

Son preference and prenatal sex selection: recent trends in the UK South Asian diaspora

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Son preference and sex selection in Asia

Son preference and discrimination against girls have been reported in many countries and notably in South and East Asia. The availability of various pre-natal sex-determination techniques such as ultrasound screening since the 1980s, has resulted in well documented prenatal sex-selection against females in South Korea, China, India (e.g. Das Gupta and Bhat, 1997; Hesketh and Xing, 2006) and more recently in Vietnam (Guilmoto *et al.*, 2009) and Central Asian Countries (Mesle *et al.*, 2007). Prenatal sex selection, thought to be until now mainly through female-selective abortionⁱ, has contributed to significantly increase the sex-ratio at birth (number of boys per 100 girls), especially at higher birth orders when only daughters were born (Zeng *et al.*, 1993; Park and Cho, 1995; Das Gupta and Bhat 1997). Prenatal sex-selection (PNSS) is seen as a mean to increase the chance of having a son, especially when controlling family size. PNSS in India appears to add, or to some extent substitute other forms of gender discrimination, including girl neglect, abandonment and infanticide (Das Gupta, M. Bhat, 1997). Female selective abortions reflect strong gender discrimination. The imbalance in the sex-ratio at birth (SRB), its ethical implications and its consequences for the next generation of adults has become a major concern in India and China (Holden, 2009). New results from the 2010 Indian census data suggests sex-selection against females has further spread.

Sex selection among Asian Diasporas in Western Countries

PNSS against females is not limited to Asian countries, but has recently also been evidenced in western countries with important Asian diasporas. A study by Dubuc and Coleman (2007), based on the exhaustive annual vital data registration in England and Wales from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on sex, birthplace of mother, and birth order within marriage from 1969 to 2005, shows a strong 4 points increase in the sex ratio at birth (SRB) to India-born women (over the period 1990-2005 compared with 1969-1989). The bias was especially pronounced at third and higher birth orders (113 boys per 100 girls, correlating with the availability of prenatal sex determination techniques (mainly ultrasound diagnostics) and mirroring findings in India. This provided the first quantitative (indirect) evidence of PNSS against females occurring in a western country (Dubuc and Coleman, 2007).

Accumulating demographic evidence for PNSS against females in Western countries with important Asian diasporas indicates more widespread PNSS and an overview of the quantitative evidences will be presented.

Updated results in the UK since 2005 are presented and discussed.

The factors of son preference

In traditional patriarchal societies such as India and China, a son is viewed as paramount to fulfil exclusively male family roles, including patrilinear inheritance practices and providing economic support and care (through his wife) to parents in old age – whereas a daughter is viewed as an economic burden for her parents (e.g. Agarwal, 1994; Bossen, 2005, Dubuc, 2009). Bearing a son is the primary role of the young wife and a way to raise her status in her husband's family household (e.g. Das Gupta *et al.*, 2003; Unnithan-Kumar, 2009). Women often resort to PNSS to escape abuse and multiple pregnancies, and to avoid having unwanted girls who are then at risk of being neglected (Goodkind, 1996; Dickens *et al.*, 2005). This strategy to improve their well-being and potentially that of their (wanted) children (Unnithan-Kumar, 2009) is, however, seen as a route to perpetuating female discrimination and the devaluation of girls (Das Gupta *et al.*, 2003). These factors underline the complexity of the ethical implications of PNSS as well and the political challenges.

Dubuc, S. and Coleman D. 2007, "An increase in the sex ratio of births to India-born mothers in England and Wales: evidence for sex-selective abortion.", *Population and Development Review*, 32:2,328-332.

DUBUC S. (2009) Demographic Manifestations of son-preference in England and Wales' Paper at the *Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America*, session: Gender, Power and Reproductive Behavior, 29th April - 2^d May 2009. (and other references therein)

ⁱ New medical technologies allow for new methods of PNSS (for instance, pre-implantation genetic diagnosis) and therefore might increase the phenomenon. However, hitherto most PNSS has been achieved through sex determination of the foetus/embryo, followed by sex selective abortion. Ultrasound technology is the most commonly used method and now allow relatively accurate determination of the sex of the foetus at 12 weeks of pregnancy (20 weeks in 1980).