

Son preference and within-household bargaining position of Pakistani women

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Rashid Javed and Mazhar Mughal analyze the effects of the pervasive phenomenon of son preference on Pakistani women's participation in household decision-making. They find that women with at least one son take more household decisions than other women, but only in routine, unimportant matters. Even with sons, female empowerment remains limited and decision- or context-specific.

In December 2016, Samira, a resident of a village in Vehari, Pakistan, poisoned her infant daughter and committed suicide after a quarrel with her mother-in-law. The dispute was about her 'inability' to bear a son.

Son preference is a widespread and ancient phenomenon in the traditional societies of East and South Asia, where such gruesome incidents are not rare. In patriarchal societies, sons are perceived to be the household's economic asset as they take up family businesses, carry the family name and insure the parents' old-age security. Daughters, in contrast, are considered an economic burden for the household: parents must save for their dowry, and, on marriage, they leave home to join their husbands. Women who bear sons often enjoy high prestige while those who fail to do so face social stigma and pressure at home, sometimes leading to domestic violence, divorce or even tragedies such as the one mentioned above.

As a result, desire for sons is common, and in many cases childbearing is discontinued only after the birth of a male child (Javed and Mughal, 2019), leading to abnormally high sex ratios at last birth (for instance, 133 male per 100 female births in Pakistan; PDHS 2012-13).

A handful of studies have examined the place and wellbeing of women in relation to preference for boys (and gender of their children). Li and Wu (2011) show that a Chinese woman with a first-born son has a 3.9 percentage points greater role in household decision-making than a woman with a first-born daughter. Having a first-born son improves the

mother's nutrition intake and reduces her likelihood of being underweight. Likewise, Kishore and Spears (2014) report that women in urban India whose first child is a son have a greater body mass index (BMI).

In a recent study (Javed and Mughal, 2018), we argue that women's say in household decision-making does increase after bearing sons, but is limited to everyday (or 'routine', or 'mundane') choices, corresponding to less important social, healthcare, or economic matters, such as visiting friends or relatives, seeing a doctor, buying a household item. 'Strategic' decisions on the other hand, those that involve significant amounts of money and reflect the real source of power at home, remain in the hands of their husbands or the family elders.

Effect of bearing sons on women's say at home

We base our study on data from a nationally representative survey of over 13,000 households in Pakistan (PDHS 2012-13).

We consider four key intra-household decisions regarding the woman's healthcare, family visits, large household purchases and management of the husband's income. They are indicated, respectively, as health, social, consumption and financial aspects of household decisions in Table 1.

Table 1: Female participation in decision-making

VARIABLES	Healthcare decisions	Social decisions	Consumption decisions	Financial decisions
Sons (ref: none)				
At least one son	0.149***	0.208***	0.169***	0.048
Marginal effect	0.052***	0.070***	0.057***	0.017
Controls	YES	YES	YES	YES
Observations	10,017	10,035	10,026	8,532

Note: probit estimation. Results net of several controls (age, education, employment, ...)

Source: Authors' calculations using PDHS 2012-13. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

We find that women with at least one son make more household decisions, alone or jointly with their husbands, than women without a son (Table 1). Women with at least one male child have 6.4 percent more say in at least one of the four types of household decisions studied. However, while bearing one or more sons is associated with 5 to 7 percent higher say in decisions involving healthcare, social and consumption matters, little, if anything, changes when it comes to financial affairs: on these matters, either with or without sons, women's opinions bear no weight. These results are particularly clear among younger, wealthier and educated women, and those who married before age 18.

We also observe that female participation in decision-making grows significantly with the number of sons but only up to the third birth. This suggests that sons represent a sort of "normal good", whose utility decreases, and eventually falls to zero in large households.

Increase in women's say at home does not in itself lead to less gender discrimination

Our analysis shows that one cause of improvement in female decision-making may well be the disproportionate preference for a male child, which in itself symbolises the perpetuation of the unfavourable social status of women. This sheds a less glorious light on female participation in

household decision-making as seen from the perspective of women's empowerment. This, to a certain extent, explains why women in the Asian Subcontinent show stronger preference for boys than do their husbands (PDHS 2012-13). The improvement in women's bargaining power at home seems to come at a cost, often paid by the girl child, as differential preference for boys is associated with poor health and schooling outcomes of girls in Pakistan. At the same time, this increase in bargaining power is severely bounded.

References

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