



# It's a boy! Women and decision-making benefits from a son in India

Laura Zimmermann

University of Georgia, Brooks Hall, Department of Economics, 310 Herty Drive, Athens, GA 30602, United States



## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Accepted 11 December 2017

### Keywords:

Son preference  
Non-monetary benefits  
Decision-making power  
Intra-household allocation  
India  
Asia

## ABSTRACT

Son preference is widespread in a number of developing countries despite substantial improvements in education levels and economic development. One potential explanation for the persistence of this phenomenon is that individual household members like the mother derive large non-monetary benefits from giving birth to a son and therefore prefer boys to girls. Qualitative evidence suggests that such benefits exist and may depend on the child's age. This paper uses large nationally representative datasets from India and tests whether having a son leads to higher decision-making powers for mothers than having a daughter. Since the number and gender composition of children is likely to be non-random for families that want a son, I focus on first-born children for whom the sex ratio of girls relative to boys is normal. The main analysis also focuses on young children of up to six months, which gives parents little time to adjust desired birth-spacing intervals that could be systematically correlated with decision-making powers and child gender. The results show little evidence of consistently large female benefits shortly after birth, and any positive impacts of having a son disappear after the first six months. There are also no large benefits for adult sons. These empirical patterns do not support qualitative evidence suggesting that women benefit from the birth of a son through larger decision-making powers in the household because of increased respect by other household members. The benefits also do not heavily depend on the child's age, which is not consistent with a channel predicting a better bargaining position for women with adult sons who start taking over the running of the household. Overall, these results extend our understanding of individual-specific incentives for son preference.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

In a number of developing countries, a strong preference for sons has led to unnaturally low numbers of girls relative to boys.<sup>1</sup> In India, for example, estimates suggest that over two million women per year 'disappear' due to sex-selective abortion before birth or due to higher than normal mortality rates after birth (Anderson & Ray, 2012). The Indian sex ratio for children in the zero to six year age group, measured as the number of girls per 1000 boys, has been too low to be normal in the last two Censuses.<sup>2</sup> The resulting sex imbalance can lead to a number of other large-scale problems, including gender discrimination against girls within the

household, or an increase in violence by single men unable to find a wife (Azam & Kingdon, 2013; Edlund, Li, Yi, & Zhang, 2013). The preference for sons has also proven to be highly persistent over the last decades despite substantial socio-economic changes like rising education levels or economic development (Das Gupta, Chung, & Shuzhuo, 2009).

This paper tests one potential explanation for the persistent son preference in a country like India: Qualitative evidence suggests that women derive substantial non-monetary benefits from giving birth to a son in a number of developing countries, for example in the form of larger decision-making powers within the household (Gupta et al., 2003). If women value this side-effect from having a boy, this may counteract or even outweigh some of the other incentives that may make women less likely to favor boys, such as their own experiences of growing up in an environment where social prestige depends on having male heirs. These mother-specific benefits can arise through two channels: First, the birth of a son increases the respect for the mother of the child, who is seen as having fulfilled her duty of having a son. This may lead to an improvement of her position within the household and to an increase in her decision-making powers as other household

E-mail address: [lvzimmer@uga.edu](mailto:lvzimmer@uga.edu)

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, son preference is understood broadly to include economic and cultural explanations and is therefore not limited to taste-based discrimination.

<sup>2</sup> It was 927 in 2001 and 914 in 2011. Census sex ratios are taken from [www.censusindia.gov.in](http://www.censusindia.gov.in). 'Too low' here refers to being outside the estimated India-specific confidence intervals for the natural sex ratio at birth, which is a lower bound of the 0–6 year sex ratio since girls have a natural survival advantage (Waldron, 1983). According to Bhat and Zavier (2007), the natural sex ratio confidence interval is 943–971 female births per 1000 male births, whereas Srinivasan and Bedi (2009) put it at 932–965.

members now see her as a full member of the household. Second, since the eldest son typically takes over the running of the household once he is older, a son who is old enough to witness how his mother is being treated may change the allocation of decision-making powers in the household and secure a more important position for his mother (Gupta et al., 2003). Both of these channels suggest that mothers of a son derive non-monetary benefits that other mothers do not receive, and that the age of the son may contribute importantly to the strength of the effect. While the first channel may start to operate directly after the birth of a son, the second channel should matter more over time once the son is an adult.

To test the quantitative importance of these channels, I use two large nationally representative cross-sectional datasets on Indian households from 1998/99 and 2005 and focus on mothers with children of varying ages. I analyze the effect of a son on the mother's decision-making powers in the household along a couple of dimensions. I also look at other outcome variables that may be correlated with a woman's position in the household, including the ability to go to different places without having to ask for permission, and having access to her own money or a savings account.

Since the birth of a son in a society with strong son preference is unlikely to be random, the empirical identification strategy needs to be carefully chosen to credibly identify a causal effect. For young children, my main analysis sample focuses on first-born children who are at most six months old. I provide evidence that the gender of a child appears exogenous in this restricted sample, and there is little time to change household behavior after the first child is born, for example by decreasing birth spacing intervals if the first child happens to be a girl. In consequence, families with a girl should have similar individual and household characteristics as families with a boy. To test whether the non-monetary benefits for women grow with the age of the first child, I increase the age threshold to include older sons and control for the age and sex composition of younger siblings. As an extension, I analyze whether having a son of any age improves the mother's position in the household by instrumenting having a son with having a first-born son.

Overall, the results suggest that the decision-making benefits of a son in India are lower for mothers than one would expect based on the existing qualitative evidence. I find no increased decision-making powers for mothers of a young son relative to mothers of a young daughter in the 1998/99 sample. While mothers with a young son in the 2005 sample are about four to six percentage points more likely to have decision-making powers in categories like large purchases and family visits, these impacts are driven by the mothers of four to six month old children, with no statistically significant effect for older children. There is also no consistently large impact on other outcome variables correlated with a woman's position in the household, although women with young sons are more likely to have a savings account and are able to go to the market without having to ask for permission. This empirical pattern does not change for older children, including adult sons: The large majority of estimated coefficients is small and statistically insignificant, whereas the remaining impacts are even negative. The results therefore suggest that women derive no large decision-making benefits from the birth of a son.

These results contribute to the existing interdisciplinary literature on son preference and gender discrimination in a couple of ways. First, the quantitative literature on female-specific causes of son preference is very small. While concerns about the implausibility of treating households as monolithic entities with common preferences and a joint household utility function have been raised for a while in this context, most existing papers focus on the analysis of economic and cultural mechanisms for son preference rather than on the incentives of particular household members to

have a son (Almond, Edlund, & Milligan, 2013; Anderson, 2003; Chung & Das Gupta, 2007; Dyson & Moore, 1983; Folbre, 1984; Koolwal, 2007; Levine & Kevane, 2003; Logan & Arunachalam, 2014; Qian, 2008; Rao, 1993; Rose, 2000; Rosenzweig & Schultz, 1982). The paper therefore extends our understanding of the causes of son preference by looking at the non-monetary benefits of mothers.

Second, based on the existing quantitative literature it is unclear how generalizable the results are to other contexts. Only one other paper analyzes the importance of mother-specific benefits from the birth of a son. Li and Wu (2011) find that having a first-born son in China leads to an increase in the mother's bargaining power and to an improvement of the mother's health, although the effects are small in magnitude. China is a very specific case in a number of respects, however, which includes the existence of the one-child policy. So it is unclear whether women-specific benefits from having a son are larger in other contexts. My paper shows that the benefits for mothers in India are also small, but that even those benefits appear short-lived and vanish as the child becomes older.

Third, my paper is the first to estimate the age-specific impacts of having a son on decision-making powers. This is important because qualitative evidence suggests that the mother's benefits from having a son depend on the child's age. It could also be an explanation for the small effects in Li and Wu (2011), who do not break up their sample by age. My analysis focuses on younger as well as adult children to test whether the benefits of a son are age-dependent. The results show, however, that there appears to be little change in the benefits for mothers over time.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides background information on son preference and the empirical predictions in the Indian context. Section 3 explains the empirical strategy and presents descriptive statistics. Section 4 focuses on the main results as well as on some extensions and robustness checks. Section 5 concludes.

## 2. Mothers and son preference in India

The continuing fall of sex ratios in India and other countries has attracted a lot of academic research on the potential underlying causes of this preference for boys over girls. In general, researchers focus on two main channels: economic and cultural considerations. With respect to economic considerations, boys are a better investment if they have a higher probability of earning income and are expected to provide shelter and financial support for their parents later in life. Male labor force participation in India generally is significantly higher than that of women, so having a son may indeed lead to better old-age support for the parents (Azam & Kingdon, 2013; Chakraborty, 2015; Chung & Das Gupta, 2007; Rose, 2000; Rosenzweig & Schultz, 1982). Especially in North India, on the other hand, girls are traditionally seen as ceasing to be part of the family when they marry, so that a daughter's earnings benefit her husband's family instead. Additionally, dowries are paid in large parts of the country when a girl marries, and, although its existence is still debated in the literature, anecdotal evidence suggests that dowry inflation is an important concern in India and the broader region (Anderson, 2003; Logan & Arunachalam, 2014; Rao, 1993).

Cultural considerations are also often advanced as an important factor for son preference in countries like India. Parents may prefer sons for a number of reasons: Some religious rituals like lighting the funeral pyre of the parents, for example, need to be performed by a son. Women also traditionally cannot inherit property in large parts of the country so that parents need a male heir to pass on their land and family possessions (Almond et al., 2013; Dyson & Moore, 1983).

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات