

The Son Preference Paradox: A Qualitative Study on its Influence on Family Planning Decisions in Khairahani Municipality

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Abstract

Son preference has remained a persistent socio-cultural phenomenon influencing reproductive behavior across South Asia, including Nepal. This qualitative study examined how son preference shaped family planning decisions among households in Khairahani Municipality. The study aimed to explore underlying beliefs, lived experiences, and decision-making dynamics related to fertility intentions. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with married women and key community informants, selected purposively to capture diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and meanings within participants' narratives. Findings revealed that son preference significantly influenced contraceptive use, family size decisions, and birth spacing practices, often overriding economic or health-related considerations. Women reported familial pressure, gendered expectations, and perceived social security as key drivers sustaining this preference. The study concluded that son preference functioned as a paradox within modern family planning discourse, where awareness of contraceptive methods coexisted with selective fertility behavior. Addressing this issue requires culturally sensitive interventions that challenge entrenched gender norms while strengthening reproductive autonomy.

Key Words *Son preference; Family planning decisions; Gender norms; Reproductive behavior; Qualitative study*

Introduction

Son preference refers to the systematic favoring of male offspring over female children and is deeply rooted in patriarchal social structures, inheritance systems, and cultural ideologies prevalent in many parts of South Asia (Das Gupta et al., 2003). Despite substantial progress in education, health services, and fertility decline, son preference continues to shape reproductive behavior in subtle yet powerful ways. In Nepal, where family planning programs have achieved considerable outreach, the persistence of gender-biased fertility intentions presents a paradox that warrants closer examination.

Family planning initiatives in Nepal have historically focused on reducing fertility rates, increasing contraceptive prevalence, and improving maternal and child health outcomes (Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP), 2017). While these efforts have contributed to a steady decline in total fertility rate, they have not uniformly transformed underlying gender norms that influence reproductive decision-making. Studies have shown that families may adopt contraception only after achieving the desired number of sons, thereby prolonging childbearing or selectively discontinuing contraceptive use (Bongaarts, 2013; Jayachandran, 2015).

Son preference is sustained by multiple interrelated factors, including patrilineal inheritance, religious rituals requiring male participation, expectations of old-age support, and social perceptions that sons enhance family status (Cain, 1984; Arnold, 1997). Daughters, conversely, are often perceived as economic liabilities due to dowry practices and their eventual transfer to marital households. These perceptions influence not only fertility intentions but also women's autonomy in reproductive choices.

Nepal's socio-cultural landscape is highly diverse, with variations across caste, ethnicity, and geographic location. However, evidence suggests that son preference cuts across these divisions, albeit with differing intensity (Thapa, 1989; Leone et al., 2003). In municipalities such as Khairahani, where urbanization and modernization coexist with traditional value systems, family planning decisions are negotiated within complex social contexts. Women may possess knowledge of contraceptive methods yet face pressure from husbands, in-laws, or the broader community to continue childbearing until a son is born.

Previous quantitative studies have documented skewed sex ratios at birth and differential stopping behavior in Nepal and neighboring countries (Guilmoto, 2009; Chao et al., 2019). While such studies provide valuable macro-level insights, they often fail to capture the nuanced meanings, emotions, and negotiations that underlie individual reproductive decisions. Qualitative inquiry is therefore essential to understand how son preference is experienced, rationalized, and enacted at the household level.

Furthermore, family planning discourse frequently frames reproductive decision-making as an individual or couple-based choice, overlooking the collective and gendered nature of such decisions in patriarchal societies (Kabeer, 1999). Women's reproductive lives are often shaped by relational power dynamics, where compliance with gender expectations becomes a strategy for social acceptance and security. Understanding these dynamics is critical for designing interventions that move beyond service provision to address normative change.

Khairahani Municipality presents a relevant setting for exploring these issues due to its demographic diversity, accessibility of family planning services, and ongoing

socio-economic transition. Examining son preference within this context allows for an in-depth understanding of how traditional gender norms persist or adapt in the face of modernization. This study therefore sought to explore the influence of son preference on family planning decisions through the voices and lived experiences of women and community stakeholders.

By focusing on qualitative narratives, this research aimed to contribute to existing literature by illuminating the paradoxical coexistence of family planning awareness and gender-biased fertility behavior. The findings were intended to inform policy makers, health practitioners, and gender advocates seeking to promote equitable reproductive decision-making in Nepal and similar contexts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how son preference influenced family planning decisions among households in Khairahani Municipality. Specifically, the study aimed to examine the socio-cultural meanings attached to male offspring, the decision-making processes surrounding contraceptive use, and the gendered power relations shaping reproductive choices. By adopting a qualitative approach, the study sought to generate context-specific insights that could inform gender-sensitive family planning policies and contribute to broader theoretical discussions on reproductive behavior in patriarchal societies.

Research Questions

Family planning decisions are not made in isolation but are embedded within cultural norms, family expectations, and gendered power relations. Understanding these contextual factors is essential for addressing persistent fertility behaviors linked to son preference.

- i. How do married women and families in Khairahani Municipality perceive the value of sons in relation to family planning decisions?
- ii. In what ways does son preference influence contraceptive use and fertility intentions?
- iii. How do household and community-level dynamics shape women's reproductive autonomy?

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly followed throughout the research process to safeguard participants' rights and well-being. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after clearly explaining the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms and removing identifiable information

from transcripts and reports. Interviews were conducted in private settings to minimize discomfort or coercion. Data were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. The study adhered to national ethical guidelines for social research and received approval from the relevant institutional review authority prior to data collection.

Review of Related Literature

Son preference has been widely examined as a demographic, cultural, and gendered phenomenon, particularly in South Asia where patriarchal family systems remain influential. Scholars have argued that son preference is not merely an individual attitude but a structural outcome of social institutions that privilege males in inheritance, lineage continuation, and social security (Cain, 1984; Das Gupta et al., 2003). This section reviews theoretical perspectives, empirical evidence, and contextual studies relevant to understanding the relationship between son preference and family planning decisions.

Theoretical Perspectives on Son Preference

Patriarchy theory provides a foundational lens for understanding son preference, emphasizing how male dominance is institutionalized through kinship, property rights, and social norms (Walby, 1990). In patrilineal societies, sons are viewed as carriers of family lineage and economic assets, while daughters are often perceived as transient members who will eventually join their husband's household. This structural arrangement reinforces differential valuation of children by gender (Kabeer, 1999).

Economic theories of fertility further explain son preference through the lens of old-age security. Cain (1984) argued that in contexts lacking formal social protection systems, parents rely on sons for financial and physical support in later life. This expectation shapes fertility behavior, encouraging continued childbearing until the desired number of sons is achieved. Feminist scholars have critiqued purely economic explanations, highlighting how women's reproductive labor becomes a site where gender inequality is reproduced (Sen, 1999).

Son Preference and Fertility Behavior

Empirical studies across South Asia consistently demonstrate that son preference influences fertility intentions, contraceptive adoption, and stopping behavior. Bongaarts (2013) observed that couples often delay or discontinue contraception until they achieve their preferred sex composition of children. This pattern has been documented in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, where parity progression is closely linked to the birth of sons (Arnold, 1997; Jayachandran, 2015).

Research using Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data has shown that women with only daughters are significantly less likely to use modern contraceptives compared to those with at least one son (Leone et al., 2003). This selective fertility

behavior contributes to larger family sizes and undermines the effectiveness of family planning programs. Guilmoto (2009) further noted that declining fertility combined with persistent son preference may intensify gender bias, sometimes resulting in sex-selective practices.

Son Preference in the Nepali Context

Nepal presents a complex context where legal reforms promoting gender equality coexist with deeply entrenched cultural norms. Studies have indicated that despite improvements in female education and labor participation, son preference remains prevalent, particularly in rural and semi-urban settings (Thapa, 1989; Bennett, 2005). Cultural expectations related to funeral rites, inheritance, and family honor continue to reinforce the perceived necessity of having sons.

MoHP (2017) reported high awareness of family planning methods among Nepali women; however, knowledge does not always translate into consistent use. Qualitative studies have shown that reproductive decisions are often influenced by husbands and senior family members, limiting women's autonomy (Morgan & Niraula, 1995). Women may strategically delay contraception to avoid social stigma or familial conflict associated with not bearing a son.

Gender Norms and Women's Reproductive Autonomy

Women's reproductive autonomy is shaped by power relations within households and communities. Kaber (1999) conceptualized autonomy as the ability to define one's goals and act upon them, a capacity often constrained by gendered expectations. In patriarchal societies, women's worth may be closely tied to their reproductive success, particularly their ability to produce male heirs.

Studies in Nepal and neighboring countries have highlighted how women internalize son preference as a survival strategy, rather than overtly resisting it (Jeffery & Jeffery, 1996). Compliance with family expectations may provide women with social security, marital stability, and improved status within the household. This dynamic complicates simplistic narratives that portray women solely as passive victims of patriarchy.

While quantitative research has effectively documented patterns of son preference and its demographic consequences, there is limited qualitative exploration of how these preferences are negotiated in everyday life, particularly at the municipal level in Nepal. Many studies focus on national or regional trends, overlooking localized socio-cultural dynamics. Additionally, existing literature often treats family planning decisions as rational choices, insufficiently accounting for emotional, relational, and normative influences.

There is also a need for context-specific qualitative studies that foreground women's voices and lived experiences. Understanding how women perceive, justify, or contest

son preference can provide deeper insights into the persistence of gender-biased fertility behavior. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining son preference within Khairahani Municipality, offering a nuanced understanding of how cultural norms intersect with family planning practices.

Methods and Materials

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how son preference influenced family planning decisions within a specific socio-cultural context. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the research sought to understand meanings, perceptions, and lived experiences rather than to measure prevalence or establish causal relationships. By prioritizing participants' narratives, the study aimed to capture the complexity of reproductive decision-making shaped by gender norms and family expectations.

The research was conducted in Khairahani Municipality, located in Chitwan District, Nepal. The municipality represents a semi-urban setting characterized by ethnic diversity, increasing access to health services, and ongoing socio-economic transformation. Despite improvements in education and health infrastructure, traditional family structures and gender norms remain influential, making the area suitable for examining the persistence of son preference.

The study population consisted of married women of reproductive age (15–49 years) residing in Khairahani Municipality. In addition, key informants such as female community health volunteers (FCHVs) and local health workers were included to provide contextual insights. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide rich and relevant information related to family planning and gender preferences. Efforts were made to include women from different caste, educational, and economic backgrounds to capture diverse perspectives.

A total of 24 in-depth interviews were conducted, including 20 married women and 4 key informants. Sample size was determined by data saturation, defined as the point at which no new themes emerged from subsequent interviews.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. An interview guide was developed based on the research questions and existing literature. The guide included open-ended questions on fertility intentions, contraceptive use, family expectations, and perceptions of sons and daughters. Flexibility was maintained to allow participants to elaborate on issues they considered important.

Interviews were conducted in Nepali in locations chosen by participants to ensure privacy and comfort. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis. Thematic analysis was used following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes. Coding was conducted manually to maintain close engagement with the data. To enhance credibility, themes were reviewed multiple times to ensure consistency and coherence across narratives.

Several strategies were employed to ensure trustworthiness. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants and triangulation using key informant interviews. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail of methodological decisions. Transferability was supported through thick description of the study context, enabling readers to assess relevance to similar settings.

Results / Findings

This section presents the findings derived from in-depth interviews with married women and key informants in Khairahani Municipality. The results are organized thematically, based on recurring patterns observed across participants' accounts. Narrations are presented verbatim in meaning but paraphrased linguistically to preserve confidentiality and clarity. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Participants consistently described sons as central to long-term security, lineage continuation, and social stability. These perceptions strongly influenced fertility intentions. One participant stated that although daughters were emotionally valued, sons were considered essential for the future, noting that "when parents grow old, it is the son who remains in the house and takes responsibility." Another woman explained that discussions about stopping childbirth were postponed because "without a son, the family feels incomplete, no matter how many daughters are born." A third participant shared that her husband often reminded her that "a son is needed to carry the family name," particularly during conversations about contraception. A key informant, a female community health volunteer, observed that many couples expressed fear about old age, stating that "people believe daughters cannot provide long-term support because they belong to another household after marriage." These accounts collectively demonstrated that sons were widely perceived as guarantors of social and economic continuity, shaping reproductive intentions across households.

Although awareness of modern contraceptive methods was widespread, participants reported that their use was often conditional upon the birth of a son. One participant mentioned that she had received counseling on family planning services but delayed their use, explaining that "the family agreed to contraception only after a boy is born." Another woman noted that she had previously used temporary methods but discontinued them after relatives insisted that "it is not the right time because there is still no son." A third participant explained that despite personal health concerns,

she avoided contraceptives because “using family planning before having a son is seen as careless.” One participant further shared that health workers encouraged her to space births, but she felt unable to follow the advice, stating that “if I use family planning now, my in-laws will say I am trying to avoid having a son.” A key informant confirmed this pattern, stating that “many women come to health facilities asking about family planning, but later decide not to use it due to family pressure related to son preference.” These narrations illustrated that contraceptive behavior was closely tied to gender expectations rather than reproductive health considerations alone.

Decision-making regarding fertility and contraception was largely collective, with husbands and elder family members exercising substantial influence. One woman stated that although she wished to limit further pregnancies, “the final decision always depends on my husband and his parents.” Another participant explained that discussions about contraception often led to conflict, noting that “if my mother-in-law disagrees, my husband also refuses.” A third woman shared that she rarely attended health facilities alone, saying that “family planning decisions are discussed at home, not by me alone.” One participant described that even expressing a desire to stop childbearing was discouraged, stating that “talking about family planning before a son is born creates tension in the family.” Another woman noted that she felt obligated to follow elders’ wishes, explaining that “going against their decision would be seen as disrespectful and selfish.” A key informant emphasized that women’s autonomy was limited, explaining that “even when women are informed, approval from elders is expected before any contraceptive method is adopted.” These accounts highlighted the relational nature of reproductive decision-making within households.

Participants described experiencing social scrutiny and emotional distress when they had not given birth to a son. One participant shared that neighbors frequently questioned her, stating that “people keep asking whether I will try again for a son.” Another woman noted that comments from relatives made her feel responsible, explaining that “even though I know it is not my fault, I still feel blamed.” A third participant described feeling pity from others, saying that “some people speak kindly, but their words make it clear they think something is missing.” A key informant reported observing emotional stress among such women, stating that “women without sons often express anxiety and low confidence during health consultations.” These narrations reflected the emotional and social consequences of persistent son preference within the community.

Across all themes, the following patterns were evident:

- i. Sons were widely perceived as symbols of security, lineage, and social approval.
- ii. Family planning practices were often postponed or selectively used until the birth of a son.

- iii. Women's reproductive decisions were shaped by household hierarchies and collective expectations.
- iv. Social pressure reinforced gender-biased fertility behavior despite growing awareness of reproductive health services.

The findings directly addressed the research questions by illustrating how son preference was embedded in family planning decisions at both household and community levels.

Discussion

This study explored how son preference influenced family planning decisions in Khairahani Municipality by examining women's lived experiences and household dynamics. The findings revealed that son preference continued to shape reproductive behavior despite widespread awareness of modern family planning methods. This paradox aligns with existing scholarship suggesting that fertility behavior is not solely driven by knowledge or access to services but is deeply embedded in socio-cultural norms and power relations (Bongaarts, 2013; Kabeer, 1999).

The perception of sons as providers of old-age security emerged as a central theme, reinforcing Cain's (1984) theory that fertility decisions in low-income or weak social protection contexts are closely tied to expectations of future support. Participants' narratives indicated that sons were viewed as reliable caregivers and inheritors of family lineage, while daughters were expected to leave the parental household after marriage. This belief system contributed to continued childbearing and delayed contraceptive adoption, particularly among women with only daughters. Similar patterns have been documented in Nepal and other South Asian countries, where parity progression is strongly associated with the sex composition of existing children (Leone et al., 2003; Guilmoto, 2009).

The study also highlighted conditional use of family planning methods, where contraception was considered acceptable only after the birth of a son. This finding supports earlier research showing that contraceptive behavior is often strategically managed to achieve desired gender outcomes rather than to limit or space births per se (Arnold, 1997; Jayachandran, 2015). Such practices undermine the effectiveness of family planning programs that focus primarily on service delivery without addressing underlying gender norms.

Household power dynamics played a significant role in shaping reproductive decisions. Husbands and senior family members, particularly mothers-in-law, exerted considerable influence over women's fertility choices. This finding resonates with Morgan and Niraula's (1995) observation that reproductive decision-making in Nepal is often collective rather than individual. Women's limited autonomy was not necessarily a result of ignorance but rather a consequence of relational constraints

within patriarchal family structures. As Kabeer (1999) argued, agency must be understood in relation to social context, where compliance may function as a strategy for security rather than submission.

Social pressure and stigmatization further reinforced son preference. Women without sons reported experiencing blame and emotional distress, echoing findings from Jeffery and Jeffery (1996), who noted that women often internalize gender norms to maintain social acceptance. This internalization complicates intervention strategies, as resistance to son preference may carry social costs for women themselves.

Overall, the findings suggest that son preference persists not because of lack of awareness but due to its deep integration into cultural expectations, economic reasoning, and gendered power relations. Addressing this issue therefore requires interventions that extend beyond information dissemination to challenge normative beliefs and redistribute decision-making power within households.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the findings and existing literature, a conceptual framework was developed to illustrate the relationship between son preference and family planning decisions. The framework positions son preference as a central cultural norm influenced by patriarchal values, inheritance systems, and expectations of old-age security. These factors shape household power dynamics, particularly the authority of husbands and senior family members, which in turn constrain women's reproductive autonomy.

Limited autonomy affects contraceptive use, fertility intentions, and stopping behavior, resulting in conditional or delayed adoption of family planning methods. Social pressure and fear of stigmatization act as reinforcing mechanisms that sustain son preference across generations. This framework informs the research questions by highlighting the pathways through which cultural norms translate into reproductive behavior and underscores the importance of qualitative methods in capturing these relationships. Future studies may empirically test and refine this framework in similar socio-cultural settings.

Conclusions

This study demonstrated that son preference remained a significant influence on family planning decisions in Khairahani Municipality, despite increased awareness and availability of contraceptive services. The findings revealed that reproductive behavior was shaped by deeply rooted cultural norms, expectations of old-age security, and gendered power relations within households. Women's contraceptive use was often conditional upon achieving the desired number of sons, reflecting a paradox where modern family planning knowledge coexisted with traditional fertility preferences. By foregrounding women's narratives, the study contributed nuanced insights into

the social processes sustaining gender-biased reproductive behavior. These findings underscore the need for family planning policies that move beyond service provision to address structural gender inequalities and normative change. While context-specific, the study offers valuable implications for similar settings where son preference continues to undermine reproductive autonomy and gender equity.

Recommendations

Son preference is a multidimensional issue requiring coordinated social, policy, and community-level responses. Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Integrate gender-transformative education into family planning programs to challenge normative beliefs about sons and daughters.
- ii. Promote male engagement initiatives to address husbands' roles in reproductive decision-making.
- iii. Strengthen community dialogue involving elders and mothers-in-law to reduce intergenerational transmission of son preference.
- iv. Link family planning services with social protection schemes to reduce reliance on sons for old-age security.
- v. Encourage further qualitative and mixed-methods research at local levels to inform context-specific interventions.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by its qualitative design and relatively small sample size, which may restrict generalizability beyond Khairahani Municipality. Social desirability bias may have influenced participants' responses on sensitive topics. Additionally, the study primarily reflected women's perspectives, with limited direct input from male household members. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating longitudinal designs and broader participant groups.

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