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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gender Preference among the mothers of Kamrup district of Assam, India: A cross sectional study

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Abstract

Background: Gender discrimination is a social evil and preference for the boy child is a matter of concern all over the world. **Objectives:** The present study was carried out to look for gender preference amongst the mothers of Kamrup district of Assam, to find out the reasons for preferring child of a particular gender and to look for the rural urban differences in gender preference. **Materials and Methods:** This cross-sectional study was done from August 2013 to July 2014 in Kamrup District, Assam, India. Mothers who met the inclusion criteria participated in the study. A total of 400 mothers were interviewed. **Results:** Majority of the respondents (56%) showed no gender preference of which 54.9% belonged to rural areas and 45.1% to urban areas. Among the respondents who preferred a male child, most (30%) in the rural areas cited "increase in work force" as the reason. And in the urban areas, male child was preferred (42.86%) as sons continue the family lineage. The reasons for desiring a girl child in the rural areas was because the respondents found daughters to be more dependable in times of need (29.73%). On the other hand, in urban areas, most of the respondents preferred girl child as they complete the family (31.03%). **Conclusion:** The present findings reveal that the mothers of the study area had no gender preference for their child. The rest of India should be inspired and take steps to abolish the social evil of gender discrimination.

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INTRODUCTION

India has been grappling with the problem of declining sex ratio - number of females per 1000 males. While the total population of India has been growing at an alarming rate over the past 50 years, the number of women relative to the number of men has been steadily falling. Statistics that are available from the census 2011 reveal that post independence, the sex ratio has fallen from 946 in 1951 to 940 in 2011.

The child sex ratio seems to have been more adversely affected when compared to the general sex ratio. The child sex ratio defined as number of females per 1000 males, in the age group 0-6 years consistently shows a declining trend, from 962 in 1981 to 945 in 1991, 927 in 2001 and now to an alarmingly ratio, as low as 914 in 2011. As per 2011 census results, child sex ratio has declined in 27 States and Union Territories. The child sex ratio ranges from 774 in District Jhajjar in Haryana to 1013 in Lahul & Spiti in Himachal Pradesh. The census figures of 2011 revealed that child sex ratio in the case of rural population was higher at 923 compared to 919 for the urban population.¹

The position of women in Assam and other North Eastern states are usually said to be better than that of their counterparts in the rest of India. Most importantly, in some traditions women are not equal to men, but have a higher status than in other states. The society does not suffer from practices like dowry, child-marriage and bride-burning. Hence this study was done to look for the gender preference amongst the mothers in a district of Assam and comment as to in reality does the girl child in Assam have an equal status as that of the boy child.

OBJECTIVE:

1. To look for gender preference amongst the mothers of Kamrup district of Assam
2. To find out the reasons for preferring child of a particular gender.
3. To look for the rural urban differences in gender preference.

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

- **Study Design:** Community based cross-sectional study
- **Study Area:** The present study has been carried out in the Rani Community Development Block and Guwahati Municipal Ward, Kamrup District, Assam.
- **Study Population:** Mothers having atleast one child in the age group of 0-6 years.
- **Study Period:** 1 year (August 2013-July 2014)
- **Sample Size And Sampling Design:** Considering that half of the mothers would want a boy child and the other half a girl child, the prevalence of wanting a child of the either gender as 50% and a relative error of 10% with 95% confidence interval, the sample size was calculated as 400 by using the formula:

$$n = Z^2 pq / L^2$$

Where,

n = required sample size

z =2

p = expected or assumed prevalence

q = (100-p)

L = precision (10% of p)

Simple random sampling was used to collect the required population sample. The population sample was collected from the Rani Community Development Block (Kamrup Rural) and Guwahati Municipal ward (Kamrup Urban). 10 wards were selected from the 31 municipal wards using the random number table and 20 mother were selected at random from each ward. Similarly 10 villages under Rani Community Development Block were selected using the random number table out of the 96 villages and 20 mothers were selected at random from each of the village.

- **Data Collection Tools:** Pre-designed, pre-tested semi-structured schedule.
- **Data Collection Technique:** House to house visit and interview method
- **Data Analysis:** Analysis of data was performed using Microsoft Office Excel 2007.
- **Ethical Considerations:** The Institutional Ethics Committee of Gauhati Medical College approved the study protocol

RESULTS AND OBSERVATIONS:

Table 1: Table showing the gender preference of the respondents:

Gender preference	Gender				
	Rural		Urban		Total
	N (%)	% (row wise)	N (%)	% (row wise)	
Boy	40(20%)	36.36	70(35%)	63.64	110(27.5%)
Girl	37(18.5%)	56.06	29(14.5%)	43.94	66(16.5%)
Both	123(61.5%)	54.9	101(50.5%)	45.1	224(56%)
Total	200(100)		200(100)		400

(N.B. Figures in bracket represent column wise percentage)

Comment: Majority of the respondents (56%) showed no gender preference of which 54.9% belonged to rural areas and 45.1% to urban areas. It was followed by 27.5% of the respondents preferring a male child. The preference of a male child in the urban area (63.64%) was almost double to that of the rural areas (36.36%).

Table 2: Table showing the reasons for preference of a boy child in rural and urban areas:

Reasons for preferring a boy child	Area of Residence			
	Rural(N=40)		Urban(N=70)	
	N	%	N	%
Financial Security	6	15	12	17.14
Old age security	4	10	17	24.29
Social status	8	20	10	14.28
Increase work force	12	30	1	1.43
Continues family lineage	10	25	30	42.86

Comment: Most of the respondents (30%) in the rural areas preferred a male child because of “*increase in work force*”. And in the urban areas, male child was preferred as sons *continue the family lineage* (42.86%).

Table 3: Table showing the reasons for preference of a girl child in rural and urban areas:

Reasons for preferring a girl child	Area of Residence			
	Rural(N=37)		Urban(N=29)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Helping hand at home	8	21.62	5	17.24
Completes family	10	27.03	9	31.03
More dependable	11	29.73	8	27.59
Easier to rear	8	21.62	7	24.14

Comment : Most (29.73%) of the respondents in the rural areas preferred a girl child as they found daughters to be *more dependable in times of need*. On the other hand, in the urban areas, most (31.03%) of the respondents preferred a girl child as they *complete the family*.

DISCUSSION: Majority of the respondents in both rural (61.5%) and urban (50.5%) areas showed no gender preference for their child followed by male preference (35% in urban and 20% in rural). According to DLHS-3, in Assam, among the currently married women with no living children but want a child, 39.3% reported that sex of the child is up to God, 38.8% say it is does not matter while 18.4 and 3.5 percent want a boy and a girl respectively.²

Hospital based cross-sectional study done by Kansal R *et al.*, had similar findings, where 66% of the respondents did not show any gender preference, followed by male preference (22.2%) and female preference (11.8%).³ However, this finding is in contrast to that reported by Vadera *et al.*⁴ and Puri *et al.*⁵ who reported male preference as 58.5% and 56%, respectively.

In the present study, preference for a boy child was more in the urban areas which is in contrast to studies done by Chavada M *et al.*⁶ and Vadera *et al.*⁴, where male preference was more in the rural areas. This finding of the study could be attributed to the predominant tribal population of the study area and its proximity to the neighbouring state of Meghalaya with matriarchal society.

Among the respondents who preferred a male child in the present study, most (30%) in the rural areas cited “*increase in work force*” as the reason. And in the urban areas, male child was preferred (42.86%) as sons *continue the family lineage*. Similar results were found by Chavada M *et al.*, in his study done at Ahmedabad, where keeping the family line alive was the main reason for preference for a son followed by old age security.⁶ UNFPA had published a report where the important reasons for son-preference include: social responsibilities are taken by the males, propagation of family name, support in the old age, performing cremation of parents and dowry given for girls’ marriage.⁷ Dyson and Moore also reported similar findings.⁸

The reasons for desiring a girl child in the rural areas was because the respondents found daughters to be more dependable in times of need (29.73%). On the other hand, in urban areas, most of the respondents preferred girl child as they complete the family (31.03%). In a study done by Thakkar *et al.* the reason for preferring a girl child was that females are considered as the ‘*Laxmi*’ of the house (27.2%) followed by female are more sensitive and caring towards parents (18.2%).⁹

CONCLUSION:

Girls face discrimination from the moment she is born. And this discrimination manifests itself in every walk of life, be it, nutrition, immunization, health care or schooling. In other words, they are not reared as equivalent to their male counterpart. Though the importance of girl child has been stressed time and again, yet a wide level of disparity still exists both in the rural and urban areas of India. Different underlying factors are responsible for this disparity in the rural and urban areas. Achieving gender equity is one of the main cornerstones for achieving universal health coverage. The present study showed that the mothers of the study area had no gender preference for their child. They valued their daughters equal to their sons and did not discriminate. What India needs now is a change in the mind set of the people and in this regard the states of North-east can be a shining example for the rest of India.

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