Sex-Selective Abortion among Indian Immigrants in the United States

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Abstract. This qualitative study sought to explore the transmission of and motivation for sex-selective abortion among Indian immigrants in the United States. Using a theoretical framework incorporating social learning theory and self-determination theory, the research design consisted of semi-structured interviews of 20 married Indian immigrant women. Based on an analysis of these interviews, the following emergent themes were discovered: “Problems for and from Girls”, “Dowry”, “Education (lack of)”, “Familial Pressure”, “Familial Preference”, “Familial Ties”, “Inheritance”, “Son’s Duty”, “Money”, “Name Carried Forward”, and “Want a Boy”. Theoretical and social work practice implications based on the findings of the study were discussed. While findings from this study cannot be generalized, they do open the door to future study of sex-selective abortion among immigrant populations.

Keywords: abortion, immigrant, Indian, gender, son preference

1 Introduction

A 2007 United Nations Populations Fund report showed the steady decline of India’s at-birth sex ratio from 1981 to 2001. Skewed sex ratios have been documented in India since the British conducted their censuses of the colony in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century \cite{1}. This was due primarily to “the prevalence of systematic differential treatment that caused these lower survival rates: poorer food intake, lesser access to medical care, etc.” \cite{1}. However, in the 1970s and 80s, the cultural preference for sons coupled with the introduction of modern methods of prenatal sex determination led to sex-selective abortions becoming “the primary method used to alter the sex composition of children”\cite{1}.

Many studies have examined the possible motivations behind son-preference in India. While each focuses on different aspects of Indian culture, virtually every study notes the extremely patriarchal system within which India operates. Statistics from the United States suggest that the issue of sex-selective abortion does not disappear when Indians immigrate. According to the 2006 National Vital Statistics Reports, the at-
birth sex ratio for Asian or Pacific Islanders (the population within which Asian Indians would be included) was 1.063 to 1, the highest of any racial group examined [2].

Also, it is important to note that the devaluing of female children directly impacts the treatment of girls and women who are not selectively aborted. Additionally, cultures with higher preference for sons value hyper-masculinity and reinforce stereotypes about male and female roles [3]. This could lead to unhealthy male/female relationships in the future, and problems of domestic violence. With both parties feeling that men have the right to abuse women simply because of their sex, and women being traditionally blamed for being unable to give their husbands a male heir [4-5], women in cultures who value sons over daughters potentially face problems across their lifetime. If the issue of sex-selective abortion transcends immigration to the United States, it is likely that other manifestations of gender discrimination could persist.

2 Methods

2 Research Issues

Based on the review of literature related to the postulates of social learning theory and self-determination theory, the research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What type of motivation do Indian immigrants give for engaging in sex-selective abortion?

3 Research Method

3.1 Setting and samples

For the purposes of this study, only married, female, first-generation Indian immigrants between the ages of 18 and 44 were chosen to participate in the interviews. A participant was considered a first-generation immigrant if she had lived in India and immigrated to the United States either as a child or as an adult.

The final sample size was 20 participants. The sample was recruited through convenience and snowball sampling via the researcher’s personal contacts within the Indian immigrant community.

3.2 Data Collection

An application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was made by the first author. The interview schedule as well as the research protocol were reviewed and approved by the IRB. Participants who agreed to the interview were asked to sign the consent.
form, which was promptly placed in a separate folder from her response sheet. Interviews were conducted in private locations chosen by the participants.

### Measures

The interview questions were intended to gather information on a possible relationship between socio-economic status, acculturation, and education-level on sex-selective abortion. Finally, participants were asked if they have ever engaged in sex-selective abortion.

### Data Analysis

The researcher used ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, to code the participants’ responses and look for emerging themes. Immediately following each interview, the researcher transcribed participants’ responses by hand. Once all interviews had been completed and transcribed, the researcher began data analysis.

### Results of the Study

#### Characteristics of Participants

A total of 20 women participated in this study \( n=20 \). Participants’ ages ranged from 23 to 44 (Mean = 31.75 years), with 8 (40%) participants between the ages of 23 and 29, 9 (45%) between the ages of 30 and 39, and 3 (15%) between the ages of 40 and 44 years old. Participants’ length of marriage ranged from 5 months to 25 years (Mean= 7.89 years). Ten participants (50%) had no children; 8 participants (40%) had 2 children; 1 participant (5%) had 3 children; 1 participant (5%) had 4 children. All participants with children \( n=10 \) had at least one daughter.

#### Direct and Indirect Experiences

Participants were asked seven questions related to their direct (through family and friends) and indirect (through video and print media) exposure to son preference and sex-selective abortion. The first two questions dealt with indirect exposure to both son preference and sex-selective abortion through video and print media.

**Indirect Experiences**

Twelve participants (60%) indicated they had seen something on television, in movies, in newspapers or in advertisements that either promoted the importance of having sons over daughters or promoted abortion as an option to ensure having a son. The primary example participants cited was sex-selective abortion as a plot line for a character either on television or in movies.
Direct Experiences through Family
Participants were also asked if anyone in their family had talked about preferring sons over daughters and if anyone in their family had talked about abortion as an option to ensure having a son. Six participants (30%) indicated that someone in their family had discussed son preference. Two participants (10%) said someone in their family had spoken about engaging in a sex-selective abortion.

Direct Experiences through Friends
Participants were asked two questions concerning whether or not any of their friends had spoken of son preference or sex-selective abortion. Two participants acknowledged that they had heard this discussion among their friends.

Familial Pressure
This theme deals with the sense of obligation a woman might feel towards her husband, parents or in-laws to have a male child. While the theme of “Familial Preference” holds similar ideas, the participant quotations chosen for this theme conveyed a sense of absolute necessity and lack of choice on the part of the woman.

5 Discussion and Implications
Indirect exposure (through media) to sex-selective abortion and/or son preference was cited by twelve participants as something they had personally experienced. However, as one participant noted, the irony of social learning is that the more ubiquitous a behavior is, the more difficult it is for one to be conscious of its presence. The extreme nature of participants’ responses to this question- ranging from an unequivocal “no, never” to other participants citing specific examples of its occurrence- provides evidence that son preference is likely still a pervasive theme in Indian media sources. However participants may be so accustomed to this message that they are unable to recognize its existence.

Eight participants cited having experienced direct exposure (through friends and family) to sex-selective abortion and/or son preference. Familial exposure was much more common than exposure through friends. This could reflect the sensitive nature of the subject. Perhaps Indians simply do not discuss son preference outside of their own families. The examples given of family members expressing son preference or talking about abortion all demonstrated the extreme secrecy surrounding this issue.

It should be noted that while very few participants acknowledged having a friend who had engaged in sex-selective abortion, this could have been due to the phrasing of the question. Perhaps if the word “acquaintance” had been used, participants would have thought more broadly about people in their general peer group who had been involved in some type of son preference. It is also possible that sex-selective abortion is a topic that one does not discuss with friends. Given that participants viewed the practice in a negative light, one could assume that participants’ friends would be hesitant to discuss their preference for sons with them.
Because none of the participants in the research acknowledged having engaged in sex-selective abortion, the motivations cited in their interviews are purely speculative. However, participants still gave interesting insight into the issues surrounding sex-selective abortion and son preference in the Indian community around the world. Ryan and Connell [6] define introjected motivation as “internal, esteem-based pressures to act, such as avoidance of guilt and shame or concerns about self- and other-approval”. The researcher identified the themes of “Problems for and from Girls”, “Dowry” and “Familial Preference” as representing introjected motivation.

“Problems for and from Girls” demonstrates an introjected motivation because of the participants’ frequent mention of feeling either guilt towards their daughters for not being able to provide them with a good life or fear of shame as a result of their daughters’ premature loss of virginity.

The strong moral judgment many participants attached to abortion should be noted. However, this sentiment does not mean these or other women would never engage in any type of son preference.

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References