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Son Preference in India

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Abstract

This paper identifies the prevalence of son preference among the different socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds in India. In this paper, we use the multinomial logistic regression to find the impact of socioeconomic and geographic variables on son preference using the NFHS-5 (2019-21). The main result suggests that generational shifts in attitudes towards gender preferences, with older age groups expressing a higher son preference, education emerges as a powerful mitigating factor.

Keywords: Gender, disparity, Policy.

1. Introduction

Historically, we see that many countries have preferred sons over daughters. Son preference refers to an attitude of preferring a male child to a female child. A lot of research has been done on the son preference. The most common reason for a son is anticipated old-age support from their son rather than a daughter because we see that in Indian culture, a daughter goes to her husband's home after marriage, and sons are supposed to do religious rituals. This is not the only reason; we can also see the social and economic factors determining how son preferences work in India. Therefore, we find some underlying issues, such as social norms, cultural, economic factors and regional demography, that affect son preference in India. Son preference has been found very prominently in India (Fred et al., 2012). It shows how a son's preference over a daughter has been seen not only in India but all over the world. The son preference is driven not only by economic factors but also by cultural and social norms (Dasgupta, 2010). We will review both sides of the story: history, social norms, how son preference worked in the past, and how technology changed childbearing for a family.

2. Literature Review

We found that historically: "son-biased fertility stopping," where parents keep having children until they have the desired number of sons. This not only increases fertility rates but also results in girls having more siblings than boys and growing up in families with fewer resources per capita. Consequently, this leads to gender disparities in child investment and mortality after birth. Son-biased fertility-stopping rules are an essential factor linking eldest son preference and the observed birth order gradient in child height. India's height disadvantage emerges with second-born children and increases with birth order (Jayachandran & Pande, 2017). Evidence shows the negative impact of son preference on health disparities between sons and daughters. Due to this preference, daughters' height-for-age and weight-for-age z-scores lag by 0.135 and 0.098 standard deviations behind their male peers. Heterogeneity analysis reveals that son preference has a more significant impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those in rural areas, born to less-educated mothers, and from impoverished families (Le &

Nguyen, 2022). Both evidences suggest health disparities due to son preferences, but we can also see how education inequalities prevail in son preferences. Congdon Fors and Heather (2023) highlight how son preference leads to disparities in education performance, educational investments, and height-for-age z-scores (HAZ) between girls and boys. They also highlight that Gender-biased fertility strategies are predominantly used by families with a first-born girl, while preferential treatment of boys affects girls from all families. When assessing which source contributes more to gender gaps, gender-biased fertility strategies appear to have a greater impact, with gaps often being at least twice as large. How son preference impacts gender disparities in child nutrition and healthcare (Pande & R. 2003).

Bongaarts and Guilmonto find that in the early 1980s, advancements in medical technology, particularly the widespread availability of affordable and reliable ultrasound scans, have transformed how parents in many countries, particularly in Asia, express their preference for sons. This technological development has facilitated the ability to determine fetal sex during pregnancy, leading to the alarming practice of aborting female fetuses, particularly when parents desire male offspring. Consequently, the traditional method of "son-biased fertility stopping," where parents would continue having children until they achieved their desired number of sons, has been replaced by a disturbing trend of male-biased sex ratios at birth. This shift in behaviour is since parents no longer feel the need to have "excess" fertility to ensure the birth of sons when they can selectively terminate female pregnancies. This has had profound implications for gender imbalances in various countries, contributing to a substantial increase in sex-selective abortions. The global annual number of such abortions escalated from virtually zero in the late 1970s to an alarming 1.6 million per year between 2005 and 2010.

Another literature suggests that according to India's 2011 census data, a disturbing statistic emerged, revealing seven million fewer girls among children aged 0-6 years. This significant gender disparity can be attributed primarily to prenatal sex determination and sex-selective abortions, which are used to ensure the birth of male children. The consequences of this skewed sex ratio are far-reaching and profoundly concerning. Despite significant advancements in education, literacy, healthcare, and income attainment in many Indian states, the disconcerting trend of increasing son preference and neglecting daughters persists. This phenomenon has led to a skewed sex ratio, with a shortage of girls, which has severe consequences for the well-being of women and the overall human development of India (Mitra, 2015).

Kinship systems significantly influence parental incentives and child-sex ratios. The incentive to raise girls diminishes in kinship systems that exclude adult daughters from contributing to their parents. Gender equality in support for parents is found in bilateral and matrilineal systems, while patrilineal systems exhibit variations in allowing flexibility for adult daughters to remain close to their parents. These differences are reflected in child sex ratios, with greater son preference in patrilineal systems. This is evident in India and China, where regional variations align with kinship rules. Even within the same culture, such as South Korea, variations in kinship systems matter, as seen in the stronger son preference among the wives of eldest sons, reflecting the cultural emphasis on continuing the family line (Dasgupta, 2010). Dasgupta also highlighted that in the Panjab, discrimination against daughters appears closely linked to parents' family-building strategies.

Emerging sex-selective abortion technologies make it crucial to understand the factors driving parents' preferences for sons in India. Stated son preference, an underexplored area. The study reveals that

financial considerations largely influence the preference for sons among never-married women. In contrast, never-married men's preference for sons is primarily shaped by nonfinancial factors, including their views on women, religion, and caste (Robitaille, 2011). Arnold and Kue (1984) highlight the cultural significance of sons, who are desired for reasons such as carrying on the family name, providing economic support to parents, and fulfilling rituals like ancestor worship. On the other hand, daughters are valued for their assistance with household chores, desirable personality traits, and companionship. The study identifies certain universal sex-role prescriptions that cut across countries, reflecting similarities in how daughters and sons are perceived. The research explores the determinants of gender preference, considering background factors, the couple's sex roles, and their valuation of daughters and sons. The sex composition of a couple's existing children emerges as the strongest determinant of son preference. Cultural traditions and biological factors appear to be more influential in shaping sex preferences than individual backgrounds or socioeconomic characteristics. Furthermore, the study suggests that urbanisation and modernisation alone may not be sufficient to erode pervasive son preference, and it might exert its influence more significantly at lower parity levels. The enduring prevalence of son preference in countries like Korea and Taiwan may impact fertility trends and could pose challenges for achieving future fertility reductions. A large-scale intervention aimed at tackling son preference through supply-side measures to reduce sex-selective abortions and mass media campaigns shifting social norms leads to an increase in female births. It improves female health outcomes relative to males. This intervention mitigates the adverse consequences of "unwanted" female births and highlights the need for demand-side elements in gender discrimination elimination policies (Dasgupta & Sharma, 2022).

Research Questions

1. What is the overall prevalence of son preference in different regions of India?
2. What socioeconomic factors are significantly associated with son preference in India?
3. How does the geographic location (urban vs. rural) influence the prevalence of son preference?

3. Methodology

Data

We use the data from the National Family Health Survey, 2019-21 (NFHS-5). It provides essential information on household population, housing characteristics, and basic demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of respondents, fertility, and family planning, maternal and child health, infant and child mortality, nutrition, morbidity including adult health issues, women empowerment, and domestic violence at the nation, state and district level. This survey was conducted under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) leadership and managed by the International Institute of Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai. In the survey, a question on child preference was asked as “How many of these children would you like to be boys, how many would you like to be girls, and for how many would it not matter if it’s a boy or a girl”?

Methods

We have used descriptive statistics and multinomial logistic regression to find the impact of socioeconomic and geographic variables on the outcome variable. In this study, son preference is

assessed through two distinct methodologies. Firstly, we gauge son preference by calculating the difference between the ideal number of sons and the ideal number of daughters. A positive difference indicates a preference for sons, while a negative difference suggests a preference for daughters.

Dependent Variable

A dependent variable, son preference, will be categorised as 0, 1 and 2. Where 0 represents no preference, 1 represents son preference, and 2 represents girl preference.

Independent Variable

We have considered the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics to identify factors associated with son preference. Our demographic and socioeconomic characteristics include the place of residence (urban or rural), mother's age in years (15-19, 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40-44, 45-49), sex of the head of household (male or female), mother's level of education (illiterate, primary, secondary and higher), religion (Hindu, Muslims and others), cast (Scheduled Castes/S.Cs., Scheduled Tribes/S.Ts., Other Backward Class/OBC, and others), wealth quintile (poorest, poorer, middle, richer and richest).

4. Results

Table 1 (see appendix) shows the descriptive statistics of dependent and independent variables included in the study. the majority of respondents express no son preference (72.29%), however, a preference for sons is huge (23.28%) and a smaller proportion favour girls (4.44%). This suggests a nuanced distribution of gender preferences. When examining the distribution of children's sex, the data shows a slight preference for male children (52.50%) compared to female children (47.50%). The sex of household heads further highlights a gender disparity, with a significant majority being male (84.33%). The urban-rural divide is notable, with around 78.53% of the population residing in rural areas. Hindus are 75 percent of our sample. About 21 percent and 40 percent of households belonged to SCs and OBCs, respectively. Further, 25 percent, 23 percent and 13 percent of households belonged to the poorest, middle and richest wealth quintiles, respectively. Most birth orders are concentrated among first (38%), second (30%) and third (16%) orders.

Table 2 shows the Son Preference by Geographical and Socio-economic background characteristics in India, NFHS-5. Urban areas exhibit son preference at 16.2%, with the majority expressing no preference (79.95%). In contrast, rural areas show a higher son preference of 24.69%, indicating a substantial contrast in family preferences between urban and rural settings. The 15-19 age group shows a relatively lower preference (13.71%), while the 45-59 age group registers the highest son preference at 25.94%. This suggests a generational shift in attitudes towards gender preferences in older age groups. Muslims exhibit a higher son preference (24.37%) compared to Hindus (22.32%) and others (14.68%). However, Muslims exhibit slightly higher girl preference compared to Hindus.

Education levels exhibit a significant inverse relationship with son preference. Individuals with no education show the highest preference at 31.32%, while those with higher education display the lowest preference at 9.93%. This suggests that higher education might contribute to a more gender-neutral attitude within families. Casts exhibit consistent son preference across different castes. Schedule Castes have a preference of 24.07% and Others at 16.67%. While there are differences, the variations are relatively modest compared to other factors, highlighting a relatively uniform son preference across

different caste groups. The sex of the household head appears to have a marginal impact on son preference. Male-headed households exhibit a slightly higher son preference (22.03%) compared to female-headed households (23.72%). The modest difference suggests that the gender of the household head may not be the primary determinant of son preference. Economic status, as reflected in the wealth index, demonstrates a clear gradient in son preference. The poorest quintile exhibits the highest preference at 31.14%, while the richest quintile displays the lowest preference at 13.6%. This socioeconomic gradient suggests that economic factors play a crucial role in influencing family preferences for the gender of children.

Table 3 shows the results of multinomial logistic regression of demographic and socioeconomic factors associated with son preference in India. Son preference is the dependent variable, which is categorised into three categories, namely, son preference, daughter preference, and no preference. No preferences are taken as a base outcome.

Rural areas exhibit a positive coefficient of 0.1296, indicating a higher likelihood of son preference compared to urban areas. This suggests that individuals in rural settings are more inclined towards son preference. With the increase in the mother's age, there is a positive association with son preference, indicating a higher likelihood of son preference compared to the 15-19 age group. Female-headed households exhibit a negative coefficient (-0.0260), indicating a lower likelihood of son preference compared to male-headed households. Higher education levels are associated with a lower likelihood of son preference compared to the reference category. The negative coefficients for primary, secondary, and higher education categories highlight an inverse relationship between education and son preference. Higher wealth quintiles show negative coefficients, suggesting a decreasing likelihood of son preference compared to the poorest as economic status improves. Muslims and others exhibit positive coefficients, indicating a higher likelihood of son preference compared to Hindus.

Table 4 shows sex preferences across Indian states. States like Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, and Chandigarh exhibit a predominant trend of no specific gender preference, reflecting a more balanced approach in family attitudes. On the other hand, states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand show a higher prevalence of son preference.

The regional variations underscore the diverse sociocultural of India, where factors like tradition, education, and economic conditions contribute to shaping familial preferences. Southern states like Kerala and Karnataka stand out with a relatively higher proportion of no specific preference, indicative of potentially progressive attitudes toward gender equality.

Additionally, states like Goa, Delhi, and Telangana, with a higher percentage of no specific preference, suggest a potential correlation between urbanization, education, and more equitable gender attitudes.

5. Conclusion

A complex interplay of demographic and socioeconomic factors influences son preference. Rural areas exhibit a higher likelihood of son preference, emphasizing the regional variations in family preferences. Interestingly, while there is a generational shift in attitudes towards gender preferences, with older age groups expressing a higher son preference, education emerges as a powerful mitigating factor. Higher education levels correlate with a decreased likelihood of son preference, highlighting the role of education in fostering more gender-neutral attitudes. Moreover, our study reveals the striking influence

of economic status on son preference, with wealthier households exhibiting a reduced likelihood of preferring sons. This socioeconomic gradient underscores the importance of addressing economic factors in strategies aimed at mitigating son preference.

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Appendix

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Proportion	Std. Err.	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower	Upper
Son Preference				
No Preference	0.7229	0.0004	0.7221	0.7237
Son Preference	0.2328	0.0004	0.2320	0.2335
Girl Preference	0.0444	0.0002	0.0440	0.0447
Child of Sex				
male	0.5250	0.0004	0.5241	0.5259
female	0.4750	0.0004	0.4741	0.4759
Sex of household head				
male	0.8433	0.0003	0.8427	0.8440
female	0.1567	0.0003	0.1560	0.1573
Place				
urban	0.2147	0.0004	0.2140	0.2154
rural	0.7853	0.0004	0.7846	0.7860
Age in 5 years group				
15-19	0.0043	0.0001	0.0042	0.0044
20-24	0.0609	0.0002	0.0605	0.0614
25-29	0.1501	0.0003	0.1495	0.1507
30-34	0.1814	0.0003	0.1807	0.1820
35-39	0.2059	0.0004	0.2052	0.2066
40-44	0.1883	0.0003	0.1876	0.1890
44-49	0.2091	0.0004	0.2084	0.2098
Birth Order Number				
1st	0.3878	0.0004	0.3870	0.3887
2nd	0.3097	0.0004	0.3089	0.3105
3rd	0.1647	0.0003	0.1640	0.1653
4th	0.0769	0.0002	0.0764	0.0773
5th	0.0344	0.0002	0.0341	0.0348
6th	0.0153	0.0001	0.0151	0.0155
7th	0.0112	0.0001	0.0110	0.0114
Last Child Sex				
Male	0.5250138	0.0004439	0.5241437	0.5258836
Female	0.4749862	0.0004439	0.4741164	0.4758563
Religion				

Hindus	0.7517	0.0004	0.7509	0.7524
Muslims	0.1300	0.0003	0.1295	0.1306
Others	0.1183	0.0003	0.1177	0.1189
Cast				
SC	0.2133	0.0004	0.2126	0.2141
ST	0.2049	0.0004	0.2042	0.2056
OBC	0.4065	0.0004	0.4056	0.4074
None of Them	0.1753	0.0003	0.1746	0.1759
Education				
No Education	0.3944	0.0004	0.3936	0.3953
Primary	0.1600	0.0003	0.1594	0.1607
Secondary	0.3812	0.0004	0.3803	0.3820
Higher	0.0644	0.0002	0.0640	0.0648
Wealth Quintile				
Poorest	0.2541	0.0004	0.2533	0.2548
Poorer	0.2359	0.0004	0.2352	0.2366
Middle	0.2024	0.0004	0.2017	0.2031
Richer	0.1717	0.0003	0.1711	0.1724
Richest	0.1359	0.0003	0.1353	0.1365

Table 2. Son Preference by Geographical and Socio-economic background characteristics in India, NFHS-5

	No Preference	**Son Preference**	**Girls Preference**	**n**
Place				
Urban	79.95	16.2	3.85	3,60,443.70
Rural	71.79	24.69	3.52	9,07,635.60
Age				
15-19	84.11	13.71	2.19	6,037.16
20-24	80.41	16.77	2.82	81,562.20
25-29	77.36	19.24	3.4	1,93,480.80
30-34	75.53	20.79	3.69	2,27,185
35-49	73.45	22.49	4.06	2,54,463.20
40-44	72.23	24.17	3.61	2,33,076.60
45-59	70.48	25.94	3.59	2,61,583.90
Religion				
Hindu	74.27	22.32	3.4	1023119.1
Muslims	71.27	24.37	4.37	1,86,873
Others	80.4	14.68	4.92	58,087.25
Education				

No Education	65.22	31.32	3.46	4,94,475.40
Primary	73.96	22.43	3.61	2,00,132.90
Secondary	80.87	15.31	3.82	4,78,886.50
Higher	86.66	9.93	3.41	94,584.48
Cast				
Schedule Cast	72.67	24.07	3.26	2,90,447.75
Schedule Tribe	70.38	24.84	4.77	1,23,352.20
Other Backward Class (OBC)	72.62	23.79	3.59	5,50,566.70
Others	80	16.67	3.33	2,35,791.30
Sex of Household Head				
Male	74.38	22.03	3.59	1058657.6
Female	72.48	23.72	3.79	1,98,731.30
Wealth Index				
Poorest	65.26	31.14	3.6	2,93,169
Poorer	71.05	25.33	3.62	2,75,643.60
Middle	75.6	21	3.74	2,57,493
Richer	79.17	16.98	3.85	2,38,270.60
Richest	83.19	13.6	3.22	2,03,503.10

Table 3. Results of multinomial logistic regression of demographic and socioeconomic factors associated with son preference, India.

Son Preference	**Coefficient**	**P-Value**	**Confidence Interval**	
No Preference	Ref (Base outcome)		**Lower**	**Upper**
Demographic variables				
Place of Residence				
Urban	Ref			
Rural	0.1296	0.000	0.117	0.143
Mother's age				
15-19	Ref			
20-24	0.2507	0.000	0.170	0.332
25-29	0.4091	0.000	0.330	0.489
30-34	0.4680	0.000	0.389	0.547
35-39	0.5425	0.000	0.463	0.622
40-44	0.5764	0.000	0.497	0.656
45-49	0.6219	0.000	0.542	0.701
Sex of household head				
Male	Ref			
Female	-0.0260	0.000	-0.038	-0.014
Socioeconomic variable				

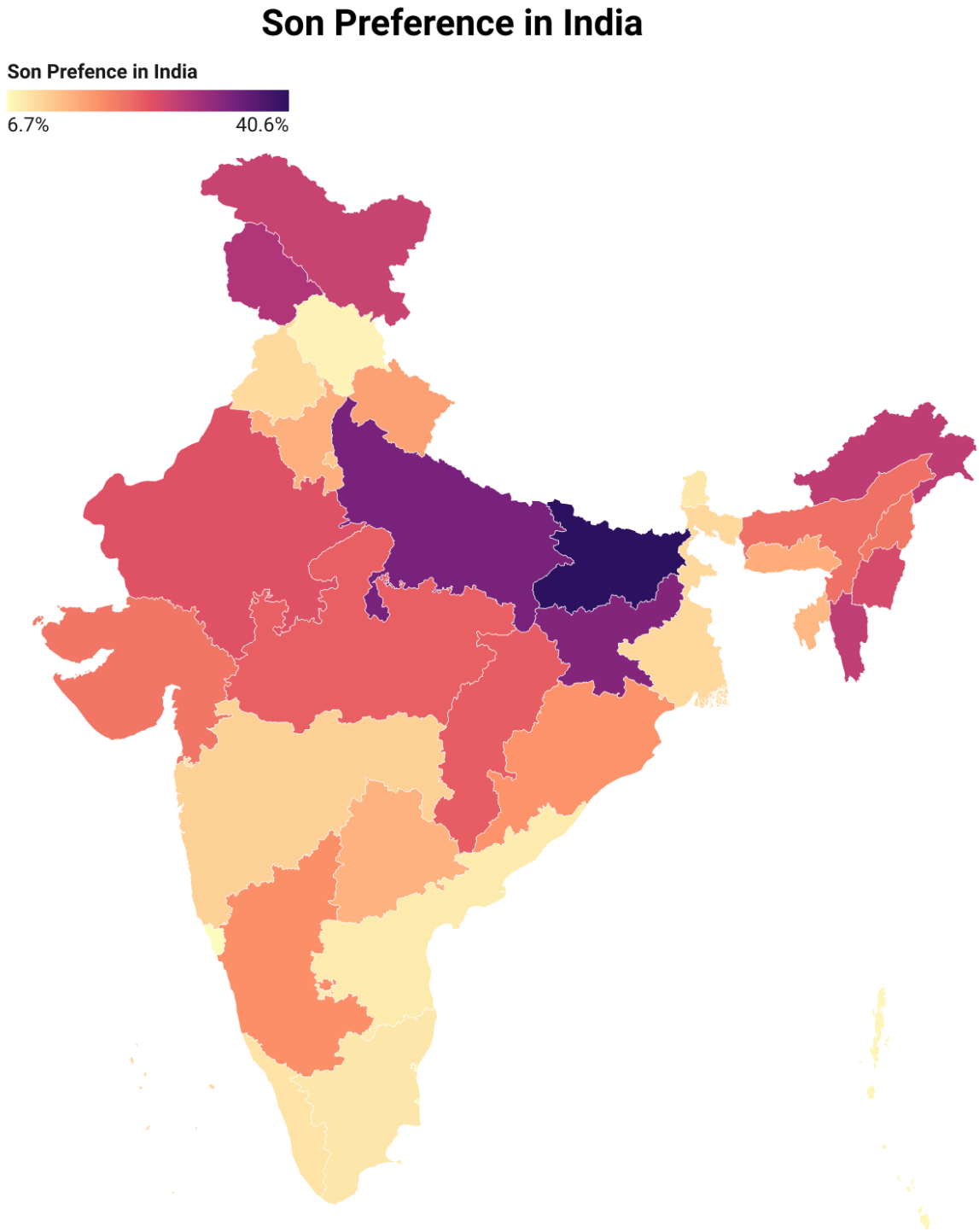
Education				
Illiterate	Ref			
primary	-0.3044	0.000	-0.317	-0.292
Secondary	-0.5457	0.000	-0.557	-0.534
Higher	-0.8675	0.000	-0.893	-0.842
Wealth				
Lowest	Ref			
Poorer	-0.1924	0.000	-0.204	-0.181
Middle	-0.3443	0.000	-0.358	-0.331
Richer	-0.4735	0.000	-0.489	-0.458
Richest	-0.6187	0.000	-0.638	-0.599
Religion				
Hindu	Ref			
Muslims	0.3257	0.000	0.312	0.340
Others	-0.0285	0.000	-0.044	-0.013
Cast				
Schedule Cast	Ref			
Schedule Tribe	0.0055	0.445	-0.009	0.020
Other Backward Class	0.0319	0.000	0.020	0.043
None of Them	-0.2142	0.000	-0.230	-0.199
_cons	-1.3210	0.000	-1.406	-1.236
Girls Preference				
Demographic variables				
Place of Residence				
Urban	Ref			
Rural	-0.1196	0.000	-0.144	-0.095
Mother's age				
15-19	Ref			
20-24	0.2041	0.018	0.035	0.373
25-29	0.4560	0.000	0.290	0.622
30-34	0.5972	0.000	0.432	0.763
35-39	0.6955	0.000	0.530	0.861
40-44	0.6383	0.000	0.473	0.804
45-49	0.6399	0.000	0.474	0.806
Sex of household head				
Male	Ref			
Female	0.0380	0.002	0.014	0.062
Socioeconomic variable				
Education				
Illiterate	Ref			
Primary	0.0311	0.022	0.005	0.058

Secondary	0.0687	0.000	0.046	0.092
Higher	0.0235	0.291	-0.020	0.067
Wealth				
Poorest	Ref			
Poorer	0.0289	0.025	0.004	0.054
Middle	-0.0303	0.032	-0.058	-0.003
Richer	-0.1258	0.000	-0.157	-0.094
Richest	-0.4045	0.000	-0.444	-0.365
Religion				
Hindu	Ref			
Muslims	0.5016	0.000	0.473	0.530
others	0.7137	0.000	0.688	0.739
Cast				
Schedule Cast	Ref			
Schedule Tribe	0.5776	0.000	0.549	0.607
Other Backward Class	0.1021	0.000	0.075	0.129
None of them	-0.0566	0.001	-0.090	-0.023
_cons	-3.5507	0.000	-3.726	-3.375

Table 4. Sex Preference across Indian States, NFHS-5

State	No Preference	Son Preference	Girl Preference	Total
Jammu & Kashmir	61.61	28.84	9.55	100
Himachal Pradesh	89.34	7.6	3.06	100
Punjab	87.85	10.28	1.87	100
Chandigarh	89.48	8.35	2.17	100
Uttarakhand	82.52	16.09	1.38	100
Haryana	83.08	14.63	2.28	100
Delhi	85.31	12.46	2.24	100
Rajasthan	73.87	24.19	1.94	100
Uttar Pradesh	63.72	33.88	2.41	100
Bihar	56.98	40.59	2.44	100
Sikkim	81.97	8.89	9.14	100
Arunachal Pradesh	65.13	27.63	7.25	100
Nagaland	66.86	20.16	12.97	100
Manipur	66.61	25.31	8.08	100
Mizoram	55.17	27.38	17.44	100
Tripura	81.34	13.81	4.85	100
Meghalaya	66.96	15.05	17.99	100
Assam	73.98	20.93	5.09	100
West Bengal	85.91	10.5	3.59	100

Jharkhand	64.3	32.91	2.79	100
Odisha	80.14	17.43	2.43	100
Chhattisgarh	69.34	22.88	7.78	100
Madhya Pradesh	74.78	22.74	2.48	100
Gujarat	73.78	20.46	5.76	100
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	88.68	9.79	1.53	100
Maharashtra	84.95	11.28	3.77	100
Andhra Pradesh	87.89	8.49	3.63	100
Karnataka	74.55	17.84	7.6	100
Goa	89.48	6.69	3.83	100
Lakshadweep	84.18	10.83	4.99	100
Kerala	84.45	9.44	6.11	100
Tamil Nadu	86.36	9.07	4.57	100
Puducherry	88.12	7.34	4.54	100
Andaman & Nicobar	88.77	7.38	3.86	100
Telangana	80.13	14.43	5.44	100
Ladakh	62.46	26.63	10.91	100


Son Preference in India
Son Prefence in India
6.7%
40.6%