

PATTERNS AND PREDICTORS OF GENDER PREFERENCE FOR CHILDREN IN KUWAIT

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In several developing countries parents prefer to have more sons than daughters. The demand for a larger number of sons is, however, not a universal phenomenon. In Muslim countries such as Indonesia the demand for sons has been found to be relatively weak while in some Arab Muslim countries such as Jordan and Syria a very strong demand has been noted while in Morocco and Tunisia a moderate preference for sons has been reported.

Preference for sons over daughters may have several social and demographic consequences. Parents may delay the use of contraception until the desired number of sons is reached. They may provide health care and nutrition differently to sons than daughters thus leading to differences in morbidity and mortality. In cases where son preference is very strong (e.g., Korea, China, and India) selective abortion may result in an imbalanced sex ratio, especially as the fertility level declines. Thus, analysis of gender preference merits attention for several reasons.

Previous research from Kuwait, based on a nationally representative household survey indicated that parents desired an average of 5.5 children in 1999. A majority (84.0%) provided quantitative information on the number of children they would like to have (or would have liked to have) while 16.0 % were not able to quantify the number of desired children. Among the ones who specified the desired sex composition, the average numbers of desired sons and daughters was 3.0 and 2.4.

Given the above picture, the objective of the present paper is to examine further the patterns and correlates of gender preference in this small oil-rich country where Kuwaiti nationals constitute only about 40 % of the total population while foreign workers comprise the rest. Desired fertility levels are very high and the need for more Kuwaitis is acutely felt. Having gone through the 1991 Gulf war the need for nationals (and sons) to defend the country is also widely perceived. However, the cost of childrearing is greatly subsidized by the government through provision of free schooling, free health care and a child subsidy amounting to about US \$ 150 per child per month. Furthermore, at the time of marriage the girl's parents are not obligated to provide a dowry as in the case of several South Asian countries. The desires for male vs. female children are therefore rooted largely in socio-cultural values pertaining to the size and composition of children. Within the above general context, the following specific objectives are addressed in the paper:

- 1) Is there any evidence of son preference in Kuwait, or do parents want a balance of sons and daughters?
- 2) What are the correlates of the desired sex composition of children?
- 3) How does contraceptive behavior differ according to gender preference within various parity levels?
- 4) How do intentions to stop childbearing differ according to gender preference within various parity levels?

DATA

The paper is based on survey data collected as part of a nationally representative household survey that used a modified version of the 1995 Egypt Demographic and Household Survey. The survey covered a total of 1689 (1.2 %) Kuwaiti households. Non-Kuwaitis were not included in the survey since a majority of non-Kuwaitis are not accompanied by their families and a survey of this kind is therefore not relevant for them. Our survey included 1656 ever-married women of whom 1502 were currently married. This paper is based on the 1502 currently married women (representing 1.1 % of all currently married women) since the questions pertaining to contraceptive use and intentions for future childbearing are applicable only to such women in Kuwait.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

When asked about their desired number of sons and daughters (as phrased in the DHS) a majority (43%) expressed a desire for an equal number of boys and girls (Table 1). Among those who wanted a mix of boys and girls, an overwhelming percentage wanted more boys than girls. About 10 % of the women who specified the number of children they wanted reported they had no gender preference. Finally, about 16 % did not specify any numerical value when asked about the number of children they desired and instead provided answers such as “it is up to God” and “I don’t know”. The above pattern generally remained true at each parity level, with some fluctuations. Thus, after excluding those women who did not specify the number of children they desired nor their sex preference for children the number of women who did provide a numerical answer to the questions on gender preference was 1118.

A cross tabulation of these 1118 women in terms of the mean number of boys and girls they desired according to their current number of living children is shown in Table 2. Those with no living children wanted an average of 3.1 boys and 2.2 girls. The number of desired sons was larger at each parity than the number of daughters. Fluctuations in the number of sons, daughters, and total children desired suggests that the actual experience of bearing children affects the desired gender preference, since there is generally a tendency to rationalize desires to adjust the actual experience. Among those at the highest parity level (6+ children) women wanted about 4 boys and about 3 girls.

The desire for male vs. female children is cross-tabulated according to women’s socio-demographic characteristics in Table 3. Neither age nor parity was significantly associated with the desire for sons vs. daughters. A significantly larger percentage of the more traditional, Bedouin women desired more sons than daughters as did the relatively less educated women and the non-working women.

Table 4 shows the percentage of current use and desire for an additional child among women of different parities and gender composition. Current use was generally higher among those who had achieved a relative gender balance during their reproductive life, or who had produced more boys. Among those who had 4 children 37 % of those who had 2 boys and 2 girls did not want another child. In comparison, 27 % of those with all 4 boys but only 9 % of those with all 4 girls wanted to stop childbearing. Thus, it seems that while a balance of boys and girls is important to Kuwaiti parents, the lack of a male child is a strong motivator of the desire for more children. Among those with six or more children about two-thirds of the

women with gender balance wanted to stop childbearing compared with less than half of those where the number of boys exceeded that of girls or vice versa.

Future multivariate analysis

The preliminary analysis shown in this proposal will be expanded through the use of appropriate multivariate methods such as logistic regression. The important questions in this analysis will aim to understand the factors that affect the desire for a larger number of boys than girls, current contraceptive behavior, and future intentions for childbearing. An attempt will be made to analyze the socio-cultural context and reasons that seem to underlie the desire for sons vs. daughters.

Table 1- Gender preference according to current parity among currently married women
(n=1502)

Parity of living children	Desired number of children					n
	Boys more than girls	Boys equal to girls	Girls more than boys	No gender preference	Non-numeric response to # of desired children	
0 children	32.2	41.5	2.5	6.8	16.9	118
1 child	30.8	37.6	9.4	13.7	8.5	117
2 children	25.6	42.4	3.9	11.8	16.3	203
3 children	27.7	45.4	3.9	11.8	16.3	238
4 children	24.1	47.7	6.8	8.0	13.5	237
5 children	27.7	44.1	5.9	8.6	13.6	220
6 + children	25.4	39.1	3.0	10.6	21.6	366
Total	26.9	42.7	5.0	9.6	15.8	1499*
Total n	403	640	75	144	237	

* 2 missing cases

Table 2- Average number of boys and girls by current parity (n=1118)

	Total \bar{x} desired	\bar{x} boys desired	\bar{x} girls desired	p
Parity of living children				
0 children	5.4	3.1	2.2	<.001
1 child	4.7	2.6	2.0	<.001
2 children	4.9	2.7	2.1	<.001
3 children	4.9	2.7	2.2	<.001
4 children	5.2	2.8	2.4	<.01
5 children	5.7	3.1	2.5	<.05
6 + children	6.8	3.8	2.9	<.001
Total	5.5	3.0	2.4	<.001

Table 3- Desire for male vs female children according to socio-demographic characteristics (n= 1118)

	Desired number of children			n	p
	Boys more than girls (403)	Boys equal to girls (640)	Girls more than boys (75)		
Age					
<30	41.5	51.9	6.6	395	.072
30-39	32.7	60.0	7.3	440	
40+	33.6	60.4	6.0	283	
Ethnicity					
Bedouin	47.5	48.0	4.5	510	<.001
Non-Bedouin	26.5	64.9	8.6	607	
Educational level					
Below secondary	44.2	51.0	4.8	525	<.001
Secondary/diploma	33.4	61.6	5.5	365	
University and above	21.5	65.4	13.2	228	
Woman working /not working					
Not- Working	39.9	54.3	5.8	739	<.01
Working	28.5	63.1	8.4	379	
Parity					
0	42.2	54.4	3.3	90	.317
1	39.6	48.4	12.1	91	
2	35.6	58.9	5.5	146	
3	35.3	57.8	7.0	187	
4	30.6	60.8	8.6	186	
5	35.7	56.7	7.6	171	
6+	37.7	57.9	4.5	247	

Table 4: Sex composition of live children and contraceptive use and whether an additional child was wanted

	Sex composition	% using* p<.01	n	% who don't want p<.001	n
Only 1 child	1 girl	70.8	24	5.1	59
	1 boy	69.6	23	3.4	59
2 children	1boy 1 girl	70.1	67	8.3	108
	2 girls	69.7	33	8.3	48
	2 boys	86.7	30	6.4	47
3 children	3 girls	55.6	18	13.0	23
	2 girls 1 boy	80.8	73	7.5	93
	1 girl 2 boys	75.0	64	14.5	76
	3 boys	51.7	29	11.9	42
4 children	4 girls	60.0	10	9.1	11
	3 girls 1 boy	79.1	43	12.3	57
	2 girls 2 boys	75.3	85	36.8	87
	1 girl 3boys	75.6	45	15.7	51
	4 boys	77.8	18	28.6	21
5 children	5 girls	25.0	4	-	5
	4 girls 1 boy	65.2	23	24.1	29
	3 girls 2 boys	85.0	60	41.3	63
	2 girls 3 boys	86.6	67	42.3	71
	1 girl 4 boys	76.0	25	44.8	29
	5 boys	71.4	7	12.5	8
6 children and above	Only girls	83.3	6	50.0	6
	Girls equal to boys	71.9	57	67.3	55
	Boys lesser	60.2	123	46.2	132
	Boys more	66.7	126	48.9	141
	Only boys	75.0	4	66.7	3

*Excludes women who never used any contraception

- no cases