Son Preference in India

Seema Jayachandran
Northwestern University

September 2021
What I will talk about

- Desire to have a son
- 5 underappreciated aspects of the desire to have a son
- Policy solutions
5 underappreciated aspects of son preference

1. Desire for to have a son is specific to some societies and not tightly linked to development
   - Problem and solution is cultural, not economic

2. Preference is for having a son rather than all sons
   - Many implications, including that dowry is not a major factor, in my assessment

3. Declining fertility worsens the skewed sex ratio
   - Problem can get worse with gains in development or women’s agency

4. Desire for a son causes unintended harm to girls’ health

5. Can’t infer son preference well from ideal family composition
1. Desire to have a son is specific to some societies
2. Preference is for having a son, i.e., eldest son preference

- Trying again for a son leads to male-skewed sex ratio of last birth [SRLB] (as does sex selection)
- Male-skewed SRLB not seen historically in US or Europe
- Today, not strongly linked with level of economic development
- Cultural roots relate to eldest son’s roles (e.g., patrilocality, religious rites)

Source: Ebenstein (2014)
3. Declining fertility worsens the skewed sex ratio

- Family with 5 kids has 3% chance of no son; with 2 kids, chance is 24%
- Greater “need” to sex-select to obtain \(\geq1\) son as desired family size falls
- Decline in desired family size explains an estimated 30-50% of India’s worsening sex ratio since 1980 (Jayachandran 2017)
- Women having more agency, e.g., via education, may not help sex ratio
  - Women fewer sons at any given fertility level
  - Women want fewer children
  - First force improves sex ratio, but second one worsens it
4. Desire for a son causes unintended harm to girls’ health

- Affects spacing between births due to hurrying to have another child
- Family size is larger than originally planned

⇒ Negative consequences for children’s health (2 examples)
Girls are breastfed for a shorter duration than boys in India

After birth of girl, want to get pregnant quickly to try for a son

Quicker next pregnancies after girls → Earlier weaning

- Know that breastfeeding reduces fecundity
- Or, pregnancy triggers weaning

Source: Jayachandran and Kuziemko (2011)
Stunting in India: A problem among children other than eldest sons

In other words, what distinguishes the matrilineal states, where we see a shallow gradient, from the rest of India is how not just girls but also non-eldest sons are treated.

We now further drill down on the implications of son-biased fertility-stopping behavior for resource allocation across siblings. The birth of a daughter with no older brothers causes her parents to exceed their intended fertility to try again for a son, reducing resources spent on her. Our first test seeks to provide evidence on the “try again” mechanism, separate from the sibling rivalry mechanism that posits that having a brother worsens outcomes for a girl because she has to compete with him for resources (Garg and Morduch 1998).

At the prenatal stage, both mechanisms benefit daughters without an older brother: there is no sibling rivalry and parents will invest in her while she is in utero.

Figure 3. Height of Indian Children Relative to Africa

Notes: The difference between the gap between the Africa fitted line and Kerala and Northeast and the gap between the Africa fitted line and India is 0.231 for girls, 0.235 for non-eldest sons, and 0.098 for eldest sons. GDP data are based on the Penn World Table 9.0 (Feenstra, Inklaar, and Timmer 2015).

Source: Jayachandran and Pande (2017)
5. Need better survey questions to measure desire for a son

- Demographic & Health Survey question: What is your ideal number of children, and how many of them do you want to be boys? girls?
- Most common answer in India today is 2 children – 1 boy, 1 girl
- Masks that parents would be OK with 2 boys but not with 2 girls
- Need to measure intensity of preference, and separate how many children they want from their son preference
- Message: Need to design and use better survey questions instead of defaulting to DHS question
5 underappreciated aspects of son preference

1. Desire to have a son is specific to some societies and not tightly linked to development
2. Preference is for having *a* son rather than having all sons
3. Declining fertility worsens the skewed sex ratio
4. Desire for a son does unintended harm to girls’ health
5. Can’t infer son preference well from ideal family composition
Policy responses to son preference
How to address desire for sons?

- Policy challenge for unintended health consequences is to direct resources *within* a family
  - Easier with health care because takes place outside the home and is non-fungible; more challenging with food

- Can we change the underlying preference for sons? Hard to do but seems worth trying
School curriculum aimed at changing gender norms

Dhar, Jain, and Jayachandran (2021)