

Diverging stories of son preference in South Asia: a comparison of India and Bangladesh



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Objective of presentation

Bangladesh and India were both characterised by high rates of fertility and by highly adverse child (and overall) sex ratios in the 1970s, a reflection of higher rates of female compared to male mortality rates – the phenomenon of ‘missing women’. The adversity of sex ratios was a product of their patriarchal family and kinship structures and severe discrimination against women. Fertility rates have since gone down but in India this has been accompanied by worsening child sex ratios which now include worsening sex ratios at birth, an indication of the growing resort to female-selective abortion. In Bangladesh on the other hand fertility decline has been accompanied by an improvement in gender equality on key indicators and sex ratios at birth have remained largely constant at the ‘normal’ rate. In this presentation I want to draw on research from the two countries to explain the factors that explain these diverging patterns.

A culture of son preference

The belt of 'classic patriarchy' extends from North Africa across west Asia and the northern plains of India to Bangladesh.

Characterised by patriarchal family structures, patrilineal inheritance and descent systems, patrilocal marriage practices and purdah or norms of female seclusion. Dowry widespread in north Indian plains and replaced bridewealth in the Bangladesh context.

Low rates of female labour force participation relative to male, strong culture of son preference and phenomenon of 'missing women' or masculine sex ratios, reflecting excess female mortality in most age groups, in contrast to higher life expectancy of women relative to men in most other parts of the world.

These characterised the northern plains of India as well as Bangladesh according to the literature of the 1960s and 1970s.

'Dravidian' south of India regarded as more egalitarian (lineage endogamy, cross-cousin marriage, greater ritual equality between families related through marriage and marriage payments can take form of bridewealth)

The rise of 'missing daughters' in India

Fertility decline accompanied by improvements in female to male life expectancy and improvement in overall sex ratios

But deterioration in child (0-6) sex ratios: male advantage has gone from 106 in 1991 to 109 in 2011.

Under 5 mortality differentials persist but new forms of discrimination through female-selective abortion: adverse sex ratios at birth risen from 111 in 1998 to 114 by 2005.

The spread of 'missing daughters' in India

Adverse SRBs spreading beyond north-western states to “fresh regions, communities and classes where it was not a problem before” (John et al. 2008). To southern – and eastern – states and to lower castes

But counter-trend observed by religion: population sex ratios worse among Muslims than Hindus in earlier decades but pattern reversing since 1970s (Govt. of India 2006). Despite greater poverty, they now also report more favorable CSRs and SRBs than Hindus in most states but their behaviour in line with the majority pattern so gap is smaller in south Indian states.

The weakening of son preference in Bangladesh

- Bangladesh also part of belt of classic patriarchy: characterised as one of the least negotiable patriarchies in the world with excess female mortality in almost every age group. Gave rise to concept of patriarchal risk as explanation for some of the highest levels of fertility in the world. Steady rise and escalation of dowry. Early surveys showed high levels of fertility (TFRs of around 7) and strong son preference but with some geographical variation, for instance higher in Comilla (Ahmed, 1981) than Faridpur (Kabeer, 1986)
- Onset of fairly rapid fertility decline from 1980s
- Gender differentials in mortality, including in under-five age group, have been declining, according to both micro and macro-level data. Sex ratios at birth show little evidence of change.....Abortion is illegal in Bangladesh but MR is allowed. While gender-differentiated stopping rule can still be observed, there is little evidence of resort to female-selective abortion.
- Current studies show a strong preference of gender balance, preferably one boy and one girl, but behaviour continues to show likelihood of an additional birth (up to about 3 children). Current fertility rates are around 2 children. Sex ratios at birth have remained flat at 105 boys to 100 girls since the start of the Matlab DHSS and also at national level. Some evidence of regional variation but little evidence of sex-selective abortion

Possible explanations

Access to technology ?

Religious norms and values?
(`particularized theology hypothesis':
Iyer and Borooah

The place of religion in social practice

Religion alone
cannot
provide a
satisfactory
explanation..

Religious beliefs and values can play a part in explaining differences in attitudes and behaviour, but religions operate in specific social, cultural and political economy contexts which mediate their interpretation and impact.

Of four Asian countries that have recent reported a deterioration in child sex ratios, Vietnam is officially Buddhist, Georgia and Armenia are largely Christian and Azerbaijan is majority Muslim. We need a far more complex explanation for changing trends in sex ratios than a focus on religious norms and values can provide

Diverging stories of son preference in South Asia

- Stories from the heartland of classic patriarchy: north Indian states (Punjab, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan)
- Stories from the 'Dravidian' south: southern states of (Tamil Nadu, Karnataka)
- Stories from the margins of classic patriarchy: Bangladesh

Two indicative titles on this theme

- Sunita Kishor (1993) 'May God give sons to all. Gender and child mortality in India' *American Sociological Review* Vol. 58
- Ahmed, Sonia Sultan and Sally Bould "'One able daughter in worth 10 illiterate sons"'. *Reframing the patriarchal family*' *Journal of Marriage and Family* Vol. 66 (5)

References

- Naila Kabeer, Simeen Mahmud and Lopita Huq (2014) 'Diverging stories of 'missing women' in South Asia: is son preference weakening in Bangladesh?' *Feminist Economics*, April
- Naila Kabeer 'The rise of the daughter-in-law: the decline of missing women in Bangladesh' ([http://nailakabeer.com/the-rise-of-the-daughter-in-law-the-decline-of-missing -women-in Bangladesh](http://nailakabeer.com/the-rise-of-the-daughter-in-law-the-decline-of-missing-women-in-Bangladesh))
- Naila Kabeer (forthcoming) *Renegotiating patriarchy. Gender, agency and the Bangladesh Paradox* LSE Press