

# Son Preference and Gender Gaps in Child Nutrition: Does the Level of Female Autonomy Matter?

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## Extended Abstract

A large body of literature has confirmed that son preference, the mindset that sons are more valuable than daughters, is pervasive among Indian parents. There exist a number of economic, social and religious reasons for the evolution of these preferences. For example, parents perceive that it is more costly to bring up a daughter because they have to arrange for substantial amounts of money as dowry payments for her marriage but would get little or no financial support in their old age from adult daughters compared to sons. Frequently, researchers have deduced the presence of son preference by examining its effects on behavior. Studies have shown that parents who do not have the desired number of sons are less likely to use contraceptives, are more likely to continue having children and have shorter birth intervals (Clark 2000). An alternate approach has been to focus on the patterns of discrimination against girls. This could be through the differential allocation of resources between male and female children, which becomes evident from gender gaps in health outcomes (Oster 2009), or by selectively aborting female fetuses to ensure that daughters are not born at all (Arnold et al. 2002).

Spouses do not necessarily have identical preferences, an inference made in several studies which have found that household outcomes vary with the identity of the decision

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maker. Barring a few exceptions, most empirical studies have concluded that higher female autonomy or improvement in a woman's position within the household is associated with better child outcomes, for instance, greater investments in child health and nutrition (Smith et al. 2003).<sup>1</sup> These effects are not always gender neutral; the underlying implication being that parental preferences vary with the child's gender (Duflo 2003; Thomas 1994).

By explicitly including parental preferences, this paper combines the literatures on son preference and female autonomy, which to the best of my knowledge, is the first to do so. Specifically, this paper examines the relationship between son preference of parents and gender gaps in child nutrition and whether this relationship depends on the level of female autonomy. To answer these questions, data from the 2005 – 06 round of the National Family and Health Survey, India are used. Rather than infer the existence of son preference from its effects on behavior, direct and separate measures are created based on survey responses regarding preferred number of boys and girls. The task of finding a satisfactory measure of female autonomy has been challenging for researchers. Some studies have used proxies such as female education, wealth or physical stature (Patel et al. 2007; Thomas 1994). The drawback is that these measures directly affect outcomes such as child's health. To get around endogeneity problems, other studies have looked at exogenous income shocks such as cash transfers (Duflo 2003; Paxson and Schady 2007). But these studies frequently assume that the recipient of the income shock is also the one who decides how to spend the money, which may not always hold true. A recent approach has been to construct an index of female autonomy from survey questions on female involvement in household decisions, freedom of mobility and control of resources (Chakraborty and De 2011). But this too has come under criticism because answers to these questions are weighted equally in the index (Alfano et al. 2011) even though the relative importance of decisions may well vary with the outcome under study. The measure of female autonomy used in this analysis is based on couples' responses to the

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<sup>1</sup>Other studies have found that household and child welfare are maximized when spouses share the bargaining power (Lancaster et al. 2006; Patel et al. 2007).

survey question on routine household purchases. Not only does this give a direct measure, it focuses on the question most relevant for analyzing investments in child nutrition.

Results from this analysis establish the importance of explicitly accounting for parental preferences when studying the dynamics of intra-household bargaining. Gender gaps in nutrition outcomes of children are observed when mothers have a son preference and are involved in household decision making. This suggests that mothers, who are primarily responsible for the nutrition needs of small children, are able to manifest their son preference by differentially allocating resources between boys and girls when she has autonomy in making decisions. On the other hand, no independent association is found between child nutrition outcomes and paternal son preference.

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