

Fact sheet

Nepal



Every Girl Counts

Son Preference and Daughter Aversion

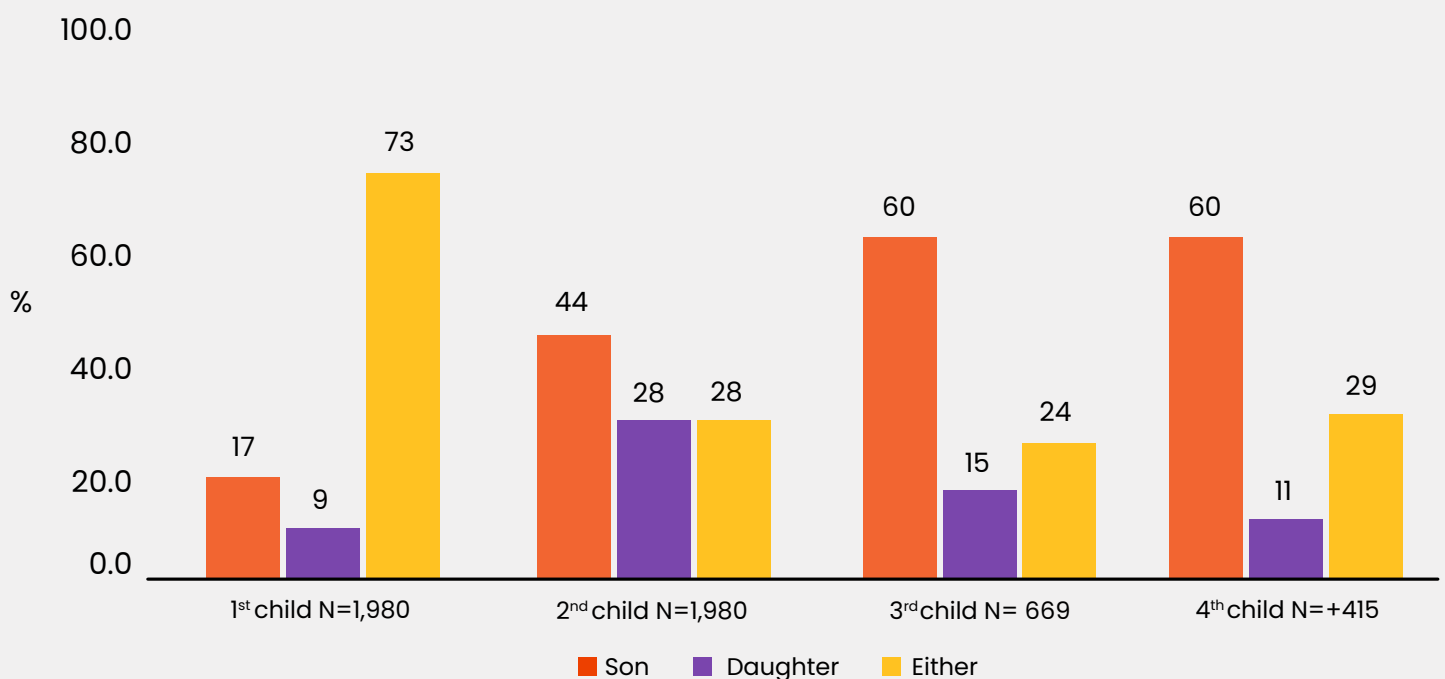
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1. Background

Son preference and daughter aversion have predominantly been understood in terms of gender-biased sex selection, which has been identified and measured by the presence of a skewed sex ratio at birth (SRB).

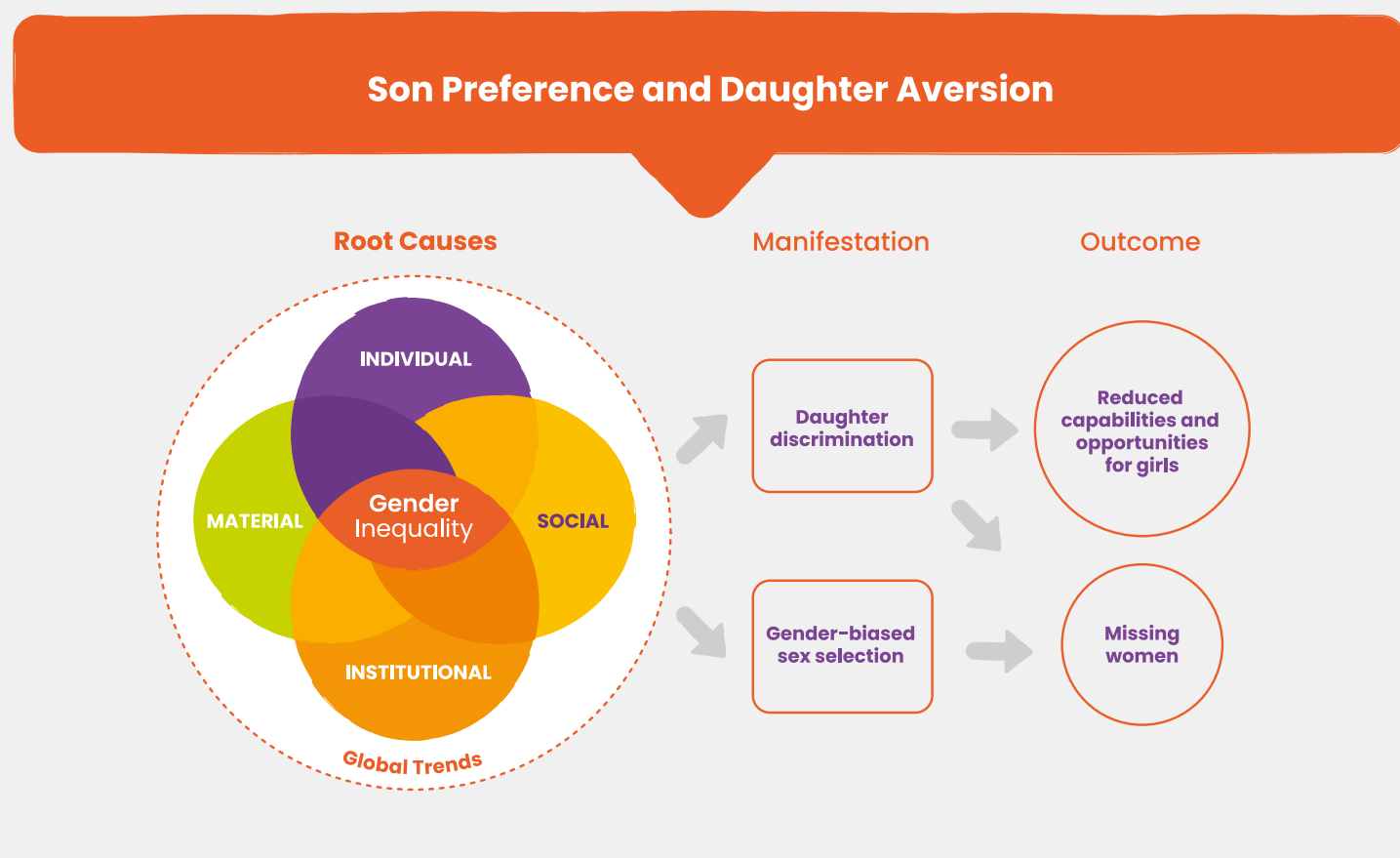
Son preference and daughter aversion have predominantly been understood in terms of gender-biased sex selection, which has been identified and measured by the presence of a skewed sex ratio at birth (SRB). When the “natural” sex ratio of 105 males to 100 females skews even further towards males, it indicates a prevalence of prenatal sex selection in favour of sons. Son preference continues to be a significant issue in Nepal, and is particularly evident for second and subsequent births. In a recent study of married women with at least two children, three-quarters of women expressed no preference for the sex of their child during their first pregnancy (Figure 1). However, 44 per cent preferred a son for the second birth, and 60 per cent for the third and subsequent births (CREHPA and UNFPA, 2023). Women in Nepal are subjected to intense pressure to produce a male heir, predominantly exerted by their husbands and mothers-in-law. As such, they face an increased risk of intimate partner violence and gender-based violence more broadly if they give birth to a girl (Magar and others, 2020; Pun and others, 2016; Deuba and others, 2016). In a patriarchal society, the birth of a son secures a woman’s status within her family and the wider community, ensuring that she receives more love, care and attention. There is evidence to suggest that girls receive less parental care than boys, as exemplified by a shorter duration of breastfeeding of daughters (Fledderjohann and Channon, 2022).

Figure 1:
Sex preference at each successive birth



Source: CREHPA and UNFPA, 2023

Figure 2:
UNFPA conceptual framework on son preference and daughter aversion



This fact sheet extracts and applies research and data relating to Nepal to better understand the context and impacts of son preference. It outlines the underlying causes of son preference, identifies the ways in which son preference manifests and explores the consequent impacts on women and girls. The analysis is conducted using the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) conceptual framework on son preference and daughter aversion (Figure 2). The framework identifies the root causes, manifestations and outcomes of son preference. This approach acknowledges that in order to sustainably address son preference, an analysis of SRB is insufficient. SRB can only measure sex selection before birth, which means it cannot be used to understand the full extent of manifestations and impacts of son preference. For example, there may be couples with a preference for sons who do not choose to sex-select, but instead discriminate against their daughters, impacting their life course. Attitudes and beliefs that place higher value on sons can profoundly impact the lived experiences of daughters who are raised in an environment where women are considered less valuable than men.

2. Root causes

Son preference in Nepal is rooted in a complex dynamic of sociocultural, political and historical factors.

Son preference in Nepal is rooted in a complex dynamic of sociocultural, political and historical factors. To accurately understand and address the deeply ingrained preference for sons and aversion towards daughters, UNFPA has formulated a conceptual framework (Figure 2) adapted from Cislighi and Heise's 2018 dynamic framework for social change. The conceptual framework highlights the individual, societal, material and institutional origins of son preference within broader contextual global trends which may influence the identified root causes. While these root causes are inherently intersecting, overlapping and dynamic, this fact sheet addresses them separately as a basis for analysis. Gender equality is positioned at the centre of the framework, in recognition that all root causes are influenced and sustained by unequal gender power relations.

Individual

Root causes at the individual level are personal beliefs which underlie perceptions of the importance of having a son in the family and the lower value of daughters. In Nepal, many women fear the discrimination that a daughter would endure across her life, and as such would prefer a son (Pun and others, 2016). Societal pressure to bear sons also weighs heavily on men, who face stigmatization and disgrace in their communities for failing to bear a son, often being labelled impotent (CREHPA and UNFPA, 2021). This is due to widely held beliefs that sons are more valuable than daughters because they can continue the family legacy, care for parents in old age and perform last rites (CREHPA and UNFPA, 2019). Many see a daughter's only value as her act of marrying into a good family and thus maintaining the status of her family (CREHPA and UNFPA, 2019). These perceptions are reflected in Figure 3, which shows attitudes of men in Arghakhanchi and Rupandehi districts.

Figure 3:
Men's attitudes regarding the value of sons (Arghakhanchi and Rupandehi districts)

	Arghakhanchi			Rupandehi			Total (N)
	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	
Fathering a son shows that you are real man							
Agree	12.5	7.0	9.8	7.0	21.0	14.0	95
Somewhat agree	10.0	10.5	10.3	10.0	11.5	10.8	84
Disagree	77.5	82.5	80.0	83.0	67.5	75.3	621
It is important to have a son to carry on the family lineage							
Agree	61.5	54.5	58.0	68.0	78.0	73.0	524
Somewhat agree	12.0	14.5	13.3	11.0	11.5	11.3	98
Disagree	26.5	31.0	28.8	21.0	10.5	15.8	178

Source: CREHPA and UNFPA, 2021

Social

Women in Nepal are often under intense pressure from their husbands and mothers-in-law to bear a son; these family members may threaten to bring a second wife into the household if no son is born (CREHPA and UNFPA, 2019). Women also face a higher risk of intimate partner violence and gender-based violence during pregnancy and after birth if the child is female, and therefore have a higher chance of suffering postnatal depression (Magar and others, 2020; Pun and others, 2016; Deuba and others, 2016). Many women would therefore prefer to have a male child to enhance their status within the family and the household, meaning they typically receive more love, care and attention, and have a higher food intake (Marphatia and others, 2022; CREHPA and UNFPA, 2019).

Material

Many people in Nepal have significant material and economic concerns, which underpins the higher value couples place on sons over daughters. This is in large part because males are seen as breadwinners who increase the social and economic status of the family (CREHPA and UNFPA, 2019). The tradition of the bride's family making a dowry payment upon marriage causes families to perceive a daughter as a financial burden, whereas a son is seen as a financial asset who will bring in the dowry to enrich the family (CREHPA and UNFPA, 2019).

Institutional

Several institutional factors exacerbate the need and preference for sons. These include religious norms which dictate that only sons can perform death rituals for their parents (Deuba and others, 2016). The majority of the population is Hindu, and traditions to honour deceased parents are the sole duty and responsibility of the son (Deuba and others, 2016). Further, due to a lack of public provision through social security systems, families have to rely on their children for economic support in old age. These factors both cause and sustain the perceived importance of male children and uphold son preference throughout Nepalese society. This is demonstrated in Figure 4, which shows attitudes of men in Arghakhanchi and Rupandehi districts regarding the value of sons in these areas.

Figure 4:
Men's attitudes regarding the value of sons (Arghakhanchi and Rupandehi districts)

	Arghakhanchi			Rupandehi			Total (N)
	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	
Without a son, it is not possible to perform last rites and rituals							
Agree	24.0	22.0	23.0	36.5	61.0	48.8	287
Somewhat agree	16.0	18.5	17.3	19.5	16.5	18.0	141
Disagree	60.0	59.5	59.8	44.0	22.5	33.3	372
It is important to have a son to take care of you in your old age							
Agree	39.0	29.0	34.0	38.0	59.5	48.8	331
Somewhat agree	18.5	19.0	18.8	21.0	15.0	18.0	147
Disagree	42.5	52.0	47.3	41.0	25.5	33.3	322

Source: CREHPA and UNFPA, 2021

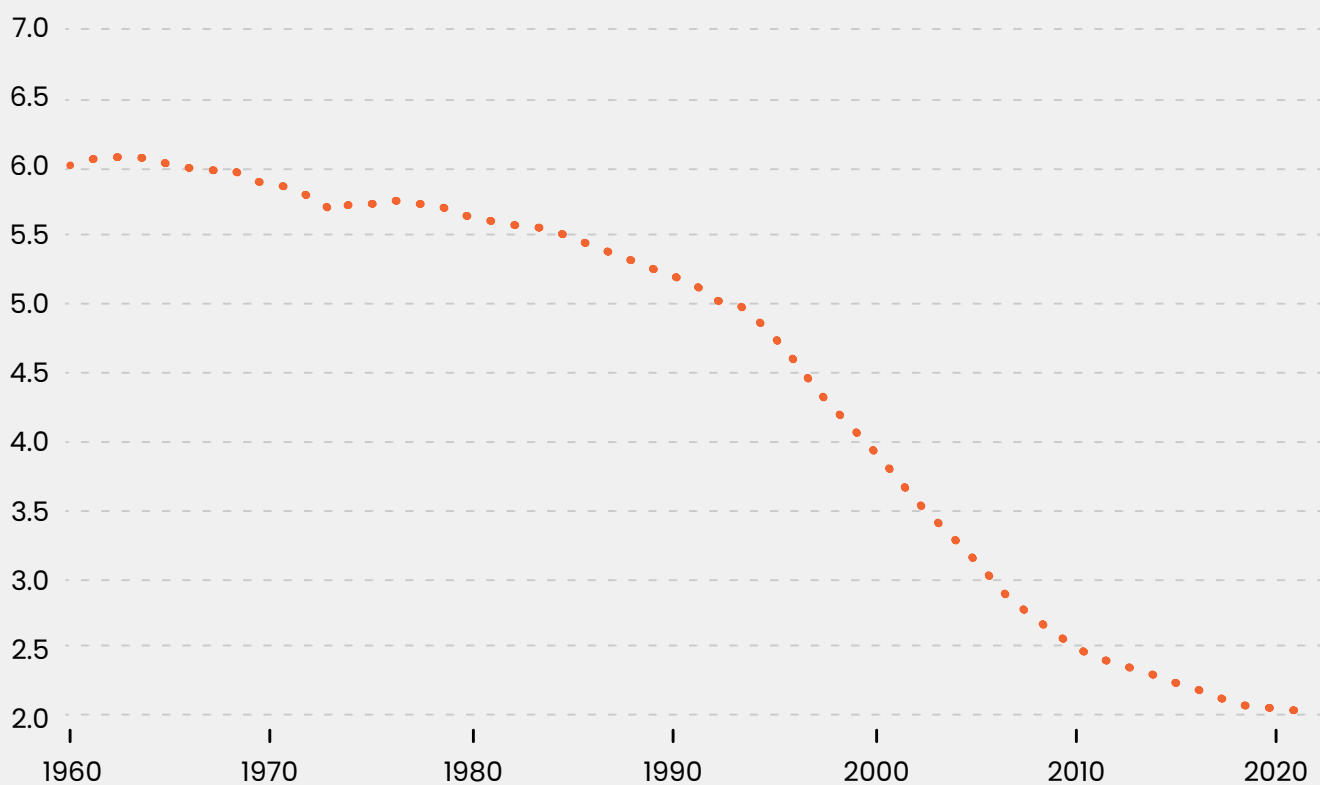
Global trends and contributing factors

Global trends such as demographic shifts, urbanization, digital technologies, inequalities and conflict influence gender preferences and families' fertility decisions in a country-specific way.

→ Declining fertility

As in many countries in the region, there has been a drastic decrease in the fertility rate in Nepal over the last 70 years, down from six children per woman in 1960 to just over two children per woman in 2021 (Figure 5). There is also a growing and explicit preference for smaller families (Magar and others, 2020). As the likelihood of having a son decreases with a lower fertility rate, methods such as sex-selective abortion are used by couples who have access to and can afford this option (Marphatia and others, 2022).

Figure 5:
Total fertility rate in Nepal – births per woman, 1960–2021



Source: The World Bank Data

3. Manifestations

Son preference in Nepal may lead to some families practising gender-biased sex selection.

Son preference in Nepal may lead to some families practising gender-biased sex selection. This is the deliberate prevention of female births, mostly through pregnancy termination. Gender-biased sex selection is often manifested in an SRB that is higher than the natural level of 105. Because birth registration in Nepal is largely incomplete, analyses of SRB rely upon census and survey data. The 2011 census reveals that of 75 districts in Nepal, 52 per cent had an SRB greater than 107, and in 11 districts the ratio exceeded 110, which is significantly higher than the natural level (Channon and others, 2021).

Sex ratio imbalance is geographically concentrated, especially in the Kathmandu Valley and Lumbini Province. Further analyses of Nepal Demographic and Health Surveys (NDHS) find that the sex ratio became more skewed if previous births were all female (Channon and others, 2021). This points to the existence of son preference and the practice of gender-biased sex selection by parents who already had girls but wanted to have sons (Brunson, 2010). Conditional sex ratio of second births where the firstborn was female is also more skewed in wealthier families and among more educated mothers (Channon and others, 2021), who are more likely to be able to access and afford sex-selective abortion. Another study based on birth records from six tertiary hospitals in Nepal confirms the findings based on census and survey data (Pradhan and others, 2019).

In addition to gender-biased sex selection, discrimination against girls persists across Nepal as a result of son preference. Using NDHS data, Fledderjohann and Channon (2022) identify a gendered differential in nutrition between boys and girls, and in particular the duration of breastfeeding. The difference is particularly noticeable for girls who have older sisters but do not have any brothers.

4. Outcomes

Son preference and daughter aversion have serious consequences for women and girls. One commonly discussed outcome is the phenomenon of missing female births.

Son preference and daughter aversion have serious consequences for women and girls. One commonly discussed outcome is the phenomenon of missing female births. This refers to the girls who would have been born in the absence of son preference but were not born due to prenatal gender-biased sex selection. Using the 2011 census and 2016 NDHS, Channon and others (2021) estimate that 22,540 female births were missing in the five years before the census, representing for 2 per cent of total girl births, and 53 per cent of missing girls were in 11 districts with the most skewed SRB (110 and above).

Son preference and daughter aversion also have a range of adverse outcomes after birth; different parental investment in sons and daughters may lead to gender-differentiated mortality or reduced capabilities across the life course of a girl. Drawing on five rounds of NDHS, Fledderjohann and Channon (2022) find that although neonatal mortality is lower for girls than boys in Nepal – which could be due to biological factors, as female infants generally have a biological advantage during the early stages of life – in later periods, girls experience higher mortality than boys. The pace of infant mortality decline with age is also faster for boys than girls. This suggests that after surviving the neonatal stage, girls may face conditions or circumstances that increase their risk of death relative to boys. This could potentially be due to discriminatory practices that affect girls adversely as they age, such as differential access to nutrition, health care and other resources necessary for survival and development.

In addition to adverse demographic and health outcomes, Nepalese girls and women encounter disadvantages in family and gender dynamics and socioeconomic status. Child marriage and early motherhood are common in Nepal, especially in rural areas (Choe and others, 2005). Gender gaps in education, employment and wages remain large (Yamamoto and others, 2019). As discussed above in the context of root causes – demonstrating how the root causes and consequences of son preference are mutually reinforcing – women in Nepal face a higher risk of intimate partner violence and gender-based violence during pregnancy and after birth if the child is female, which increases their likelihood of suffering postnatal depression (Deuba and others, 2016; Magar and others, 2020; Pun and others, 2016).

5. Recommendations

1 —————> Policy and programme implications of this research

- > Use the conceptual framework as a basis for analysis to: a) improve understanding of the intersections across the root causes of son preference; and b) monitor shifts in son preference as a result of programme interventions, including law and policy. Systematic mapping of the root causes and their interconnections can be used to pinpoint specific factors leading to son preference and the undervaluing of daughters. Grouping these factors into the different categories – individual, social, material and institutional – for various ethnic groups or regions will enhance the effectiveness of policy and programme design.
- > Ensure effective implementation of laws and policies that promote affirmative action/special measures in favour of girls and women, including in the area of women's participation at all levels of governance and decision-making in public and private spaces, to ensure that these reflect specific experiences of women.
- > Work with and mobilize opinion leaders (religious, traditional and other influential leaders) and community members who can inspire and promote gender equality, to address discriminatory religious and traditional practices that prioritize sons over daughters.
- > Promote gender-equitable education systems that ensure girls complete at least secondary education.
- > Invest in capacity-building for women and adolescents to enable their meaningful participation in public and political life, and implement policies for gender-affirmative actions.
- > Strengthen the capacities of government and non-government entities and individuals responsible for implementing gender-equality policies, plans and programmes.
- > Identify, review and revise laws and policies to address harmful practices and gender discrimination, including in areas of citizenship and access to property, social protection systems and inheritance.
- > Strengthen the capacities of law-enforcement officials to address gender-based violence in all its forms and ensure gender-responsive access to justice for women and girls.

2 —————> **Increase investment in data collection and research**

- > Strengthen regular monitoring systems for the successful implementation of laws and policies related to gender-biased sex selection and other harmful practices. Reassess the effectiveness of existing laws and policies to criminalize sex selection, including how these might have negative impacts on women.
- > Better understand the consequences of son preference on women and girls across the life course, especially during the transition to adulthood and adult years of active engagement in the labour force. This can strengthen the formulation of policies that support broader gender equality. Such an approach aims not only to rectify the immediate issue of son preference, but also to foster a society that values all genders equally.
- > Better understand the economic drivers of son preference, including female decision-making in the household and female labour force participation.
- > Develop standardized methodologies for the collection of data on SRB and changing attitudes regarding son preference. This can facilitate comparison across regions and time periods, enabling the tracking of trends and the effectiveness of interventions.

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