



Gender Discrimination and Son Preference: A Case Study among Kisan Claimants of Bhutni chor, Malda, West Bengal, India

INDU BHAUMIK¹, CHANDRA SHEKHER UPADHAYAY², SUBIR BISWAS³

¹Former ICSSR Doctoral fellow, Department of Anthropology, West Bengal State University.

E-mail: bhaumindu@gmail.com

²ICSSR Doctoral Fellow, Department of Anthropology & Tribal Studies,

Sidho-Kanho Birsha University. E-mail: shekherupadhyay@gmail.com

³Professor & Head, Department of Anthropology, West Bengal State University.

E-mail: subir@wbsu.ac.in

Abstract: The phenomenon of preferring a child's sex is a ubiquitous and culturally diverse global occurrence. This study undertakes an in-depth examination of the prevalence of son preference and gender discrimination and the impact of these on demographic trends and ideal family size among the Kisan claimants of Bhutni Chor, Malda, West Bengal. As a patrilineal community, they exhibit a pronounced preference for sons, as evident in the demographic data. Families show a marked preference for sons over daughters due to factors such as the perpetuation of dowries and women's limited rights to inherit property. Notwithstanding a comparatively even actual sex ratio, mothers prefer fewer daughters than sons. This preference remains strong even among well-educated parents. Positive correlations were found between demographic variables and the ideal number of sons, while increased levels of maternal education were related to a desire for more daughters. The ideal number of daughters did not strongly correlate with most demographic variables. In conclusion, these results demonstrate the deeply entrenched son preference and gender bias in the community, emphasising the need for interventions aimed at curbing gender inequality.

Keywords: Gender Discrimination, Son Preference, Kisan claimants, Demography.

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Introduction

The preferences of couples regarding the gender of their offspring exhibit variability but often converge within homogeneous societal cohorts. These inclinations generally harmonise with the conventional norms prevalent in a community or nation.

Preferences for the sex of a child differ among couples but tend to be similar within homogenous societal groups. These preferences typically align with the traditional norms of a community or country (Radkar, 1999). Son preference, a cultural and societal gender bias in favour of male children compared to female children, results in discrimination against daughters. This bias stems from patriarchal traditions (Cain, 1993) and economic considerations, where sons are viewed as carriers of the family name, financial supporters, and providers of old-age security for parents (Das Gupta, 2010; Jayachandran, 2015). In some societies, sons are essential for performing certain religious and life-cycle rites. The effect of son preference is remarkable, resulting in gender imbalances, discrimination, psychological effects, and numerous socioeconomic inferences (Shah 2005). Son preference is less common in developed countries but remains prevalent in many developing ones (Williamson, 1976). Developed countries, mainly in the Western world, differ culturally and socially from Eastern developing countries. Population growth is controlled in developed areas, whereas many developing countries struggle with fertility reduction. Contraceptive use is more widespread in the West than in the East. Although the incidence of son preference varies across cultures and communities. For instance, in India, patrilineal societies tend to favour sons, whereas matrilineal societies traditionally favour daughters. There is a contrast in attitude between the urban and rural populations towards the aged.

Son preference is a key indicator of social development, reflecting gender inequality and the status of women. It results in differential treatment of daughters and inhibits population-control programs. It is crucial to understand the causes and intensity of sex preference because it differs across societies and regions. The following sections further examine these issues. Son preference is wide-ranging in most Asian societies, including India, where parents usually have particular wishes about the sex and number of children. Traditional accounts, ethnographic work, and cultural narratives in modern Indian society furnish ample evidence of a preference for sons (Radkar, 1999).

In the 21st century, son preference has undergone a notable transition, influenced by changing social, economic, and cultural dynamics. Factors furnishing

to this transference include government policies and incentives for single girl children, women's reservation in the workforce, economic empowerment of women, shifting social norms, modernisation, human rights policy development, and regular awareness campaigns. Despite these encouraging trends, son preference remains deep-rooted in some areas, especially rural India. Notwithstanding these positive trends, son preference remains profoundly entrenched in certain areas, especially rural India. Adaptation is proceeding, with improvements varying widely by culture and socio-economic situation. Certain parts of the nation still struggle with the deeply ingrained attitude of son preference in their rich culture.

Situation of Son Preference in India

The cultural pattern of preferring sons to daughters is prevalent, especially in the nations of the Indian subcontinent, but to varying degrees. It is deeply rooted in the collective psyche of India and manifests itself in the attitudes and behaviour of people (Radkar, 1999; Williamson, 1976). Numerous studies have examined this preference and quantitatively measured its extent using data and indices. These studies investigate the preference for sons over daughters and its impact on fertility rates (Widmer *et al.*, 1981; Lahiri, 1974; Khan *et al.*, 1985; Bhatia, 1978; Das, 1984; Bairagi *et al.*, 1986; Chowdhury *et al.*, 1990; Nag, 1991; Deshpande, 1994; Rajan, 1996; Kulkarni *et al.*, 1996; Arnold, 2002; Bhatt, 2003; Jha, 2006; Srinivasan *et al.*, 2008; Kashyap *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, qualitative studies by various scholars also support the prevalence of son preference in India (Morrison, 1961; Altekhar, 1962; Prabhu, 1963; May *et al.*, 1968; Rao, 1969; Bhatia, 1978; Miller, 1981; Das Gupta, 1987; Basu, 1990; Satia *et al.*, 1990; Rajaretnam *et al.*, 1994; Radkar, 1999; Pande, 2007; Nanda, 2008).

Evidence of son preference is reflected in the data from the National Family Health Surveys. In 1992-93 (NFHS-1), the mean ideal number of children a couple desired was 2.9, consisting of 1.6 sons, 1.1 daughters, and 0.2 children of either sex. Nationally, the desired number of sons exceeded the desired number of daughters by 45 %, and this gap varied between 22-75 % at the state level. A comparison between NFHS-1 and NFHS-2 showed a further decline in the desired number of children to 2.7 in 1998-99, comprising 1.4 sons, 1.0 daughters, and 0.3 children of either sex. According to the NFHS-3 (2005-6), 77 % of women desired at least one son among their children, and a similar percentage desired at least one daughter. In NFHS-4, 54 % of women with at least one son and 34 % with two daughters and no sons

expressed this preference. The NFHS-5 (2019–2021) revealed that 85 % of women with two sons did not desire more children. Over time, from NFHS-1 to NFHS-5, the measure of ideal family size has indicated a steady decline in son preference.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- To examine the extent of son preference along with female discrimination among Kisan claimants of Bhutni chor, Malda, West Bengal.
- To analyse the impact of son preference on demographic trends and ideal family size among Kisan claimants of Bhutni Chor in Malda, West Bengal.

Research Methodology Applied in the Research

The study was conducted within an endogamous community, specifically among Kisan claimants in the Malda district of West Bengal, India. A total of 242 mothers, each with at least two children, participated in this study. The mothers were aged 20–49 years, representing the reproductive age group. Mothers with only one child were not selected for this study for two reasons. First, most of these mothers are typically very young (<19 years) and may not be able to provide comprehensive data on family planning. Second, if a mother chooses to have only one child, her family planning process is effectively concluded, rendering the data irrelevant for the purposes of this study. Moreover, older mothers (≥ 50 years) who were no longer in the reproductive age group were excluded since they were not actively engaged in family planning. The present study intends to paint a clear picture of the current scenario and does not represent past scenarios. Participants were chosen using purposive sampling, and individuals who could provide pertinent data on sex preference were selected.

Son preference is a critical aspect of fertility behaviour in any population, although measuring it is challenging. Primary data were collected using a fertility survey that gathered information on basic demographic factors such as the ages, educational qualifications, and primary occupations of both mothers and fathers. The survey also covered bio-events such as the age at first marriage and the age at first childbirth, as well as the actual and desired family size and its composition, the preferred sex of the next child, and contraceptive prevalence. This information uncovered participants' sex preference attitudes toward their children and the perceived benefits and drawbacks of having sons and daughters. In addition,

couples modify their fertility and family planning practices according to sex preferences.

The Context of Kisan Claimants

The Kisans, an indigenous community from the Chotanagpur Plateau, are recognised as part of the Dravidian ethnic group (Dalton, 1872). This community is spread across several Indian states and is officially classified as Scheduled Tribes. In West Bengal, however, approximately 92,598 Kisans (according to the 2011 census) reside in the Malda district, where they are not recognised as a Scheduled Tribe and face challenges in establishing a social identity. In this region, they are currently categorised as a general caste but seek recognition under the Scheduled Tribe category. Consequently, this community is termed Kisan claimants. In this society, family legacy is passed down through sons. This belief causes families to prefer having sons instead of daughters, which leads to son preference and daughters being treated unfairly. Even though there have been no cases of female foeticide, the overall picture reflects a broader gender bias.

Analysis

Son preference is extensive, especially in societies that are patriarchal. It usually arises due to the customary need to keep family lines alive through male descendants. The Kisan society is a good example of such a patriarchal system, where lineages are followed through the male line, and hence there is a preference for sons. This phenomenon is presented in the subsequent tables. Table 1 provides the background characteristics of the Kisan claimant women. The data reveal that the majority of families are nuclear (90.49 %), with only a small proportion being joint (9.51 %). The table also includes information on the education and occupations of both parents. This shows that a significant number of mothers and fathers have low levels of education. Additionally, agriculture and related occupations are predominant for both men and women in this community.

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Women by Socio-Economic Characteristics

<i>Background characteristics</i>	<i>N (%)</i>
Type of residence	
Rural	0 (0.00%)
Urban	242 (100.00)

<i>Background characteristics</i>	<i>N (%)</i>
Type of family	
Nuclear	219 (90.49%)
Joint	23 (9.51%)
Education of Mother/ Woman	
Can't sign	43 (17.77%)
Can sign	50 (20.67%)
Up to primary	48 (19.83%)
Up to secondary	87 (35.95%)
Up to Higher Secondary	13 (5.37%)
Graduate	1 (0.41%)
Education of Father/ Husband	
Can't sign	29 (11.98%)
Can sign	27 (11.16%)
Up to primary	52 (21.49%)
Up to secondary	126 (52.07%)
Up to Higher Secondary	7 (2.89%)
Graduate	1 (0.41%)
Occupation of Mother/ Woman	
Agriculture	17 (7.02%)
Agricultural labor	100 (41.32%)
Biri manufacturer	70 (28.94%)
Domestication	9 (3.71%)
Housewife	40 (16.53%)
Service	1 (0.41%)
Tailor	5 (2.07%)
Occupation of Father/ Husband	
Agriculture	103 (42.57%)
Agricultural labor	20 (8.26%)
Business	2 (0.82%)
Labor	114 (47.12%)
Service	2 (0.82%)
Singer	1 (0.41%)

Table 2 provides comparative demographic information on the surveyed women. The age distribution of mothers and fathers is shown, with the average age of mothers being 34.94 years and that of fathers being 40.11 years. The mean number of surviving children was calculated to be 3.05, with the mean number of sons and daughters being 1.53 and 1.51, respectively. The mean age at marriage for women in the Kisan claimant's community is 14.01 years, indicating the prevalence of early marriages. Similarly, the mean age at first childbirth was 16.63 years, reflecting a

very young age for motherhood. The table also details the use of contraceptive pills in the studied community.

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of Women by Demographic Characteristics

<i>Demographic characteristics</i>	<i>N (%)</i>
Age of Mother/ Woman (years)	
20-24	29 (11.98%)
25-29	48 (19.83%)
30-34	43 (17.77%)
35-39	36 (14.88%)
40-44	44 (18.18%)
45-49	42 (17.36%)
Mean age of Mother (years)	34.94 ± 0.52
Age of Father/ Husband (years)	
20-24	3 (1.23%)
25-29	39 (16.12%)
30-34	41 (16.94%)
35-39	41 (16.94%)
40-44	27 (11.15%)
45-49	44 (18.18%)
50-54	34 (14.05%)
55-59	10 (4.13%)
60-64	3 (1.23%)
Mean age of Father (years)	40.11 ± 0.61
Number of Children living	
2	84 (34.71%)
3	96 (39.67%)
4	41 (16.95%)
5	12 (4.96%)
6	7 (2.89%)
7	1 (0.41%)
8	1 (0.41%)
Mean of Children living	3.05 ± 0.06
Number of Son(s) living	
0	9 (3.71%)
1	127 (52.48%)
2	81 (33.47%)
3	19 (7.85%)
4	5 (2.07%)
5	1 (0.41%)
Mean of Son(s) living	1.53 ± 0.05

<i>Demographic characteristics</i>	<i>N (%)</i>
Number of Daughter(s) living	
0	38 (15.70%)
1	97 (40.08%)
2	69 (28.51%)
3	29 (11.98%)
4	2 (0.82%)
5	6 (2.48%)
6	1 (0.41%)
Mean of Daughter(s) living	1.51 ± 0.07
Age at First Marriage of Mother/ Woman (years)	
<18	234 (96.69%)
≥18	8 (3.31%)
Mean age at First Marriage(years)	14.01 ± 0.12
Age at First Child of Mother/ Woman (years)	
<18	194 (80.17%)
≥18	48 (19.83%)
Mean age at First Child (years)	16.63 ± 0.10
Contraceptive use	
Yes	19 (7.85%)
No	11 (4.55%)
Sterilization	177 (73.14%)
Menopause	35 (14.46%)

Table 3 explores respondents' views on ideal family size, gender composition, and reflection of societal gender attitudes. From the data, it is evident that most of the respondents are of the view that an ideal family should have 2 to 4 children, with the ideal number averaging 2.85 children. This shows that a moderately sized family is preferred in the community. When looking at the ideal gender ratio of these children, a strong preference for sons is seen. The ideal number of sons varied from 1 to 5, with a mean of 2.20. This strong preference for having more sons reflects the cultural and social value assigned to male children. On the other hand, the mean ideal number of daughters was very low at 0.65. This statistic glaringly brings out the reluctance to have female children. More striking is the revelation that 40.08 % of mothers polled wanted no daughters at all. This figure is an unambiguous reflection of a strongly ingrained prejudice against female children, indicating not only a desire for sons but also an equally strong distaste for daughters. This high aversion to having daughters can be explained by socio-cultural circumstances. In

the community being studied, daughters tend to be a source of expenses because of the dowry culture, poor inheritance rights, and the anticipation of them ultimately returning to their parents' home to live with their husbands' families. All of this contributes to the under-valuation of daughters and aversion to sons. The data in Table 3 rely solely on mothers' views to provide a glimpse of the mainstream attitudes and local cultural norms relating to family and gender in this community. Both the strong preference for sons and the accompanying dis-preference for daughters underscore the entrenched patriarchal continuation of gender inequity and discrimination against females. The cultural and social significance of these findings is immense, as they indicate the necessity of interventions to reduce gender biases and encourage the worth of daughters in such societies.

Table 3: Percentage Distribution of Women by Ideal Sex Composition of Children

	N (%)
Ideal Number of Children	
2	103 (42.56%)
3	83 (34.29%)
4	49 (20.25%)
5	3 (1.24%)
6	4 (1.65%)
Mean of Ideal Number of Children	2.85 ± 0.05
Ideal Number of Son(s)	
1	54 (22.31%)
2	113 (46.69%)
3	49 (20.25%)
4	24 (9.92%)
5	2 (0.83%)
Mean of Ideal Number of Son(s)	2.20 ± 0.05
Ideal Number of Daughter(s)	
0	97 (40.08%)
1	133 (54.96%)
2	12 (4.96%)
Mean of Ideal Number of Daughter(s)	0.65 ± 0.03

Table 4 paints a clear contrast between the expected and actual sex ratios of the children in the research community. The sex ratio, in terms of females per 1,000 males, is an important measure of gender balance. From the information presented, the actual sex ratio of offspring in the community stands at 986 females per 1,000 males. This is significantly higher than the state average of 950 and the district

average of 944, as per Census of India, 2011. Such a healthy sex ratio indicates a comparatively even gender distribution among the population, signifying the lack of female foeticide. Nonetheless, the ideal sex ratio projected by the mothers in the society presents a worrying contrast. The preferred ratio is as low as 295 females per 1,000 males. This desire for a drastically lower proportion of females compared to males indicates profound son preference and utmost gender bias. The ideal ratio highlights entrenched social biases in favour of male children against female children, an indication of deeply rooted cultural biases and structural discrimination against daughters. This reveals that, despite the relatively balanced actual sex ratio, a strong undercurrent of gender bias remains within the community.

Table 4: Expected vs Actual Sex Ratio of the Children

	N (%)
Male children	
Of ideal outcome	371
Of actual outcome	533
Female children	
Of ideal outcome	366
Of actual outcome	157
Sex ratio	
Of ideal outcome	295
Of actual outcome	986

Table 5 offers a comprehensive analysis of Spearman's correlation between parents' educational level and various demographic characteristics. The data revealed significant relationships between the mother's education and all examined variables. For example, mothers' education positively correlated with age at first marriage ($r = 0.449$), suggesting that higher maternal education is linked to a later marriage age. It also correlated with age at first birth ($r = 0.289$), indicating that higher maternal education was associated with a later age at first childbirth, and with the ideal number of daughters ($r = 0.168$), implying that more educated mothers tended to have a slightly higher ideal number of daughters.

Conversely, negative correlations were found between mothers' education and several other demographic variables: number of conceptions ($r = -0.530$), number of sons ($r = -0.296$), number of daughters ($r = -0.243$), and ideal number of sons ($r = -0.617$). These correlations indicate that higher maternal education is linked to fewer conceptions, fewer sons and daughters, and a lower ideal number of sons.

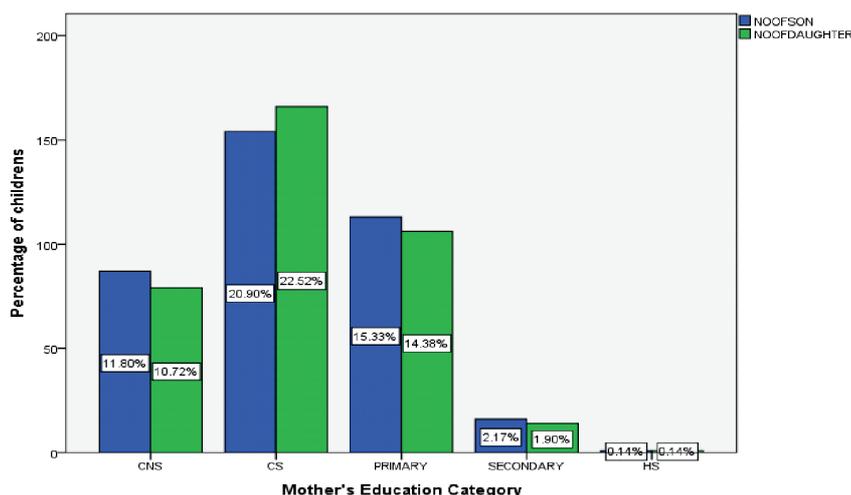
Similarly, fathers' education shows significant correlations with most demographic variables, except for the ideal number of daughters, where the correlation is not statistically significant. Specific negative correlations included conceptions ($r = -0.407$), number of sons ($r = -0.169$), number of daughters ($r = -0.267$), and ideal number of sons ($r = -0.345$).

These correlations suggest that higher paternal education is associated with fewer conceptions, fewer sons and daughters, and a lower ideal number of sons. Collectively, these relationships indicate that parental education levels are correlated with various demographic trends. In particular, better-educated parents are likely to have fewer children and specific preferences for the ideal number of sons and daughters, indicating the influence of educational attainment on family planning.

Table 5: Correlation between Parent's Educational Status and Demographic Characteristics

Variables	Mother's education		Father's education	
	R-value	p-value*	R-value	p-value*
Age at first marriage	0.449**	0.000	0.346**	0.000
Age at first birth	0.289**	0.000	0.219**	0.001
No of conceptions	-0.530**	0.000	-0.407**	0.000
No of son	-0.296**	0.000	-0.169**	0.009
No of daughter	-0.243**	0.000	-0.267**	0.000
Ideal no of son	-0.617**	0.000	-0.345**	0.000
Ideal no of daughter	0.168**	0.009	-0.057	0.379

** $p < 0.01$



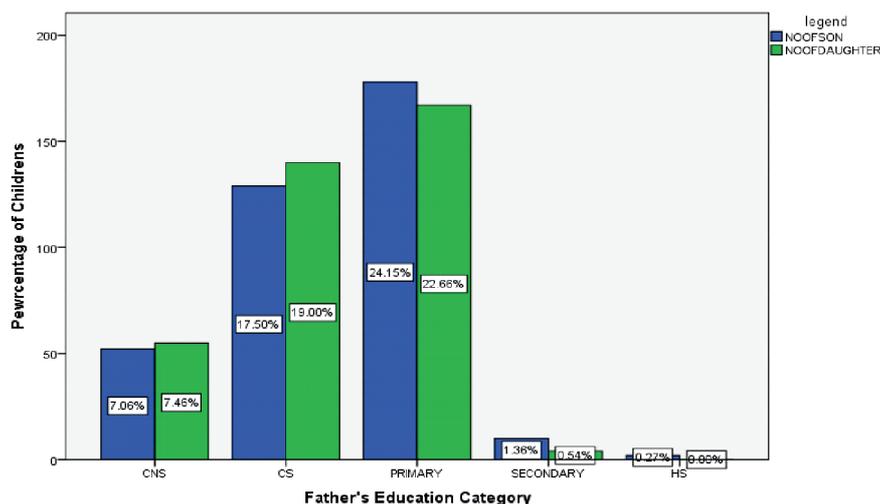


Figure 1: Actual number of Children vs. Parent's Educational Status

Table 6 presents the association between respondents perceived ideal number of sons and daughters and a spectrum of demographic variables. Notably, positive associations were observed for various factors. Specifically, maternal age ($r= 0.632$) and paternal age ($r= 0.620$) exhibited strong positive correlations, indicating that as parents' age increased, their ideal number of sons tended to increase. In addition, a significant positive correlation was perceived with the number of conceptions

Table 6: Correlation between Ideal number of Son and Daughter with Demographic Characteristics

Variables	Ideal no of son		Ideal no of daughter	
	R-value	p-value*	R-value	p-value*
Mother's age	0.632**	0.000	-0.042	0.520
Mother's occupation	-0.232**	0.000	-0.071	0.273
Mother's education	-0.617**	0.000	0.168**	0.009
Father's age	0.620**	0.000	-0.034	0.603
Father's occupation	-0.232**	0.000	-0.089	0.168
Father's education	-0.345**	0.000	-0.057	0.379
No of conception	0.737**	0.000	0.076	0.240
No of son	0.329**	0.000	0.004	0.954
No of daughter	0.387**	0.000	0.116	0.071

** $p < 0.01$

($r = 0.737$). Individuals with more conceptions are likely to have a preference for a higher number of sons. Moreover, moderate positive correlations were observed with the actual number of sons ($r = 0.329$) and daughters ($r = 0.387$). This supports the trend of couples who already have children desiring more children. Conversely, negative correlations were evident between the ideal number of sons and maternal occupation ($r = -0.232$), maternal education ($r = -0.617$), paternal occupation ($r = -0.232$), and paternal education ($r = -0.345$). These findings suggest that higher levels of parental education and certain occupational levels are associated with a lower ideal number of sons. However, analysing correlations connected with the ideal number of daughters, the study showed a different picture. There was a single strong positive correlation with the education of mothers ($r = 0.168$).

Conclusion

Son preference, which is deeply rooted in patriarchal societies such as the Kisan claimants community, is expressed in many areas of family life and societal attitudes toward gender roles. This preference is not just a personal choice but, in many cases, is rooted in centuries-old traditions and cultural norms that prioritise male heirs for the perpetuation of the family. Within such communities, the desire for sons is intertwined with broader socio-cultural constructs that define familial roles, inheritance practices, and perceptions of gender roles lineage (Sen 1990; Dasgupta 1987; Li *et al* 1999; Clark 2000; Jones 2005; Das Gupta 2010; Guilmoto 2012; Bongaarts 2013). Despite the emergence of more egalitarian values in some spheres, the traditional preference for male offspring persists, shaping family structures and societal expectations (Kugler 2017; Grech 2017; Le 2022). This emphasis on sons manifests itself in the imbalanced ideal family size, where a significant difference is observed between the ideal number of sons and daughters. Socio-economic realities further reinforce son preference. Girls are perceived as economic liabilities due to customary dowry requirements and restricted inheritance rights. This attitude perpetuates the undervaluation of female children in the family and continues the cycle of gender discrimination. Daughters therefore experience structural discrimination, which affects their access to resources, education, and opportunities for promotion.

Additionally, the association between parental educational attainment and preference for children underscores how education shapes attitudes towards gender and family planning. Although education levels are higher in families with fewer

children, the desire for sons persists, albeit to different extents. This indicates that although education contributes to more educated reproductive decisions, it does not eliminate deep-rooted gender bias. The gap between the expected and actual sex ratios serves as an indicator of the universality of son preference in the population. Furthermore, the expected sex ratio desired by mothers confirmed their ongoing preference for male offspring. This discrepancy between social ideals and population realities highlights the need for specific interventions.

Essentially, the son preference of Kisan claimants, being a patriarchal society, has strong cultural, social, as well as economic underpinnings. Addressing this issue requires a cross-cutting strategy that addresses not only personal preferences but also overall structural disparities. Initiatives towards gender equality must include educational interventions, legal reforms, and community interventions directed towards questioning entrenched gender norms and promoting an equal society.

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Ethical Approval: The research was part of a larger study which was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of West Bengal State University, as delineated in IEC Approval No. WBSU/IEC/30/03, dated 07.10.2021. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants.

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