Son Preference Among Asian Ethnic Minorities in the United Kingdom

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Abstract:

Son preference may have different demographic manifestations. One manifestation is through prenatal sex-selection against females, which has been well documented in India. This pattern has been paralleled in the UK, where previous analysis of birth registrations evidenced a male biased sex ratio at birth (SRB) among India-born women over 1990-2005. Another demographic manifestation is gender-based fertility stopping behavior wherein parents stop childbearing only when they have their preferred number of sons. We use the Annual Population Survey (1979-2016) to explore son-preference among UK women of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Chinese heritage through gender-based parity progression analyses. Results shows contrasting gender-based parity progression patterns between subgroups, emphasizing the importance of appreciating the diverse pathways of son-preference among Asian groups in the UK. Results are discussed from a transnational perspective, and in the context of the UK debates on sex-selective abortion.

Extended Abstract

Introduction

Son preference is the valuation of sons over daughters and is often attributed to economic, religious, social, and cultural norms that favour male children. In addition to evidence in Asian countries, there has also been evidence of pre-natal sex selection against females among the Asian diaspora in western countries. (eg in the USA and Canada: Abrevaya, 2009; Howell et al. 2018; Almond et al., 2013). In the UK, biased sex ratios at birth of India-born mothers over 1990 to 2005 provided indirect evidence of pre-natal sex selection against females and raise questions about the nature of son preference in the UK Asian diaspora (Dubuc and Coleman 2007). To this end, this study aims to unpack the dynamics of son preference.

Son preference may have different demographic manifestations. Son preference can be manifested in pre-natal sex selection, leading to biased sex ratios at birth (Bhat and Das Gupta, 1996; Hudson and Den Boer, 2015; Bongaarts and Guilmoto, 2015), which indirectly reflects the use of pre-natal selection technologies, such as sex selective abortion or sperm sorting in assisted reproductive technology to secure a son. Gender-based fertility stopping behavior may be another important dimension of son preference in the UK, wherein parents stop childbearing only when they have the preferred number of sons (Basu and Jong, 2010 ; Chaudhuri, 2012). The stopping rule may be used in combination with prenatal sex-selection but not necessarily and gender-based stopping behaviours alone cannot influence the overall sex ratio at birth. Therefore, we also explore stopping behaviours by examining parity progression based on the gender composition of existing children and focus on the major Asian subgroups in the UK (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi & Chinese). Exploring childbearing behaviors will help to shed insight on the nature and trends of son preference across Asian ethnic groups in the UK and its social and policy implications. Results are discussed from a transnational perspective, and in the context of the UK debates on sex-selective abortion (Unnithan and Dubuc, 2017).

Data and Methods

We pooled data from 1979 to 2016, using the UK Labour Force Survey and the Annual Population Survey to look at son preference as evidenced by different stopping behaviours. Using the pooled sample, we created a fertility history based on the household roster by linking mothers to their children. In order to minimize the issue of mothers whose children have moved out of the household, we restricted the analysis to mothers whose oldest child was 14 or under at the time of interview. We then calculated the parity progression ratio for the sample mothers by ethnicity and by the gender mix of their existing

children. Finally, we created survival curves of the transition to next birth also based on ethnicity and the gender composition of existing children. This accounts for censoring, person time at risk, and also takes into account when women age out of being at risk for another birth. Due to space limitations, survival curves are not shown.

Results

Figures 1-3 demonstrate the different patterns of stopping behaviours between White, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Chinese mothers in the UK. For the transition from 1st to 2nd birth, figure 1 suggests Chinese mothers have a higher parity progression ratio if they have a daughter compared to if they have a son. Otherwise, most mothers continue to have another, regardless of the gender of their first child. Figure 2 shows the progression from 2nd to 3rd birth and a more dramatic pattern of differential stopping behaviour can be seen for the Indian mothers and Chinese mothers who have a higher parity progression ratio if they have two daughters, compared to two sons or one son and one daughter. For Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers, there is a similar pattern, but less dramatic. This is possibly because these women may prefer larger families in general, and the majority opt to continue childbearing regardless, because this group has higher fertility. Figure 3 shows the progression from 3rd to 4th births. In this figure, Indian, Chinese and Pakistani mothers show strong differential stopping behaviour. Mothers with only daughters are the most likely to continue childbearing. Moreover, figure 3 also suggests that two sons and one girl is preferable to one son and two girls.

Figure 1. Proportion who progress from 1st to 2nd birth, by gender of 1st birth

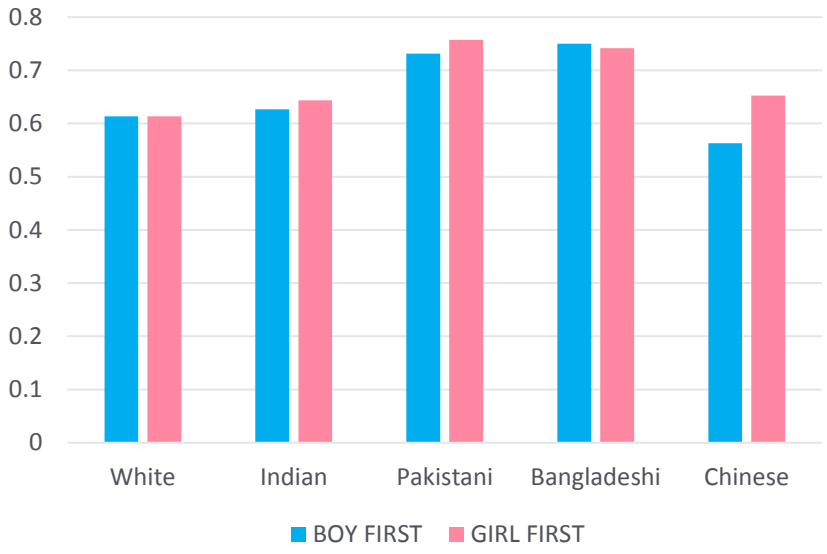


Figure 2. Proportion who progress from 2nd to 3rd birth, by gender of previous births

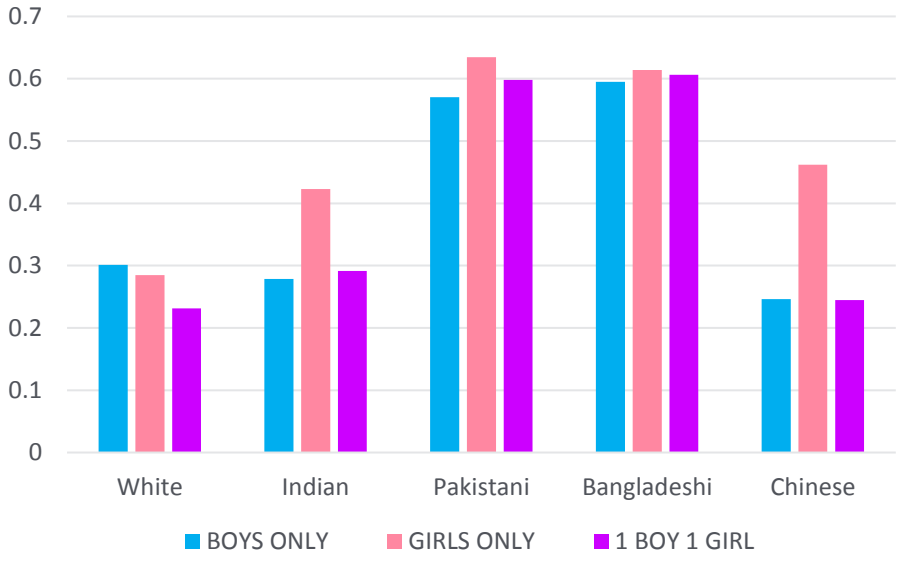
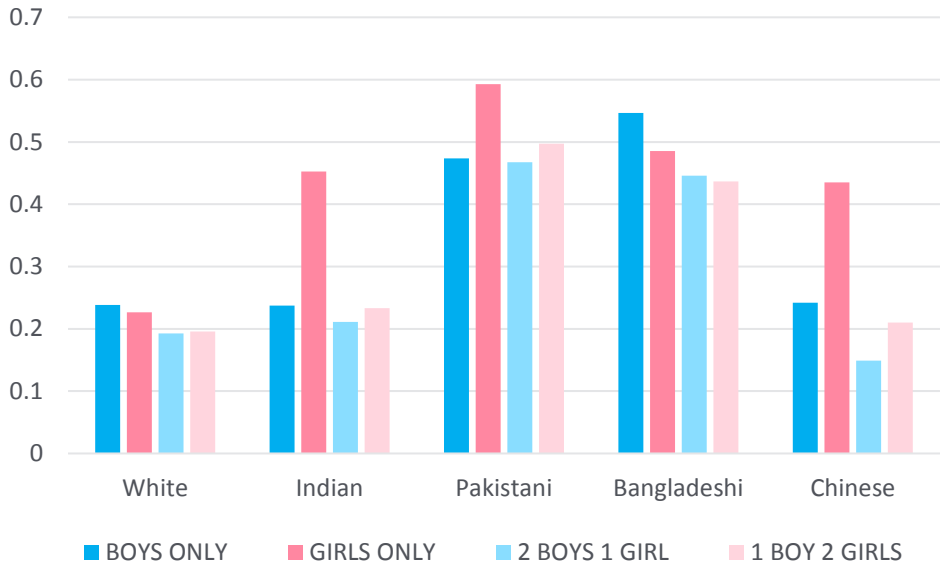


Figure 3. Proportion who progress from 3rd to 4th birth, by gender of previous births



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Howell et al. 2018;

Hudson and Den Boer, 2015

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