

Son-preference declining gradually and daughter's status increasing among the urban middle-class in North India: A new research suggests¹

Ambika Kohli

Son-preference is a major form of gender discrimination against women as sons are considered more valuable than daughters at a socio-cultural level. In many Asian countries such as Korea, Vietnam, China and India son-preference is quite common which has resulted in a severe decline of female child sex-ratio. China has the lowest female child sex-ratio in the world followed by India.

India is largely a patriarchal and patrilineal society but in the last three-four decades, especially, after the introduction of neoliberal policies in the 1980s-90s, the middle-class in urban areas has shown upward social and economic mobility. Middle-class is undergoing rapid socio-cultural changes in contemporary India, for instance, female literacy rates have increased dramatically and increasing numbers of women have entered the paid workforce.

As a part of my doctoral thesis, I examined how urban middle-class married mothers view son-preference and treat their daughters in the wake of continuous social changes. The research was conducted at University of Canterbury, New Zealand, and was approved by the Human Ethics Committee. I choose Delhi and Haryana as my research sites not only because I was familiar with these regions rather both of these states have low female child sex-ratio below the national average of 914, and female literacy above the national average of 65.46%. Haryana has the lowest female child sex-ratio and Delhi also ranks low. In 2011, the female child sex ratio in Haryana was 834 and Delhi it was 871. The literacy rate of Delhi according to the 2011 census has female literacy is 80.93 % and it is 66.8% in Haryana. The paradox of increasing female literacy and low female child sex-ratio suggests that patriarchal structures are being reproduced and transformed concurrently in contemporary India.

I interviewed 45 married urban middle-class mothers from Delhi and Haryana, and found that among the urban middle-class son-preference is gradually declining and daughters' social status is increasing. Parents usually wish to have a son, but once a girl is born parents treat her with respect and equality and invest the same emotional and financial resources for their daughter's better life as they would for a son.

¹ This research report was originally published at National Aspirations <http://nationalaspirations.com/son-preference-declining-gradually-daughters-status-increasing-among-urban-middle-class-north-india-new-research-suggests/>

The main reasons behind these changes are neoliberal economic reforms, male migration for jobs and popularity of small and nuclear families. In India, daughters usually join their husbands' families after their marriages and sons look after their parents. Neoliberal economic reforms have allowed educated Indian males to leave their hometown or country in search of highly paid jobs. Neoliberal reforms in conjunction with increasing numbers of small and nuclear families mean that there are high chances that old parents might live on their own even if they have a son or might have to rely on their daughters.

At the same time, neoliberalisation has provided women with education and job opportunities owing to which daughters are able to support their parents not only emotionally, but also financially. Because of the increased social and economic status of daughters and their economic contribution towards their families parents have put greater reliance on them. Owing to all this, son-preference is gradually declining, and parents' trust in sons is also weakening in rapidly changing in urban Indian middle-class society.

My study found that daughters are now inheriting their parents' property, are taking care of their parents and even performing funeral rites for them. These ongoing changes are gradual but are uplifting daughters' status and challenging the practice of son-preference and female foeticide among the urban middle-class in India.

Though the research result is limited to urban middle-class, but is a strong indication that by increasing women's status gender scripts can be changed in other social groups as well, and son-preference can be curbed. Urbanisation, female education and employment can only slowly change the gender scripts such that daughters can be perceived as being more equally valuable by their families and societies.

Ambika Kohli is a PhD in Sociology from University of Canterbury, New Zealand. Her PhD topic was Gender, Class and modernity: Reproductive agency in urban India. Her research interests include violence in society, reproductive agency, gender and class, modernity, and women's empowerment. Her email id is: ambikakohli@hotmail.com.



Ambika Kohli, 2018

2018, by Ambika Kohli. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>