

## Son Preference and Desired Family Size in a Rural Community of West Godavari District, Andhra Pradesh, India

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**ABSTRACT** In the present study, the desired family size and preference for son and their socio-economic and demographic determinants were studied among rural populations of West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh, India. The data were collected from 214 respondents from the rural area of West Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh. The mean desirable number of children is 2.5. More than half of the respondents desired to have only two children and only 3% of male respondents desired to have one child. The data also showed that more than half of the respondents opted for at least one son. With regard to the choice of first child, majority of men (70%) are in favour of son as their first child and only 2% desired to have daughter as their first child. Among women respondents, these figures are 55% and 2.5%, respectively. These parameters are associated with some of the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the respondents. The study concludes the existence of son preference, which is undesired fertility behaviour among this population. Also the study warrants checking the possible gender bias in child health programmes.

### INTRODUCTION

In developing countries like India, the infant and child mortality have declined considerably during the last few decades, mainly due to immunisation programme together with discoveries of life-saving drugs and other antibiotics, and to some extent due to various public health measures. It is known that mortality among female infants is more than that of male infants, especially in the rural areas. A question may be asked whether the preference is for a male child results in female infants not receiving as much care and nourishment as bestowed on the male infants. Son preference is a well known phenomenon in many developing societies and in the reasons that put forward most often are less freedom of women to make decisions regarding reproductive choices, familial and societal pressure to bear a male child, considering girl child as a liability, lack of education and empowerment of women and the recent spread of reproductive technology. Thus the studies of

gender bias in several developing countries have received wide attention (Chen et al., 1981; Rosenzweig and Schultz, 1982; Behrman, 1988; Bhuiya and Streatfield, 1991; Murthi et al., 1995; Quibria, 1995; Burgess and Zhuang, 2000; Clark, 2000; Miller, 2001; Mwageni et al., 2001; Bandhyapadhyay, 2003; Leone et al., 2003). The studies of gender bias extensively focus on differences in mortality, fertility and sex ratio also (Dyson and Moore, 1993; Dasgupta, 1987; Basu, 1989; Bourne and Walker, 1991; Kishore, 1995; Murthi et al., 1995; Mutharayappa et al., 1997; Nielsen et al., 1997; Agnihotri, 1999; Clark, 2000; Leone et al., 2003).

It appears that in India, the major problem of reduction in fertility is to overcome the desire for large families which is partly sustained by a strong preference for sons (Arnold et al., 1998; Clark, 2000; Pattanaik et al., 2000). Moreover, the desire for children is largely influenced by factors like number of surviving children, sex composition of the surviving children and certain other psychological and socio-economic ones including religious beliefs and customs. The studies on son preference in a comprehensive way are of utmost important for several reasons, particularly for deepening our understanding the nexus among son preference, fertility behaviour and the family structure. In the present study, the desired family size and preference for son

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and their socio-economic and demographic determinants were studied and reported among rural populations of West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh, India.

### METHODOLOGY

The information for the present study was obtained from 214 households, drawn from three villages in Palakol and Palakoderu *mandals* (developmental blocks) of West Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh. The information pertaining to demographic and socio-economic characteristics of households, and about fertility was collected from the head of the household (either male or female), through in-depth interviews with structured questionnaire. The questionnaire included the questions on desired size of the family (number and gender of children) and preference for the first child. The data were entered into a personal computer and analysis was done through SPSS v.10 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). The respondents were categorized

based on their age, caste, occupation, education, income and age at marriage. Based on the caste, the respondents were categorized into scheduled caste (SC) and non SC. The Government of India grouped some castes into SC for positive discrimination in education, employment and other development opportunities for their upliftment. This includes the castes, which were once considered as untouchables according to *Hindu varna* system. All other castes were grouped as non SC.

### RESULTS

In the present community, the mean desirable number of children is 2.5. The multiple classification analysis (MCA) indicates that more than half of the respondents (56.3% men and 52.5% women) desired to have only two children (Table 1). Interestingly only 2.9% of male respondents desired to have one child. Substantially higher proportions of men (33.3%) and women (27.5%) responded that the desirable

**Table 1: Multiple classification analysis of responses regarding desirable number of children**

Desirable number of children	Men				Women			
	1	2	3	≥4	1	2	3	≥4
<i>Age Group</i>								
≤30 (m=18, f=10)	1.2	6.3	2.9	-	-	17.5	5.0	2.5
31-40 (m=62, f=9)	1.2	23.6	9.8	1.2	-	15.0	5.0	2.5
41-50 (m=60, f=13)	-	20.1	12.6	1.7	-	7.5	15.0	10.0
≥51 (m=34, f=8)	0.6	6.3	8.0	4.6	-	12.5	2.5	5.0
<i>Caste</i>								
SC (m=154, f=39)	1.7	48.3	31.0	7.5	-	52.5	27.5	17.5
Non SC (m=20, f=1)	1.2	8.1	2.3	-	-	-	-	2.5
<i>Occupation</i>								
Agriculture labourer (m=112, f=32)	1.7	34.5	23.0	5.2	-	37.5	25.0	17.5
Small farmer (m=31, f=0)	1.2	10.9	5.8	-	-	-	-	-
Employee (m=24, f=2)	-	7.5	4.0	2.3	-	5.0	-	-
House wife (m=0, f=6)	-	-	-	-	-	10.0	2.5	2.5
Others (m=7, f=0)	-	3.5	0.6	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Education</i>								
Illiterate (m=52, f=16)	0.6	13.2	13.2	2.6	-	15.0	10.0	15.0
Primary education (m=50, f=11)	0.6	17.8	8.1	2.3	-	12.5	12.5	2.5
Secondary education & more (m=72, f=13)	1.7	25.3	12.1	2.3	-	25.0	5.0	2.5
<i>Annual Income (in Rupees)</i>								
≤8,000 (m=84, f=24)	1.1	27.0	17.2	2.9	-	37.5	15.0	7.5
8,001-10,000 (m=32, f=6)	1.7	9.2	5.8	1.7	-	2.5	7.5	5.0
10,001-20,000(m=39, f=5)	-	13.8	6.9	1.7	-	2.5	2.5	7.5
≥20,001 (m=19, f=5)	-	6.3	3.5	1.2	-	10.0	2.5	-
<i>Age at Marriage</i>								
≤20 (m=92, f=37)	0.6	24.7	24.1	3.5	-	45.0	27.5	20.0
21-25 (m=72, f=3)	2.3	26.4	9.2	3.5	-	7.5	-	-
≥ 26 (m=10, f=0)	-	5.2	-	0.6	-	-	-	-
Total	2.9	56.3	33.3	7.5	-	52.5	27.5	20.0

m=male, f=female; Figures in parenthesis indicate size of the sample in that category.

number of children is three. However, for a few people it was recorded as more than three. The presence of higher proportion of respondents desired to have two or less than two children is a welcoming trend. The age distribution clearly indicates that the respondents of lower age groups mostly desired less number of children than higher aged respondents. Regarding caste affiliation, non SC respondents possessed higher per cent of people who desired two or less than two children than SC respondents. Similarly an association was found between desirable number of children and occupation. Agricultural labourers desired for more number of children and the trend decreases towards employees via small farmers. It is expected that education has an impact on the desire of the people for number of children. Among illiterates only 45% desired to want to have two children where as in literates 61% people responded that they want two children.

Similarly a decreasing trend of desirable number of children is noticed along with the increase of income levels. The age at marriage has no such impact. Thus, the desirable number of children which is an important variable in studies related to family planning and fertility is depended on many demographic and socio-economic variables.

The desirable composition in the family (gender of the children) is as important as desirable family size. Hence, we asked the respondents to know the desirable number of sons. The results of the analysis of responses regarding desirable number of sons are presented in Table 2. More than half of the respondents (58.6% males and 52.5% females) opted for only one son. While the remaining respondents desired to have two sons. The mean number of desirable sons of the present sample is 1.4. The results show that the younger age group

**Table 2: Multiple classification analysis of responses regarding desirable number of sons**

<i>Desirable number of sons</i>	<i>Men</i>		<i>Women</i>	
	<i>One</i>	<i>Two</i>	<i>One</i>	<i>Two</i>
<i>Age Group</i>				
≤ 30 (m=18, f=10)	8.05	2.3	17.5	7.5
31-40 (m=62, f=9)	23.6	12.1	15.0	7.5
41-50 (m=60, f=13)	20.1	14.4	7.5	25.0
≥51 (m=34, f=8)	6.9	12.7	12.5	7.5
<i>Caste</i>				
SC (m=154, f=39)	49.4	39.1	52.5	45.0
Non SC (m=20, f=1)	9.2	2.3	-	2.5
<i>Occupation</i>				
Agriculture labourer (m=112, f=32)	36.2	28.2	37.5	42.5
Small farmer (m=31, f=0)	12.1	5.8	-	-
Employee (m=24, f=2)	7.5	6.3	5.0	-
House wife (m=0, f=6)	-	-	10.0	5.0
Others (m=7, f=0)	2.9	1.2	-	-
<i>Education</i>				
Illiterate (m=52, f=16)	13.8	16.1	15.0	25.0
Primary education (m=50, f=11)	18.4	10.3	12.5	15.0
Secondary education & more (m=72, f=13)	26.4	14.9	25.0	7.5
<i>Annual Income</i>				
≤ 8,000 (m=84, f=24)	28.2	20.1	37.5	22.5
8,001-10,000 (m=32, f=6)	10.9	7.5	2.5	12.5
10,001-20,000(m=39, f=5)	13.8	8.6	2.5	10.0
≥ 20,001 (m=19, f=5)	5.8	5.2	10.0	2.5
<i>Age at Marriage</i>				
≤ 20 (m=92, f=37)	24.7	28.2	54.0	47.5
21-25 (m=72, f=3)	29.3	12.1	7.5	-
≥ 26 (m=10, f=0)	4.6	1.2	-	-
Total	58.6	41.4	52.5	22.5

m=male, f=female; Figures in parenthesis indicate size of the sample in that category.

respondents desired to have only one son while the aged respondents opted for two sons. Among SC respondents, relatively higher number showed their desire to have two sons where as majority of non SC respondents desired for only one son. An increasing trend in the proportion of respondents with the desire of having one son is noticed in various occupational groups (agricultural labourers to employee) education level (illiterates to higher secondary education) and in income levels in increasing direction. The respondents who married at early ages desired to have two sons while respondents with late age at marriage usually opted for one child.

Another important question pertaining to sex bias in family composition, i.e. the choice of first child, is posed to respondents. The results of the responses to this question are presented in Table 3. Majority of men respondents are (70.1%) in favour of son as their first child, 28.2% are

responded neutrally and very small fraction (1.7%) desired to have daughter as their first child. Among women respondents 55% desired to have son as their first child. Among women, relatively higher proportion than among men (42.5% against 28.2%) replied neutrally (either son or daughter) with regard to choice of first child. The results indicate that the present respondents particularly men are male biased. The MCA reveals that a very few respondents in all categories of people opt for a daughter as their first child. There is a trend towards unbiased attitude regarding their first child. The proportion of respondents who desired to have either son or daughter as their first child is higher in younger age groups than elders, and among non SC respondents than SC respondents. Among agricultural labourers this proportion is low compared to remaining groups of occupation. Both education as well as income levels has effect on this attitude. Illiterate respon-

**Table 3: Multiple classification analysis of responses regarding choice of first child**

Choice of first child	Men			Women		
	Boy	Girl	Anybody	Boy	Girl	Anybody
<i>Age Group</i>						
≤ 30 (m=18, f=10)	5.8	0.6	4.0	17.5	2.5	10.0
31-40 (m=62, f=9)	24.7	0.6	10.3	12.5	-	20.0
41-50 (m=60, f=13)	25.9	0.6	8.1	17.5	-	15.0
≥ 51 (m=34, f=8)	13.8	-	5.8	7.5	-	12.5
<i>Caste</i>						
SC (m=154, f=39)	62.1	1.2	25.3	55.0	2.5	40.0
Non SC (m=20, f=1)	8.1	0.6	2.9	-	-	2.5
<i>Occupation</i>						
Agriculture labour (m=112, f=32)	47.1	1.7	15.5	52.5	2.5	25.0
Small farmer (m=31, f=0)	12.6	-	5.2	-	-	-
Employee (m=24, f=2)	7.5	-	6.3	-	-	5.0
House wife (m=0, f=6)	-	-	-	2.5	-	12.5
Others (m=7, f=0)	2.9	-	1.2	-	-	-
<i>Education</i>						
Illiterate (m=52, f=16)	24.7	-	5.2	22.5	-	17.5
Primary education (m=50, f=11)	19.0	0.6	9.2	25.0	-	2.5
Secondary education. & more (m=72, f=13)	25.1	1.1	13.8	7.5	2.5	22.5
<i>Annual Income</i>						
≤ 8,000 (m=84, f=24)	37.9	1.7	8.6	37.5	2.5	25.0
8,001-10,000 (m=32, f=6)	12.6	-	5.8	12.5	-	2.5
10,001-20,000(m=39, f=5)	13.8	-	8.6	2.5	-	10.0
≥ 20,001 (m=19, f=5)	5.8	-	5.2	2.5	-	10.0
<i>Age at Marriage</i>						
≤ 20 (m=92, f=37)	38.5	0.6	13.8	52.5	-	39.0
21-25 (m=72, f=3)	28.2	1.1	12.1	2.5	2.5	2.5
≥ 26 (m=10, f=0)	3.5	-	2.3	-	-	-
Total	70.1	1.7	28.2	55.0	2.5	42.5

m=male, f=female; Figures in parenthesis indicate size of the sample in that category.

dents possess lesser proportion of people who are neutral in this aspect and mostly opt for son. Similarly there is an increasing trend of neutral attitude from low to high levels of income. The association of this trend with age at marriage is not clear.

### DISCUSSION

Traditionally, apart from social prestige and the felt need to carry on the family name, the existence of a son in an Indian family is considered very important, to take care of parents in their old ages and to provide eternal comfort in heaven to the parents (a religious inhibition) (Kapadia, 1966). Moreover, due to the unlawful yet *de facto* prevalence of the dowry system in India, the marriageable daughters are held at a discount and sons at a premium. A good deal of qualitative and quantitative research on preference for children of particular sex and its impact on fertility in India and abroad has already been done (Subrata, 1984). The cross-cultural study by Freedman and Coombs (1974) and the world-wide survey of Williamson (1976) are among the better known studies on son preference. These studies indicated that son preference exist in all communities. Several reasons are attributed to the prevalence of strong son preference in some societies. Some are religious, some are economic and some are cultural.

The economic reasons are especially strong in rural societies but exist elsewhere. From the Khanna study, Wyon and Gordon (1971) have given several reasons for the desire of sons. Sons may add to the earning power of the family whereas few Indian daughters work for money, and if they did, they would earn less money and probably work for a shorter time. If they were married, their money would go to their husband's family. In addition, sons are more helpful during parents' old age in a society where there are few alternative sources of support. Another function of sons is to perpetuate the family name. And finally, the defence of the family and its interest was mentioned. The World Fertility Survey (1983) found that of the 40 developing countries studied, countries with the strongest son preference were Bangladesh, Jordan, Korea, Nepal, Pakistan and Syria. Similar situation is reported in African nations also (Mwagani et al., 2001).

Preference for sons and discrimination against women arises not so much out of

discriminatory legislation and practices as out of the psychological and cultural climate of societies. It arises out of social attitudes, out of society's prejudices, myths and beliefs. Prejudiced judgements on women are observed everywhere. The family is one of the most efficient agents for the transmission of sexism through the attitudes of the parents in relation to their children: girls may be required to do housework, while boys are excused. Boys and other male members may get better food (Chen et al., 1981; Das Gupta, 1987; Behrman, 1988; Basu, 1989; Chakrabarty, 2000; Case and Deaton, 2002), healthcare and medical expenditures (Rahaman et al., 1982; Koenig and D'Souza, 1986; Das Gupta, 1987; Levine, 1987; Basu, 1989; NCAER, 1992; Ganatra and Hirve, 1994; Madhiwalla et al., 2000; Case and Deaton, 2002) and immunization (Gaudin and Yazbeck, 2006) than girls and women. A recent study by Oomman and Ganatra (2002) reported that son preference manifests even to the female infanticide. With the increasing availability of sex-determination technology, sex-selective abortion began to become widespread. Bandyopadhyay (2003) opined that the survival chances of girls in parts of South and East Asia have been adverse. She observed skewed sex ratio at birth in rural West Bengal, and attributed female foeticide, infanticide, son preference and abortion to the situation. Miller (2001), with an anthropological approach, discussed the features of Asian culture that support son preference. Another analysis, which examined the effects of social and demographic characteristics of women on likelihood of abortion, reported that the effect of son preference is significant on likelihood of abortion in North India (Bose and Trent, 2006). In Nepal, the sex preference is an important barrier to the increase of contraceptive use and decline of fertility (Leone et al., 2003). Even in African countries like Tanzania, son preference was found to be prevalent and significantly influenced the contraceptive behaviour (Mwagani et al., 2001). Clark (2000) provided empirical evidence from India that son preference has two pronounced and predicted family level effects on the sex composition of children ever born. The study concludes the existence of son preference, which is undesired fertility behaviour among this population. Also the study warrants checking addressing the overt and covert gender bias during childbirth, immunization and other child health programmes.

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