

Determinants and Prevention of Gender Preference among Pregnant Women in India: An Updated Review

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Abstract:

Gender preference is a very sensitive issue for every couple which has lot of social binding. The couples who have gender preference are many times pressurized to have a particular preference either by family members or the society norms. Sex ratio has been declining in India through decades since 1901. Son preference has been one of the most evident manifestations of patriarchal society. There are many women “missing” due to an unfavourable sex ratio in India, which has strong patriarchal norms and a preference for sons. This review was done with rationale of finding out the various determinants of gender preference and the reasons behind male preference still prevalent in our country. This review shall help to find out a well planned strategy and timely interventions to curb this ever falling sex ratio and hence promote gender equality before birth of the child.

Key words: Gender Preference, Pregnant Women, Determinants, Antenatal Women

Article History : ● Date of submission : 28/12/2015 ● Date of peer review: 30/01/2016 ● Date of acceptance: 05/02/2016

Introduction:

India is one of the few countries in the world which has not shown an improvement in the sex ratio over the year. Sex ratio has been declining in India through decades since 1901.^[1] Due to traditional preference for male child in India, it is not very surprising right from the first census in 1871; India has consistently shown an abnormal sex-ratio (940 women for every 1000 men).^[2] Son preference has been one of the most evident manifestations of patriarchal Society. It has worked against the female sex particularly in their infancy and early childhood. Today, with technological advancement in medical diagnosis this discrimination begins even before birth. Various medical technologies have been put into practice to identify the sex of the child before the birth and selective abortion, if

found female. A steep decline in sex-ratio in recent years has been due to recent technological advancements and easy availability of ultrasound machines.^[3,4]

There are many women “missing” due to an unfavourable sex ratio in India, which has strong patriarchal norms and a preference for sons.^[5] The preference for sons has been associated with preferential abortion of female fetuses and even to female infanticide. This differential treatment given to the girls and the sex selective illegal abortions has resulted in estimated 30 to 70 million “missing” women in India.^[6] Desire for male child manifests so blatantly that parents have no qualms about repeated, closely spaced pregnancies, premature deaths and even terminating child before it is born. Birth of female child is perceived as a curse with economic and social liability. The birth of female child is perceived as a curse with economic and social liability.^[7] In a patriarchal society, sons are responsible for “preservation” of the family name and hence preferred gender.^[8] The evil practice of dowry is widely prevalent in India. As a result, daughters are considered to be an economic liability.^[9] Therefore this review was done with rationale of finding out the various determinants of gender preference and the reasons behind male preference still prevalent in our country (to study preventive strategies and interventions

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which can help in improving the ever falling sex ratio). Gender preference happens in the Indian families not only because of social causes but it happens because of personal prejudices as well. This review was performed to study determinants and factors associated with gender. This review shall help to find out a well-planned strategy and timely interventions to curb this ever falling sex ratio and hence promote gender equality before birth of the child.

Methods of Literature search

The materials for this review were obtained from an extensive search using Medical Subject Headings of electronic databases which included PubMed, PubMed

Central, Google Scholar, Medknow, Science Direct and Textbooks were searched until July 2015. Literature on the gender preference and factors associated with gender preference was retrieved. The key words used for the literature search included “gender preference”, “antenatal women” and “pregnant women”. The search was limited to reviews; meta analyses and assorted clinical reports were retrieved and evaluated from 1990 to 2015 in English. A total of 45 articles were identified. After examining the titles and abstracts, this number was finally reduced to 25 articles.

A summary of gender preference and factors associated with it by various authors’ is depicted in Table 1.

Authors	Article title and type	Key messages
Nithin K et al., [10]	Gender preferences among antenatal women: a cross-sectional study from coastal South India Original article	A relatively larger proportion of housewives preferred a female child while working women preferred a male child. The overall son preference index was observed to be 1.3. No consistent relationship could be established between the socio-demographic factors and the preference for gender.
Bhattacharjya H et al., [11]	Gender preference and factors affecting gender preference of mothers attending Antenatal Clinic of Agartala Government Medical College Original article	Son preference was significantly higher among the rural, illiterate and nullipara women or women having no male child, housewives, primigravida and women from joint families.
Wadgave HV et al., [12]	Attitude of Pregnant Women towards the Gender Preference. Original article	Gravida, sex of the previous child significantly determine gender preference. Propagation of family name, support in old age and demand of son by family members were common reasons behind the male child preference.
Yasmin S et al., [5]	Gender preference and awareness regarding sex determination among antenatal mothers attending a medical college of eastern India Original article	Gender preference was significantly high in subjects with: lower socioeconomic status; lower level of education of mother and husband; multi gravida; presence of living children; and husband having preference of sex of baby.

Determinants and prevalence of gender preference in Indian context -

In order to develop effective strategies for preventing gender preference or son preference and its untoward consequences in future on gender equality and sex ratio, the risk factors and determinants of gender preference need to be identified and assessed. Most of the factors that compel people to favour a male offspring are social and religious in origin. With the average family size

decreasing rapidly and preference for male child remaining the same, the female population is showing a downward trend.^[7]

In a cross sectional study conducted by Nithin K et al.^[10] among women attending the antenatal care centres at tertiary care hospitals in coastal South India, the majority of the antenatal women (60.6%, n=80) did not have any gender preference. Among those who had a gender preference (n=52), male and female preference was

reported by 55.7% (n=29) and 44.3% (n=23) of the participants respectively. Similar findings were found by Bhattacharjya H et al.^[11] in their study among mothers attending antenatal clinic of Agartala. It was seen that 40.8% women preferred son, 29.7% preferred daughter and 29.5% women had no particular preference. In the given situation of having only one child, 42.3% women preferred to have a son, 26.2% preferred a daughter while 31.5% had no particular preference. Whereas, in the given situation of having more than one children, 46.2% women preferred to have equal number of sons and daughters, 17.7% preferred more number of sons, 12.8% preferred more number of daughters whereas 23.3% women had no particular preference.^[11] Hence, parity, number of previous children and gender of previous children becomes a major determinant for the gender preference.

A community based study in slums of Maharashtra^[12] revealed that 50.75% primigravida didn't show any preference towards specific gender but 58 (43.28%) preferred male child and only 8 (5.97%) preferred female child. Bhattacharjya H et al.^[11] and Vadera et al.^[13] revealed that previous male childbirth was responsible for low son preference during the next pregnancy. Dey I et al.^[14] also found the son preference to be 39.2% in the rural area of West Bengal. Not many studies have been conducted on gender preference in developing country like India. There are studies which shall reveal the various factors associated with a particular gender preference.

The determinants which were found to be the key factors responsible in gender preference are discussed as below:-

Education of the Mothers -

Many studies have shown that gender preference is associated with literacy of mothers. In a study from West Bengal by Yasmin S et al.^[5] gender preference was seen in 55.6% subjects and was significantly high in participants with low socio-economic status and lower level of education. Gender preference was significantly high in subjects with: lower socioeconomic status (p=0.011); lower level of education of mother (p=0.047) and husband (p=0.0001); multigravida (p=0.002); presence of living children (p=0.0001); and husband having preference of sex of baby (p=0.0001). Puri et al.^[15] also concluded that 56 % females had preference to male child which was significantly associated with literacy status of women. Son preference was higher among illiterate women as evident in the study from Ahmedabad. The variations in gender preference among rural and

urban areas, as well as, on the basis of socio-economic status have also been reported.^[16] Srivastav S et al.^[17] found that majority, 88% of married women from rural population of district Bareilly Uttar Pradesh were of view that even if family is complete with female child then also they would prefer to go for male child. Preference for male child was significantly associated with the literacy status of females. Among mothers attending antenatal clinic in Agartala^[11] it was found that rural residence, having no previous child or having daughter, being illiterate or primary educated were the significant determinants for a women to prefer a male baby. In Solapur city of Maharashtra,^[12] the percentage of preference of male child was more in primary educated women (50%) and women educated up to secondary school or graduates (60%) as compared to illiterate women (37.5%) but the relation was not statistically significant. Thus, male preference was more in the educated women as compared to illiterate women but Patrikar et al.^[18] noted the son preference was more in illiterate women. Percentage of male preference was similar in all religion i.e. Boudha and Christian (51.52%), Hindu (45.78%) and Muslim (50%) (p>0.05). Thus they concluded that religion was not associated with gender preference.^[12] More studies need to be conducted to show religion and geographical area of urban rural divide are significant determinants of gender preference.

Age and occupation of the mother -

Many studies have shown that age and occupation are important determinants of gender preference. A study from Western part of India has shown a higher preference for sons in rural (94.3%) than urban areas (80.3%).^[16] Bhattacharya H et al.^[11] concluded that son preference was significantly higher among the rural, illiterate and nullipara women or women having no male child (68.24%, 58.33% and 68.24% respectively, p<0.05). Higher son preference was also observed among housewives (58.00%), primigravida (54.61%) and women from joint families (61.18%), though it was not significant. In a study from coastal India,^[10] a larger proportion of participants in the age group between 21 to 30 years preferred a male child (23.5% vs. 14.7%), whereas those above 30 years preferred a female child (30.8% vs. 19.5%). Also they concluded that a relatively larger proportion of housewives (20.8%) preferred a female child while working women preferred a male child (31.7%). Among the women who preferred a male child, majority did so because they believed that male is the

working hand or breadwinner for the family (34.5%), has also been observed. A study by international center for research on women (ICRW) reported mothers' education as the single most significant factor in reducing son preference and thus reaffirms the influence of women's education status and employment on gender preference.^[19] In study by Vedpathak V et al.^[20] found that 294 (35%) of pregnant women gave preference to male child. A preference to male child was significantly associated with education of mother, socioeconomic class and sex of the last child whereas insignificant association with religion and gravida of women.

Parity of the mother and gender of the previous children

It is observed that sex and number of the previous born children is strongly associated to the preference towards a particular gender. Women having previous male child wanted preferably 38 (65.52%) female child while, women having previous female child wanted male child 70(92.11%). If the women had two live children out of that one male and one female then 20 (83.33%) preferred any child.^[12] Malhi P ^[21] conducted a study in Haryana showed that with one son living, 27% wanted to have next child as male baby and with two sons desirousness was seen in 3.5%. The study conducted among married women in slums of Chandigarh by Puri S et al.^[15] too showed the desire for males. Majority (57.8%) intended to have male as their first child and 14.4% wanted second child too as male even with the first male baby. Three-fourth women wanted to have their third baby as boy after two baby daughters and 6% wanted a boy even after two baby boys. It was seen in Solapur, Maharashtra that women of second gravida were specific for particular gender, 56 (57.14%) preferred male child while, 28 (28.57%) preferred female child. 30 (44.12%) women of third gravida or more wanted male child, 12 (17.65%) female child and 26 (38.24%) prefers any child. Significant relation was found between sex of the previous living child and present sex preference.^[12]

Why male child is preferred??

The male dominated society, low status of women in society, a patriarchal social framework and value system based on 'Son Mania' are the major reasons for son preference in our country. Wadgave HV et al.^[12] found that most common reasons of son preference were propagation of family name (55.56%), support at old age (23.61%) and demand for male child by family members

(19.44%). In South India, the reasons for son preference found were better security in old age, generation continuation, bearing son as a status symbol and more earning. Reasons for not preferring daughter as an outcome of the current pregnancy were daughter will not stay with parents in future, difficulty to find a suitable groom, problem of dowry and difficult to rear a girl child.^[10] Ashturkar M et al.^[22] noted in a rural area of Pune, Maharashtra that most common reason of son preference was support at old age (57.14%) followed by demand of male child by family members and community (32.88%). However, in India the practice of dowry has been an important reason behind non preference of daughters.^[23] Not many studies have been done to find out the reasons for preferring male child. Kansal R et al.^[24] found that other reasons given were that boys carried out the social responsibility (8.9%), propagate the family name (6.7%), and they can depend on son in old age (2.2%).

Preventive strategies to curb/stop gender preference leading to female foeticide -

Strategies and gender based discrimination should be addressed which shall stop gender preference. Female foeticide is thus an after-effect of much prevalent gender preference. As discussed by Wadgave HV et al.^[12] more emphasis on programs and policies that actively improve the status of women and change the attitude towards female child. Intensive IEC campaigns should be conducted focusing on individual level, family level and community level to protect and support the girl child. This situation calls for two pronged strategy i.e. by women empowerment and by ensuring effective implementation of PCPNDT Act so that families found it difficult to undertake sex determination and selective abortions.^[20] The situation regarding son preference in India is alarming, which is frequently associated with the neglect and death of millions of females through infanticide, sex selective abortions, improper nutrition, and lack of medical care.^[25] Improving social security at old age, facilities favouring girl children and steps for elimination of dowry from the society may help in improving the preference for girl children leading to a balanced population.^[11]

Conclusion:

Indian customs and traditions always have a vital role in gender preference for the couple or the family. India is a land of diversity with different religions, regions, and population groups across India showing a vast variance in their beliefs and preferences. So there has to be lot of

change in the attitude of Indian community. To summarize, the commonly identified potential determinants and risk factors of gender preference among pregnant women in Indian scenario are: educational status and employment of mothers, socioeconomic status of the family, gravida or number of living children, sex of previous child, cultural beliefs and family pressures. Religion and caste can be a major determinant but no study had shown statistical significant association with gender preference. Interventions like empowering women, incentive programmes for single girl child families, media to generate mass awareness on sex selective acts & their legal implication must be promoted. After learning all the factors responsible for gender preference or son preference from various studies, proper timely interventions and its strict enforcement must be given a priority. The social determinants of gender preference should be addressed and hence educating women from under privileged population about gender equality and recommendations under PNMT act should be explained to them.

Sex ratio is an important social indicator which measures the gender equity. The declining sex ratio and son preference are the major factors exhibiting gender inequality. It is studied that socioeconomic status or literacy are not the only determinants of gender preference. So multipronged strategy related to women empowerment will definitely help in addressing this gender imbalance. Gender preference shall be a big obstacle in achieving two family norms which our country is promoting. India is facing population explosion and if gender preference or son preference continues it shall be very difficult to achieve a two family norm in India. If the mothers continue to bear pregnancy till their desired gender, it shall be too difficult for successful implementation of various family planning programmes. Various preventive strategies and socio behavioural interventions shall help to reduce the gender preference during child birth and automatically shall promote a favourable sex ratio.

Recommendations:

Community should be made aware of the effects of gender imbalance and its consequences towards declining sex ratio. The following points should be stressed.^[10,11,12]

- The policy makers should come up with strategies to address each of these determinants rather than have a single strategy approach which may not be applicable to all. More emphasis on programs and

policies that actively improve the status of women and change the attitude towards female child.

- Policies need to be formulated and implemented which can bring about a change in attitude of the society towards gender preference and achieve the 2 child norm. Social security for old age needs to be developed for people who prefer son for attention and care during old age.
- Health education, awareness campaigns regarding adverse sex ration and gender imbalance must be promoted. Female literacy is the best intervention but other determinants should also be looked into to achieve the MDG 3 of gender equality. To educate women from under privileged population about gender equality and recommendations under PNMT act in order to improve declining sex ratio in our country.
- Strong sociocultural factors which are associated with gender preference should be addressed particularly rather than single strategy approach applicable to all. Conduct awareness about gender imbalance and PNMT Act to all pregnant women & their spouses
- Media to generate mass awareness on sex selective acts & their legal implication. Encourage Women empowerment. Incentive programmes for single girl child families. Develop good IEC material, showing female role models

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How to cite this article: Shidhaye PR, Giri PA, Shidhaye RR. Determinants and Prevention of Gender Preference among Pregnant Women in India: An Updated Review. *Int J Educ Res Health Sci* 2016;2(1): 2-7