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The Economic Potential of Son Preference among Rural Women in Nepal: Evidence from Modi Rural Municipality, Parbat, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the economic significance of son preference among rural women in Modi Rural Municipality, Parbat, Nepal. In rural communities, sons are often viewed as essential for improving family wealth and ensuring economic stability. The sons are seen as the primary contributors to household income, inheritance, and old age security. This study aims to analyze the economic significance of son preference among rural women in the study area. This quantitative study has used analytical and descriptive research designs to explore the economic significance of son preference among rural women. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire from a randomly selected sample of 139 married women in the age group of 21 to 40 years and analyzed through frequency distribution, mean and standard deviation. The study focused on the roles that sons play in supporting parents, contributing to family income, and maintaining the family legacy. The findings revealed that 72.6% of participants had one son, with a child sex ratio of 116. Statistical analysis showed a mean perception score of 3.8374 (SD = 0.2478), indicating higher agreement with the economic advantages of having sons. Furthermore, the

preference for sons was evident, especially when respondents were asked to choose between a son and a daughter as the only child. The results underscore a strong association between the perceived economic value of sons and the continuation of son preference. This paper suggests that economic support, inheritance and old age security

are the main economic drivers of son preference among rural women in Nepal. The deep economic importance of son preference among rural women in Nepal is causing sex imbalance in the society and obstructing the journey toward gender equality.

KEYWORDS: Economic potential, financial support, gender inequality, sex imbalance, son preference

INTRODUCTION

Rural women believe that having a son is important for safe living in old age. Son preference is a pernicious issue of gender equality in Nepal. A strong expression of gender inequality and discrimination against women, Son preference over daughters is still universal (Le & Nguyen, 2022). Gender imbalance is strongly associated with son preference (Wang & Liu, 2020). Son preference is common in Asia and North Africa (Hesketh et al., 2011). Women preferred son for parental support and family legacy (Pawaiya et al., 2019). In an agricultural economy, sons are preferred because boys have higher earning potential (Chi et al., 2013). Son preference refers to the psychological distinction between sons and daughters based on expectation of economic Possibilities and socio-cultural values. Preference for sons is a tendency to ignore daughter and prevent them from live birth.

Son preference plays a key role in increasing gender inequality in Nepali society. In the absence of external influences, the natural sex ratio at birth typically ranges from 102 to 106 males for every 100 females (WHO, 2006). However, when the sex ratio at birth goes beyond 106, it indicates a strong preference for sons. In 2011, Nepal's sex ratio at birth was 107 males per 100 females, and by 2021, this ratio had increased to 112 sons per 100 daughters (NSO, 2021). This means that for every 100 daughter live births, there are 112 daughter live births. The declining birth rate of daughters, compared to sons, shows the growing preference for sons in Nepal. If this trend continues, it could lead to a significant gender imbalance, with fewer women than men in the near future. If Nepal does not address this issue promptly, it may face serious consequences due to this growing gender disparity.

Son preference is defined as “the attitude that sons are more valuable than daughters” (Chattopadhyay & Ghosh, 2020, p. 227). A higher degree of priority for son has been prevalent in the societies since ancient times. The desire for a son is almost the same in all classes, families and societies. Even in modern society, this trend has not ended. There is no rich–poor difference in son preferences. Family structure does not matter in desire of son. But economic component influences son preference (Sultana & Gulfam, 2020). Son preference is a product of patriarchal attitudes in which sons are preferred over daughters (Ahmad et al., 2023). Due to the strong desire for a son, the emerging imbalance in birth regarding the sex of baby is the consequence of termination of female fetus. Son Preference ultimately affects the entire demographic process. A mother herself is a woman but son is her first preference. This is a serious issue in terms of gender equality. Son preference is the product of multiple causes. In this context, many conclusions are related to economic and socio-cultural causes (Gu, & Li, 1995; Hammad & Rajoria, 2013; Nnadi, 2013; Ahmad et al., 2023).

In Nepal, Women still want to produce male child (Brunson, 2010). Son preference is still alive in Nepal. Despite being a modern, heterogeneous, complex and progressive society and culture, conventional practice of son preference is still intact

(Dahal, 2020). Nepal has a long history of son preference, which is linked to mainly patrilineal and patriarchal society (Channon et al., 2021). Imbalanced sex ratio at birth shows that the female birth rate in Nepal is significantly declined. The reason for this may be the son preference in the family (NSO, 2024). In the context of Nepal, the use of sex-selection is widespread due to the strong son preference (Dulal, 2024).

Nepal has adopted policies to reduce the fertility rate, highlighting the disadvantages of having many children and the benefits of having fewer children. As a result, the fertility rate has significantly decreased, and couples have started opting for smaller families due to challenges in education, healthcare, and child-rearing. However, there has been limited progress in social and economic development. Traditional social, cultural, and religious values continue to uphold the importance of son preference. As a result, many parents still believe in son preference, even with fewer children, continuing the practice, which promotes gender inequality and son preference, leading to sex imbalances. To address this issue, rapid economic development and changes in traditional values and norms are necessary.

The main research question of this paper is: What is the economic significance of having a son? This question seeks to explore rural women's perceptions of the economic importance of sons. This paper aims to examine the economic significance of son preference among rural women in the Modi Rural Municipality of Parbat, Nepal. The study is delimited to Modi Rural Municipality, Parbat. It is centered on the issue of son preference as the primary problem under investigation. The research employs a quantitative approach and utilizes random sampling to gather data. 139 married women from the Modi Rural Municipality have been selected to represent the study's focus on the economic significance of son preference among rural women. The paper is well organized by covering all the necessary sections such as title, abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, conclusion, references, and appendices.

RESEARCH METHODS

In this quantitative study, analytical and descriptive research design is applied. The study was conducted in Modi Rural Municipality, Parbat. The study site was selected from the hill districts of Gandaki Province, specifically Parbat, which is notable for having a high sex ratio at birth of 119, which exceeds the national average (NSO, 2021). It ranks as the seventh highest in terms of sex ratio at birth across Nepal. This indicates a clear preference for sons among the majority of parents in the district. The aim of the research was to investigate the economic significance of son preference among rural women. Using descriptive and analytical research designs, the study collected quantitative data from a randomly selected sample. The sample size was determined using a formula by Daniel and Cross (2013). The study has involved 139 married women aged 21 to 40, randomly selected to assess their perceptions regarding the economic benefit of having a son. Structured questionnaires included demographic information and employed a 5-point Likert scale to assess perceptions of son preference. Structured interviews complemented the data collection. Data analysis included frequency distributions for numerical descriptions, in which mean and standard deviation were calculated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results and discussion of the study, beginning with an overview of the demographic characteristics of the respondents and economic importance of having a son to provide a context for the analysis.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

A total of 139 respondents were participated in the data collection process. Respondents were asked 12 questions related to the demographic information. All 12 questions in the questionnaire were completed with the participants' consent. Regarding the age distribution of respondents, 20 of them (14.4%) were age group of 21 to 25, 34 (24.5%) were 26 to 30, and 56 (40.3 %) were age group of 31 to 35. Likewise, 29 of the respondents (20.9%) were age group of 35 to 40. The third age group (31 to 35) covers the largest segment and the first age group (21 to 25) occupies the space of the smallest population. Regarding household heads, one participant (0.7%) heads their household, 89 of them (64%) were led by husbands, 37 (26.6%) by fathers-in-law, and the rest 12 (8.6%) by mothers-in-law, indicating that the majority of households are headed by husbands, reflecting a traditional family system. In terms of family structure, 49 participants (35.3%) lived in joint families, while 90 participants (64.7%) are in nuclear families, suggesting a trend towards smaller and more independent family units. Finally, the education levels show that one participant (0.7%) is illiterate, 18 of them (12.9%) have a basic education (Grade 1-8) where 101 others (72.7%) have completed secondary education (Grade 9-12). Likewise, 15 participants (10.8%) hold a Bachelor's degree, four of them (2.9%) have a Master's degree, and no individuals have a Doctorate degree, highlighting that educational attainment is predominantly at the secondary level. Additional details about the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table.1

Number and Percent Distribution of Respondents by socio-demographic characteristics

Measure characteristics	N	%	
Age group	21-25	20	14.4
	26-30	34	24.5
	31-35	56	40.3
	36-40	29	20.9
	Total	139	100.0
Household head	self	1	0.7
	husband	89	64.0
	father in law	37	26.6
	mother in law	12	8.6
Total	139	100.0	
Family structure	Joint	49	35.3
	nuclear	90	64.7
	Total	139	100.0

Education	Illiterate	1	0.7
	Basic (Grade 1-8)	18	12.9
	Secondary (Grade 9-12)	101	72.7
	Bachelor	15	10.8
	Master	4	2.9
	Total	139	100.0

Source: Field study, 2024

The participants consisted mainly of age group 31-35, with households primarily led by husbands in nuclear family structures. The majority of the selected population had education of secondary level, indicating potential areas for improvement in higher education access. The presence of joint families is modest compared to the more common nuclear arrangements.

The data presented in (Table 2) provides a demographic breakdown of a group of 139 women based on several factors, including occupation, number of children, sex of children, sex of the last child, and desire for another child. Among the respondents, 82 (59.0%) were engaged in agriculture, while 57 (41.0%) worked in non-agricultural sectors, indicating that the majority are involved in agriculture. Regarding family size, 39 respondents (28.1%) have one child, 74 (53.2%) had two children, 22 respondents (15.8%) had three children, three respondents (2.2%) had four children, and one respondent (0.7%) had five children, with most families having two children and a significant number having only one. In terms of sons, 82 respondents (72.6%) had one son, 30 (26.5%) had two sons, and one respondent (0.9%) had three sons, suggesting a preference for smaller families. Regarding daughters, 68 respondents (72.3%) had one daughter, 22 (23.4%) have two daughters, three respondents (3.2%) had three daughters, and one respondent (1.1%) had four daughters, reflecting a similar trend to that of sons. When looking at the sex of the last child, 91 respondents (65.5%) reported having a son, while 48 respondents (34.5%) reported having a daughter, showing a higher number of sons as the last child. Lastly, in terms of the desire for more children, 30 respondents (21.6%) expressed a desire for another child, while 109 of them (78.4%) did not want to have other children, indicating that a significant majority do not plan to expand their families. Further details about the participants are provided in Table 2.

Table.2

Number and Percent Distribution of Respondents by occupational and demographic characteristics

Characteristics		N	%
Occupation	Agriculture	82	59.0
	Non Agriculture	57	41.0
	Total	139	100.0
Children	1	39	28.1
	2	74	53.2

	3	22	15.8
	4	3	2.2
	5	1	0.7
	Total	139	100.0
Sons	1	82	72.6
	2	30	26.5
	3	1	0.9
	Total	113	100.0
Daughters	1	68	72.3
	2	22	23.4
	3	3	3.2
	Total	94	100.0
Last child sex	Son	91	65.5
	Daughter	48	34.5
	Total	139	100.0
Desire Another child	Yes	30	21.6
	No	109	78.4
	Total	139	100.0

Source: Field study, 2024

Overall, the data reflects that respondents primarily engaged in agriculture, with a tendency towards smaller families, particularly with one or two children. The preference for sons is evident through both the number of boys and the sex of the last child. Additionally, most respondents seem not to have more children, indicating a potential trend towards family size limitation.

Economic Importance of Son

The data presented in (Table 3) reflect the respondents' perceptions of the importance of having a son for economic perspective. The statement "Birth of a son is important to take care of parents during their old age" has a high mean score of 3.9856, indicating strong agreement. This suggests that most respondents believe having a son is essential for caring for parents in their old age. The low standard deviation of 0.11952 shows a high level of consensus among respondents, meaning there is little variation in their views on this matter. For the statement "It is important to have a son to contribute to family income," the mean score of 3.9209 shows strong agreement, reflecting the belief that sons play a crucial role in contributing to the family's financial well-being. The low standard deviation 0.29647 indicates that most participants share this view with little disagreement.

On the other hand, regarding the statement "It is important to have a son to continue the inheritance of family business and property," the mean score of 3.3957 is closer to neutral, suggesting mixed opinions among the respondents. Some agree while others did not consider this a significant reason to prefer a son. The relatively high

standard deviation of 0.85651 indicates a wider range of opinions on this issue. The statement "It is important to have a son for financial support of the family" also received strong agreement, with a mean score of 3.9424, suggesting that respondents generally view sons as an important source of financial support. Similarly, for the statement "It is important to have a son for physical support of the family," the mean score of 3.9424 indicates general agreement that sons are necessary for physical support, with a low standard deviation of 0.28917 reflecting a high level of consensus on this point.

Table.3

Means and Standard Deviation of score on Economic measures

Statement			Level
	Mean	Standard Deviation	
Birth of a son is important to take care of parents during their old age	3.9856	0.11952	Agree
It is important to have a son to continue inherit family business and property	3.3957	0.85651	Neutral
It is important to have a son to contribute family income	3.9209	0.29647	Agree
It is important to have a son for financial support of family	3.9424	0.26292	Agree
It is important to have a son for physical support of family	3.9424	0.28917	Agree
Total	3.8374	0.24738	Agree

Source: Field study, 2024

The overall mean score of all statements is 3.8374, with a standard deviation of 0.24738, indicating that respondents generally agree with the importance of having a son for economic perspective. The low overall standard deviation shows a strong consensus among participants, with little variation in their opinions.

Discussion

The findings from this study underscore the significant economic role that son preference plays in rural communities, particularly in Modi Rural Municipality, Parbat, Nepal. Rural women in this area view sons as essential to their financial security and the continuation of family legacies, supporting existing literature that highlights the economic importance of sons in rural and agricultural economies (Chi et al., 2013; Pawaiya et al., 2019). The data reveal that more than two third of participants had at least one son, and the overall male-to-female child sex ratio was found much higher than acceptance level (WHO, 2011), a clear indication of the strong economic preference for sons in the community. This study further reinforces the perception that sons are viewed as the primary financial contributors to family well-being in rural Nepal. Higher the

mean perception score on a 5-point Likert scale indicates top level agreement among respondents regarding the economic advantages of having a son, especially in terms of old-age security, income generation, and physical support. A particularly high mean score of the statement, "the birth of a son is important to take care of parents during their old age," highlights the deeply ingrained economic belief that sons are essential for ensuring the well-being of parents in their later years. This finding aligns with other studies that emphasize the role of sons as key providers, especially in the absence of formal social security systems in rural areas (Wang & Liu, 2020). In addition, the respondents highly agreed that sons are vital for contributing to family income and providing both financial and physical support. These findings are consistent with prior research on the economic roles of sons in agricultural settings, where they are expected to contribute to farming activities and household finances (Chi et al., 2013). The respondents' strong emphasis on sons for economic support also reflects the patriarchal structure of rural Nepali families, where sons are considered crucial to the family's financial stability and survival.

Notably, the study has found a more neutral response regarding the role of sons in inheriting family businesses and property, with a poor mean score. In this context, participants were of the opinion that there is no difference between sons and daughters regarding to the consumption of the ancestral property. This suggests that while the traditional belief in sons as heirs may still hold some importance, it is not as universally emphasized as the economic roles related to financial support and old-age care. This shift could reflect changing family dynamics or an increasing awareness of gender equality, as suggested by other studies (Sultana & Gulfam, 2020). It indicates that the importance of sons as inheritors of family property may be diminishing in some contexts, though the broader economic roles of sons remain significant. In addition to the strong son preference, the study revealed that a majority of participants did not wish to have more children, reflecting a broader trend toward smaller family sizes. This demographic shift, driven by decreasing fertility rates in Nepal (Dahal, 2020), indicates to changing reproductive choices. However, despite the preference for smaller families, the desire for male children persists. This suggests that son preference is not just a result of family size decisions and continuation of generation, but is deeply rooted in economic factors that continue to influence the desire for male children, in the context of demographic changes.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines the economic importance of son preference among rural women in Modi Rural Municipality, Parbat, Nepal. The findings show that, the strong economic importance behind son preference among rural women in Nepal presents a significant challenge to achieving gender equality. The findings highlight that the desire for sons is closely linked to perceptions of financial improvement, inheritance, and old age security, which are deeply rooted in the economic structure of rural Nepal. To promote gender equality, it is essential to address economic hardships in order to reduce gender inequalities and discriminatory practices associated with son preference.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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