



Reasons for Male Gender Preference Among Pregnant Women in Chipata District- Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Traditional societies have undergone rapid social change. Old customary beliefs and practices have been shed by their tonnes, however, other ancient attitudes and beliefs such as son preference are slow to drop off especially in some Sub-Sahara African countries. Following cultural transformation as a result of more females getting educated and their entrance into the labour market assured, it is expected that traditional attitudes of gender preferences especially son preference are by-gones in modern times. The objective of this study was to find out from 80 Pregnant Women in Chipata District, Zambia, the preferred gender in relation to the present pregnancy. The study used communal conversations with Pregnant Women in two separate times to collect qualitative data. This study found that 62.5% (50) Pregnant Women yearned for a son. The reasons ranged from family security and leadership, provision of financial and social support to aged parents, for improvement of food security in the home and to perpetuate the name and father's legacy. This study recommends education to couples as they attend Antenatal care to accept any child gender. This will assist families not to have too soon, too early pregnancies for a preferred gender with consequent uterine rupture or failure to care for a bloated family.

Key Words: Gender, Preference, Son, Daughter, Society, Inequalities

I. INTRODUCTION

Son preference is defined as 'to ascribe higher value to sons over daughters' (Duflo, 2011). Studies on gender preference for children at parental level and at the wider society level, is receiving scholarly attention worldwide. It is out of these studies that the Chinese and Indian societies are said to have had a pervasive culture for 'son preference.' 'China's longstanding patrilineal and patriarchal family and marriage systems propelled by wife's subordination to her husband' (Shang, Chi & Liu 2023:3), eventuating into 'sex-selection methods as differential stopping behaviour and sex-selective abortion' (Rashid & Mazhar 2018:1) for girls. Like China, son preference in India is 'generally propagated through traditionally held customs, norms, and practices, which vary across geographies' (Sigh et al., 2022: 794). Raji et al. (2016) argued that 'the underlying patriarchal attitudes and behaviour, as well as discriminatory gender norms and structures are the root causes of male child preference in human society' (Raji et al. 2016: 59). In Africa, studies conducted in Nigeria found that the yearn for the male child is regarded as an approved and justifiable cultural phenomenon for it fosters continuity of the family name (Olanrewaju et al., 2015: 91). Ohagwu et al. (2014) in their Nigeria study, found that a male child meant greater joy for sons' preferring parents with the father was joyful because he had a man who would take after his name and perpetuate his legacy.

Zambia is one of the countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa with the population of 20 million. Chipata, formerly Fort Jameson, is a Zambian city for the Ngoni speaking. By culture, the Ngoni are patriarchal. Growing up among the Ngoni during the 1990s, I observed that men preferred sons to daughters. Women fell in as well into the prevailing cultural norm. Following the lapse of 3 decades Chipata City has undergone radical social change. For example, female student enrolments in primary, secondary through to college and university have greatly improved.

Studies conducted in 'Bangladesh and-to a lesser-extent-in India and Nepal indicate that preferences for sons is undergoing a steady decline among women' (Asadullah, Mansoor & Randazzo 2020: 2). Has son preference among women in Chipata District, Zambia remained steady, declined or increased in 'modern times where primary school enrolment has become nearly universal for both boys and girls?' (Duflo 2011:1). The objective of this study was to find out the status of son preference and reasons thereof.

II. Materials and Methods

Study Design: The study used explorative research design with qualitative research approach. Participants in this study were of low education level therefore, could not provide responses to a questionnaire. In addition, matters of reproduction has a social sensitivity code that could only open through physical engagement with participants.

Study Location: The study was conducted in Chipata District, Zambia. Chipata City has a population of 327,059. Population of females is slightly above the population of males.

Study Duration: The study was conducted between January and March, 2023

Sample size : 80 Pregnant Women participated in the study

Inclusion criteria

1. Only Pregnant Women aged 18 and above years, available and willing participated in the study

Exclusion criteria

1. Pregnant Women less than 18 years, or older but not willing to participate or were not available

III. Procedure Methodology

The study was conducted at the largest health facility in Chipata District, Zambia. A total of 80 pregnant women participated in the study. Data was collected between January and March, 2023. Permission was sought from hospital management. Two separate communal conversations were held with Pregnant Women. Each meeting consisted of 40 pregnant women. The session lasted 45 minutes. In both sessions, the Researchers did not face challenges as they were both Health Workers as such understood how to engage participants and allow the conversations to bring out valuable data naturally. Data collection was conducted through a semi-structured interview guide. Prior to engaging participants, explanation about the study objective was offered. Informed consent was obtained from participants. Data analysis used Thematic Analysis.

Theory

The study was guided by the theory of Patriarchy. A product of the family, culture and other influential institutions, Patriarchy gives men and women unequal power, privileges and independence (Kelly, 1988). Under the system of Patriarchy, Mirkin (1984) argues that men control women, and it is argued that they mould ideology, philosophy, art, culture and religion to suit their needs' (Mirkin 1984: 41). Patriarchy views 'Women as a subgroup in a man's world where the wife is seen as the husband's property the husband to produce him children of his preferred gender, if she fails to do so she feels insecure in her marriage because she is seen as a liability. Women therefore, feel they are obliged to give birth to the gender desired by men.

IV. Results

The following table illustrates social demographic data for participants.

Table 1. Social Characteristics of Pregnant Women

Variable	Total (N- 80)	Son Preference during Current pregnancy	Daughter preference during current pregnancy
DISTRICT			
Chipata	80(100%)	50(62.5%)	30(37.5%)
AGE GROUPS IN YEARS			
<25	30(37.5%)	12(24%)	18(60%)
25-30	24(30%)	18(36%)	6(20%)
31-36	16(20%)	12(24%)	4(13.3%)
>37	10(12.5%)	8(16%)	2(6.7%)
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL			
No formal education			
Primary education	22(27.5%)	18(36%)	4(13.3%)
Secondary education	36(45%)	22(44%)	14(46.7%)
College or university education	22(27.5%)	10(20%)	12(40%)
	0(0%)	0	0(0%)

RESIDENCE			
High Density (urban)	21(33.8%)	3(6%)	18(60%)
Low Density(urban)	5(6.2%)	1(2%)	4(13.3%)
Village	54(60%)	46(92%)	8(26.7%)

As can be noted from the table above, age is a predictor of male child preference. The older the pregnant woman the more likely that they would choose to give birth to a son than a daughter during their current pregnancy. Similarly women with low educational levels are inclined to prefer a son to a daughter. Son preference among women in the village is comparatively higher than those in urban areas.

Reasons for son preference

From the conversations with Pregnant Women, the following results categorized under the themes: to oblige to the husband's demand for a son, to ensure family cattle is cared for, for food security due to aggressive farming activities, to ensure financial and social support to parents in their old age, perpetuation of father's name and family leadership.

Obligation to the husband's demand for a son

Pregnant Women who reported to have a daughter as the first child or had given to two or more daughters were under obligation by their husbands to give birth to a son. As reflected into the following excerpts from participants:

'My first born is female, her father loves her but he keeps on telling me he wants a son' (Pregnant Woman, second pregnancy).

'My husband and I have been blessed with two daughters, their father says if a male comes in, then the family will be complete' (Pregnant Woman, third pregnancy).

'This is my first pregnancy, my husband tells me he is ready for any gender but will be extra happy if he has a son' (Pregnant Woman, first pregnancy).

To assist with caring for family cattle

Cattle-rearing-families had a natural inclination for sons more than daughters. The trade to tender cattle is exclusively for males. While families could engage hired shepherd (s) the cost/benefit ratio weighed more towards having a male child, the rightfully heir.

'My husband has much cattle, the never-ending stories of disappointments he has endured from the mischievous hired cattle servants, he tells me give me a son and all these problems will end' (Pregnant woman, fourth pregnancy).

'We are tired of attending village courts because our hired cattle shepherds are careless and negligent to the extent that the animals stray regularly and eat fresh crops in other people's fields. When the owners find them, we are dragged to court and made to pay. It has happened not once, twice but several times' (Pregnant Woman,

Sons for food security due to aggressive farming activities

Ruralites dependent on agriculture for survival. Agricultural, though a mixed sex activity, leans towards males. During conversations with Pregnant Woman, it was highlighted that male children were desperately yearned as reported:

'For me I want a son now and more sons in future to help with farming so that the family has food all seasons' (Pregnant Woman, Fourth pregnancy).

'When you have more sons in the family then you are assured that you have plough handlers, as parents, you play a supervisory role' (Pregnant Woman, fifth pregnancy).

For financial and social support to parents in their old age

It was reported that male children, by virtue of their gender, meant that they settled close to their parents while daughters were taken by their husbands. Obviously, male children finally took up the role of caring for their aged parents.

'We give birth to daughters in order that other families far away can enjoy but giving birth to male children is an assurance that they will take care of you in your old age (Pregnant Woman, sixth pregnancy)

'Female children are not our children but male children. They are the ones who even bury you' (Pregnant Woman, eighth pregnancy).

Perpetuation of father's name and family leadership

Advocates of the male child preference explained that sons were preferred for leadership role in the family after parents' declining strength due to age.

'Men always talk about who would inherit their name, so they tell the wife, come on give me a son' (Pregnant Woman, third pregnancy).

'When you have a bundle of daughters only, then you notice infighting, jealousy, competition and chaos, you need a man to provide leadership, guidance and discipline' (Pregnant Woman, eighth pregnancy).

V. Discussion

Son preference is common among male parents. Female parents in traditional societies flowed with the masculine reasoning. In Zambia, it was not uncommon during the years leading up to the 1990s, for female parents to prefer sons to daughters. However, following, a lapse of three decades, characterized by cultural transformation due to multiple factors such as globalization, community education, human rights promotion and awareness in rural environments, coupled with increased opportunities for women's education and financial independence, it is significant to investigate whether the held cultural attitude exists and if it does, to what extent? The objective of this study was to find out the cultural status of male child preference among pregnant women in Chipata District, Zambia.

The study was conducted between January and March, 2023. A total of 80 pregnant women aged 18 and above years participated in the study. This study found that 62.5% (50) of Pregnant Women preferred a son during their present pregnancy. Reasons for male child preference were bordered on 'my husband wants a son. I am obliged to give him what he wants' (Pregnant Woman, first pregnancy). Elele, 2002 in Raji et al. (2016) observed that the desire for a male child among women usually results from husbands keeping pressure on their wives to have male children and if that failed, the man resorted to polygamy in the hope that other women would give the son he needs (Elele 2002 in Raji et al. 2016:58). This study also found that preference for male children was driven by the eagerness to have an army of male children to help with cultivation for the purpose of increasing food security and provision of financial and social support to aged parents. Ebenstein & Leung (2010) investigated the firmly held traditional view that old-age support norm was the reason why couples in China preferred sons to daughters.

VI. Conclusion

Son preference to daughters is a long customary practice among traditional societies in Asia and Africa. Following cultural transformation as a result of more females getting educated and their entrance into the labour market assured, it is important to investigate existence of the cultural attitude and analyse its extent. The objective of this study was to find out from 80 Pregnant Women in Chipata District, Zambia, the preferred gender of the child in relation to their present pregnancy. This study found that 62.5% (50) Pregnant Women yearned for a son. The reasons ranged from family security and leadership, provision of financial and social support to aged parents, for improvement of food security at home and to perpetuate the name and father's legacy.

VII. Recommendations

Traditional societies have undergone rapid social change. Old customs beliefs and practices have been shed by their tonnes, however, some ancient attitudes and beliefs such son preference are slow to drop off especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. This study found that more women preferred a son to a daughter. This study recommends education to couples as they attend Antenatal care to accept any child gender. This will assist families not to have too soon, too early pregnancies for a preferred gender with consequent uterine rupture or failure to care for a bloated family.

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