birth of a son is celebrated whole heartedly by the paternal as well as maternal grandparents. Paternal grandparents distribute lots of local sweets among the relatives and money is

distributed among the poor. Maternal grandparents gift thousands or lacs of rupees and gifts to their grandson. Even, husband presents gold jewelry for their wives on such events. As a son grows young, he is more attached with the mother than the father. So the wish for a son is not only from a husband or his family only; but also from a mother. When a woman has only daughters, she is a pathetic person in the society. Even, when she gives charity to a beggar, he or she, always tell her, *May Allah bless you with a son*. Thus son preference is the only phenomenon which is a source of her status uplift in the society; otherwise her social and marital status is always at a risk.

Woman status is an impassable subject matter in the underdevelopment state of Pakistan. They live in a circular life which revolves around domestic chores along with dependent economic status, poor health, illiteracy, and violence. She is accepted as a homemaker in the four walls of the house (Baldock, 2003). She has a little or no portion in the decision making autonomy of the house. Even the presence of her in-laws in the household clearly inhibits her in all the aspects of lives (Sathar & Kazi, 2000). Mumtaz & Shaheed (1987), while arguing her domestic role, state that,

“The Pakistani womanhood whether belongs to rural or urban areas are poor and virtually illiterate, leads a life of physical hardship involving long hours of tedious chores for which there is neither compensation nor recognition. These women bear the burden of childbearing and house work. Consequently, they are the first to rise and the last to sleep. They are to light fire, offer their prayers, milk the cow and buffalo, prepare the breakfast, have the dishes

Factors Affecting Son Preference
Phenomenon and Women Familial Status in Pakistan

washed and house cleaned. This is not the end of her duties. She has a long day ahead. She is to look after the livestock, rear the children, look after the aged and sick, collect firewood, if she is in hilly areas and has to fetch water. After everyone has collapsed on the bed, she is still to prepare for the following day and is the last to sleep. Despite these functions, she is still the inferior being."

Even after performing so many roles, she is considered as unproductive in the family. She is unable to get uplifted status in the family; even she works 24/7 and gets no time for her personal activities.

Shah (2006), while explaining the women's domestic role in Pakistan says that,

"Women played seven different roles in a society, namely, parental, occupational, conjugal, domestic, kin, community and individual to determine the status of a woman. Despite of the several roles played, women were not accepted and didn't get proper regard in their husbands' families until and unless they had a son."

The early days of marital life are crucial for a woman; but as she gives birth to a son she has a certificate of acceptance by the in-laws family. Now she is known as a mother of a son instead of having her own identity at home.

All above factors, realize a woman that if she can have power and uplifted status in the family domain, that is only being the mother of a son. As, it is obvious that an individual who is considered as an inferior being,

becomes important at once after giving birth to a son. Eventually, mothers develop a strong feeling that their son is a source of status elevation in the family.

There are strong socio-cultural and economic factors which present topographies that how son preference phenomenon describes women familial status in Pakistan.

Economic Factors

There are mainly five sources of welfare in any country that provides social security to its citizens, i.e. the individuals, the family, the voluntary sector, the market system, and the state (Fitzpatrick, 2010), which can rescue the people economically. Pakistan is a poor country since its birth, with ever increasing heavy debts which is greater than its GNP. Here main sources of welfare are not met through the State; rather the family is responsible for socio-economic development. Poverty has risen in the country during the last decades. Under this backdrop, high population growth rate, low economic growth rate and ever-increasing national debt, which shows debacle for the country seems unsustainable under these circumstances. Here women, being the one half of the total population suffer a lot in their older age or when they cross 40. They have no economic incentive from the State and families are also unable to afford them. Under such circumstances, a mother has to finally rely upon the son in her later age. She considers him as her asset as he is her only source who will protect her in the later life.

Old Age Economic Source

There is a worldwide shift in ageing with the increase in life expectancy due to medical inventions. The demographic transition has begun

Factors Affecting Son Preference
Phenomenon and Women Familial Status in Pakistan

in Pakistan since 1990 as in other regions of the world. The main reasons in the increase of age population in Pakistan are due to a regular decline in mortality, which resulted in life expectancy and a decline in total fertility rate in recent years. Consequently, the proportion of the elderly population is expected to increase in the years ahead.

Table 1
Total Population and Elderly Persons (Aged +60) in Pakistan: 1961–2030
Elderly Population (Million)

Year Census	(60+ Years)			Sex Ratio
	Total	Male	Female	M/F
1961	2.92	1.68	1.24	135
1972	4.57	2.63	1.94	135
1981	5.88	3.40	2.48	137
1998	7.34	3.99	3.35	119
Projected Estimates				
2013	11.19	5.69	5.50	103
2030	22.07	11.09	11.09	99

Source: Pakistan (2002) Ageing in Pakistan: A Situation Analysis, Ministry of Social Welfare and Special Education, Islamabad.

The salient features of a population segment are reflected through their socioeconomic conditions. As family care and assistance is of greater importance in the old age. Under the common observation, women have a greater proportion of widows in Pakistan as they have longer life than men and live alone in old age (PIDE, 2008). They are usually in a susceptible condition if they do not get enough socio-economic provision. Women are facing a vicious circle of poverty in Pakistan not only in their young age but also in the later life, i.e. in the 40s- 60s of their life span. But a very few of them are get the Social Security provisions in Pakistan. Even though, the Government is

constitutionally bound to grant economic opportunities to the both sexes at equal grounds. But the reality is far from this existing situation.

Labor Force Participation rate is an important aspect to suspect the economic conditions of elderly in Pakistan. A smaller population of elderly persons, are benefited through pension and social security programs, many aged persons continue to work after 60 years of their age, specifically in the rural agriculture sector. Moreover, there is a large population of female aged women who remain busy in unpaid domestic chores till the last day of their life but there is no data available for such facts.

Table 2

**Literacy Status and Economically Active Population (60 Years and above)
1998**

Age Group	Literate %			Labor Force Participation Rates%		
	Both Sexes	Male	Female	Both Sexes	Male	Female
60-64	21.1	30.7	9.9	34.3	62.4	1.6
65-69	20.6	29.9	9.5	32.6	58.0	1.7
70-74	17.0	24.3	7.9	29.6	52.3	1.4
75+	15.6	22.5	7.5	24.9	44.5	1.2
Total (60+)	19.0	27.5	8.9	30.9	55.5	1.6

Source: 1998 Population Census of Pakistan.

A larger proportion of the population is working in the informal sector in Pakistan so this informal sector has no social assistance in the country. There is a small budget for pensions and social security to meet the needs of the elderly population. According to the 1998 population census, only 20 percent of the elderly population gets benefit from pension scheme and that

Factors Affecting Son Preference Phenomenon and Women Familial Status in Pakistan

covers only 7.34 million of the total elderly population. Further, there are contractual jobs offered by the government for the last decade with no pension schemes for the population.

The available data clearly shows that women are less indulged in the formal labor force and have low population who receive pension as they live longer than their male partner and have no economic incentive by the government. The role of the state towards social security provisions for the whole population of women in Pakistan is nix. Yet they have certain needs in their later life. Clarks (2013), opines about Pakistani women as,

Large number of Pakistani women over 60 are widow, because women tend to marry older men, there are more widows than the widowers in each age cohort. Additionally, while men often remarry if they lose a spouse, it is unusual for women who have had children to marry. Older women are especially vulnerable financially.

They have certain economic, health, social and psychological needs. When there is no incentive from the government, family is the only source of their needs fulfillment. Under the family structure of Pakistani society, a mother is the head of the family in her widow life. As in later life, she becomes the head of the family and takes the decision making autonomy of the house. But she is still not an income generator of the house. It is usually her son or sons who run the economic affairs of the family. This son, who empowered the mother on his birth, is still a source of her strength in the family. As mothers groom their sons in the Pakistani culture that they are closer to their mother than the father and they are more obedient to the mother

than any other relationship. A son, in older age, is not only a son for mothers, but it is the only source that is their economic source and sees them as their asset of their life. That's why they always keep the strings of the son in their own hands. As a result the family of the son gets affected in a way that mothers keep the wages of their sons in their own hands and the daughter in law, grandsons and daughters have to ask for money from them. As it is her only source of income so she never let the shift of power from her hands to the son or daughter-in-law. Although it creates an economic riot in the family, but everyone has to follow such values.

Old age support and son preference has a long-standing relationship which gives economic incentive. Elucidations for son preference lay great stress on the reality that sons will afford the old age support. Most of the old parents live with their married children and it is prodigiously the son, with no class and caste distinction in Pakistan. According to the cultural construct, parents live with their married or unmarried son or sons in the old age, as living with a married daughter is not in cultural vogue in the country. Hence, a mother prefers her son throughout her life and has an economic dependency on him.

Family Purse

In the family set up of Pakistani society, it is a usual routine that mother runs the kitchen affairs. She is given money or provided grocery by the male head of the family, say father in-law or husband. In her later life, when his son enters into the earning phase, it is a routine that his pay is transferred in the hands of his mother directly. Now it is the mother's will how she spends that money; either she saves it for her daughter's dowry, or spends somewhere

else, she is the possessor of that money. Even in the combine families, the entire male sibling hand over their pay to their mother and she runs all the domestic affairs, including shopping for all women and children in the home. So the family purse is the bank account of an older mother who gets cash deposits every month. Her son is not only a son, but a source of direct cash transfer between the son and the mother. Under this setup, a mother gets more authority in the economic domestic domain. She is enabled to get this authority only being a mother of a son. This reason creates a notion in the society that the son is the person who transfers the family purse in her hands directly; hence is considered as a source of status uplift of the mother.

Socio-Cultural Factors

An Uplifted Status and Shift in Power

There is a dramatic change in the status of a woman which she possesses throughout her life span (Gupta, 1995). In the young life when a mother is a newcomer as a daughter-in-law in the family, a woman has a lesser chance to enter the household decisions than as the mother of a future man of the lineage. In the Pakistani society, as the son grows, he is considered as able to take part in the social affairs of the family. He is the gateway of his mother who takes her to the family affairs. The key of this door is always in the hands of her mother. Since the childhood, he has been closed to his mother and he thinks that his mother is always right. Through the gateway of a son, a mother takes the authority from the husband's hand in her own hand. She is justified, in her own eyes, to take this shift in power, as she spends a long time in the subordinated status. This shift in power allots her an uplifted status. As in her young age, her status is of a second class citizen in the domestic

domain. The power is always in the hands of the male head of the family. It is the decision about the marriage, or relatives visit, it is always decided by the male heads and women are not taken in confidence in making any decision. In her old age when his son has grown young, she has a feeling that her asset has groomed now and it is the time to take profits. The profit which she takes through the groomed son is the uplifted status and shift in power in the household matters. Now no such matter is accepted by the family in which her consent is not taken. Such factors assure her that a son is an asset who became the source of her uplifted status in the familial matters.

Acceptance by the Family

Acceptance of a woman from the family of her in-laws is a complex phenomenon in an Asian country like Pakistan. As she enters into the home in the bridal dress, she is said to move from there in the coffin by her own parents. Now her rest of whole life will be in that home. In her early days, even in the early years, she confronts the problem of acceptance of the female as well as the male family members. She is treated as an alien identity by the family of in-laws. She has to pass through the examination in her daily life matters. Her cooking, cleaning, washing is judged and criticized by many. No matter, she cooks very well and maintains the house in a proper way. She is always criticized while nourishing and pampering the children. Her savings or shopping, both are not appreciated by the family members. In short, it is not an easy task for her to get the acceptance by them. The only gateway, through which she gets some sort of acceptance by them, is being a mother of a son. Being a mother of a daughter or daughters does not open the gates of acceptance for her, rather being a son of a mother is a like a lucky draw for

her. At last, she gets family acceptance as her son grows young. When family decision making authority is going to be in the hands of the young men, i.e. son of the family, her mother is also involved in this process and hence get acceptance of the family. That's why she considers her son as an asset who becomes a source of her acceptance, and she thinks herself as an owner of this treasure.

Roles and Rules for the Family Members

In a family set up, familial roles are the expected behaviors. Traditional roles are comprised of mother, father, son and daughter. These roles are the product of the mindset of the society. To these roles, one may enhance other roles such as “the caretaker one,” or “the obedient one.” On the actual grounds, the individuals behave according to their set roles. These roles are helpful in maintaining the family's equilibrium according to the culture. Under these specific roles, unsaid rules are generated that indicate how the family will function. These rules tend to be unspoken because they come into existence following the specific behaviors set by the previous generation.

In the Pakistani society, there exists a traditional role of a mother and a traditional rule for a son. Being a mother, she has to do the domestic chores throughout her life. She performs all the duties of his son from his food care to room cleaning and clothes washing to ironing, even he is young. Her role generates a set of rules for her that she is bound to do these works as a caretaker endlessly. The traditional role of a son is of a bread winner of the family. Along with this he has to maintain the family ties in such a way that he and his mother has to live with him in the same house. The set of rules for him restricts him to be obedient of his mother. He is bound to live according

to the rules set by his mother. In this familial pattern, a mother who was a caretaker in the previous years now becomes a totalitarian who can set familial roles by her own will. She treats his son as he is an asset of her life and the specific roles and rules are the assisting factor of the said phenomenon.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In many societies of the world, a male child is regarded as a compulsion for the patrilineal continuation, for the strength of the family, for old age security of the parents, and for protecting the family name and honor hence considered as an asset, same is the case in Pakistan. The phenomenon of “Son preference” is always associated with “daughter neglect”. But when the son is young and her mother gets old, he becomes a source of her uplifted status in her family. In Pakistani society girls possess less valued status than boys and remained in the same status till they become a mother of a son. As before this, she is ignored, discouraged, violated, and discriminated by the family. In the patriarchal setup, socio-economic strength is always associated with men in any role, a husband, a brother or a son. A mother has a closest relation of a son in a familial set up. When her son is in the young age he serves as a ladder for her status uplift in the family. This creates her ideology that her son is the only way of her socio economic uplift. But all the above said factors present a discriminatory status of women in the country. A woman who couldn't have a single son faces the discriminatory behavior of the family throughout her life.

It seems very strange that a country which has a history of social policies regarding women socio-economic empowerment since last 55 years,

Factors Affecting Son Preference Phenomenon and Women Familial Status in Pakistan

allots such an inferior status to women as a citizen in her domestic domain. Even in the presence of legislation against Domestic Violence, Government is failed to uplift women status at familial level in the country. As there is low female labor force participation rate in Pakistan; in both formal and informal sector. Women economic uplift through state policies is unable to provide social protection for them. Consequently, she is economically dependent on male family members who allot lower status to them.

Patriarchal culture is embedded in the social structure of the society but state policies can be a useful instrument to uplift women status in the patriarchal surrounding environment. Family laws are promulgated in the country since 55 years but family customs regarding son preference could not be changed through the state policies and this discrimination is still a part of Pakistani culture.

Interestingly, Population Policy in the country promotes the ideal family size of having two children, regardless the sex of the child. But there is no restriction by the state when families have more than two children to have more and more sons. Hence women status at familial grounds is dependent on the male members of the family and her status is uplifted a little after the birth of son/sons in Pakistan and Government has paid no attention to said issue which sometimes becomes a cause of domestic violence, and divorce in Pakistan.

References

- Ali, S.M. (1989). Does son Preference Matter? *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 21(4), pp. 399-408.
- Baldock, J. (2003). *Social Policy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clark, Grace. (2013). Pakistan's Zakat System: A Policy Model for Developing Countries as a means of Redistributing income to the Elderly Poor in Fredrick L. Ahearn (ed.) *Issues in Global Aging*, New York: Routledge.
- Das Gupta, M. (1995). Life Course Perspectives on Women's Autonomy and Health Outcomes. *American Anthropologist* 97(3), pp. 481-91.
- Desai, J. (1998). Poverty and Fertility in Veitnam, in David Dollar (ed.) *Household Welfare and Vietnam's Transition*, Washington DC: World Bank.
- El-Gilany, A. H., & Shady, E. (2007).Determinants and causes of son preference among women delivering in Mansoura, Egypt.*Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal*, 13(1), p. 119.
- Elisabeth, C. (2000). *Endangered Daughters: Discrimination and Development in Asia*, London: Routledge.
- Fitzpatrick, T. (2010). *International encyclopedia of Social Policy* .London: Routledge.
- Groot, A. D. (2007). Deprived Children and Education, Pakistan, *VIREWOC International Research on Working Children*, 2007.
- Hussain, R. (2000). The Role of Son Preference in Reproductive Behavior in Pakistan, *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 78 (3), pp. 379-388.
- Kapoor, S. (2000). Domestic Violence against Women and Girls, *Innocenti Digest*, 6, 15, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria.

Factors Affecting Son Preference
Phenomenon and Women Familial Status in Pakistan

- Mumtaz , K & Shaheed, F. (1987). *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* Lahore: Vanguard Books (Pvt.) Ltd.
- Nie, L. (2009). *Essays on Son Preference in China during Modernization*, Eisenhower Parkway: Proquest Publisher.
- Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, (2008). *Pension and Social Security Schemes in Pakistan: Some Policy Options*, Islamabad: Policy Planning Cell, Labor and Manpower Division.
- Purewal, N. K. (2012). Son Preference Sex Selection, Gender and Culture in South Asia, Retrieved from <http://www.bergpublishers.com/?TabId=11824>.
- Rangel, M. (2000). *Encyclopedia of Birth Control*, Phoenix: Orxy Press.
- Sathar Z. A. and Kazi, S. (2000). Women's Autonomy in the Context of Rural Pakistan, *The Pakistan Development Review*, 39: 2, pp. 89-110.
- Sevilla, (2006). *General Psychology: with Values Development Lessons*, Sampaloc: Rex Book Store.
- Shah, M. (2006). Women Being the Most Neglected Agent in the South Asian Societies, *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences*, 4 (1-2), pp.81-85.
- Shah, N. M. (1989). *Pakistani Women: A socioeconomic & Demographic Profile*, Islamabad: Pakistan Institute of Development Economics.
- United Nations, (2010). *Why Gender Equality in Basic Education in Pakistan*, Islamabad: UNESCO.
- Williamson, N. E. (1976). *Sons or Daughters: A Cross Cultural Survey of Parental Preferences*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Yashon, R. & Cummings, M. (2009). *Human Genetics and Society*, Belmont: Cengage Learning.