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INFLUENCE OF SON PREFERENCE ON THE CONTRACEPTIVE USE AND FERTILITY OF SRI LANKAN WOMEN

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Summary. The effect of moderate son preference on family size is analysed using data from the 1982 Sri Lanka Contraceptive Prevalence Survey whose respondents were followed-up in the 1985 Sri Lanka Contraceptive Survey. Reported reproductive intentions on desire for additional children were not always reflected in overall contraceptive use. Complicating factors were the use of modern and traditional methods and the role of induced abortion. Longitudinal observations of the 1982–85 period relating women's individual reproductive behaviour to their intentions show no consistent behavioural difference between those with and without sons. However, at any given parity, the proportion reporting at least one additional child born during the inter-survey period was higher among those women who intended to have at least one additional child than among those who wanted to stop childbearing. This analysis suggests that son preference finds expression more through reproductive intentions than through actual fertility behaviour in the follow-up period.

Introduction

Studies in many countries have reported the existence of sex preference (Westoff, Potter & Sagi, 1961; Gray & Morrison, 1974; Coombs & Sun, 1978; Kent & Larson, 1982; Lee & Bulatao, 1983; Sloane & Lee, 1983; Arnold, 1985). In the developing world, especially in rural areas and among couples of lower socioeconomic status, the emphasis is usually on a desire for sons (Cain, 1986; Vlassoff, 1990a); however, daughter preference has also been suggested for some of the Caribbean countries (Cleland, Verrall & Vaessen, 1983; Pullum, 1983). Although son preference exists even in some developed societies (Bennett, 1983), as in the United States where sons were preferred for the first child (Pebley & Westoff, 1982), the concern in these societies is more with having at least one child of each sex (Freedman, Freedman & Whelpton, 1960; Westoff, Potter & Sagi, 1963; Largey, 1972; Young, 1977).

When couples have a preference for the sex of their offspring, it is reasonable to suppose that the sex composition of the children they already have will influence their decisions about whether or not to have another child. Asian studies, especially in Korea, India, Pakistan and China, have found that fertility is influenced by the desire for sons or for a

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