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Son Preference in the Context of Fertility Decline: Limits to New Constructions of Gender and Kinship in Nepal

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Abstract

This article explores the persistence of son preference in a patrilineal, patrilocal society in the midst of fertility decline. Using survey and ethnographic data from Hindu-caste Nepali families in a semiurban village, I analyze which cultural norms regarding reproduction are questioned by contemporary married couples and which remain intact. Despite modest improvements in gender equality, levels of education, and economic conditions, the practical knowledge that daughters will be lost to other lineages and households pressures couples who might otherwise be willing to invest in daughters to continue procreating until they produce a son. Young mothers, therefore, reluctantly admit to needing a son, revealing a discrepancy between their initially stated reproductive ideals and their ultimate behavior.

In much of Asia, total fertility rates have fallen to levels of between one and three children per woman, and the characteristics of son preference have changed accordingly. Nevertheless, in many patrilineal societies son preference remains a guiding characteristic of reproductive behavior. In Nepal, contemporary young mothers are positioned amid conflicting trends of fertility decline and persistent son preference. According to the Nepali mothers in this study, the phrase “son preference” mischaracterizes the situation; women do not prefer sons over daughters, rather they feel compelled to produce a son. In the context of dramatically lowered fertility (in comparison with that of the previous generation), however, the pressure to produce a son has become more acute as young women feel the necessity of giving birth to a male in fewer overall attempts. Women find themselves in the middle of these opposing currents, and through their procreation they enact both social continuity and change.

Historically, son preference contributed to high fertility because the parents of daughters tried to produce one or more sons. In settings undergoing fertility decline, son preference can cause a lag in this decline. Despite a general desire to have fewer children, families are driven to continue procreating until they produce a son. The sex composition of a couple’s offspring, in particular the presence of a male child, takes precedence over the general perception of having “enough” children. For example, in her study conducted in Punjab, Das Gupta (1987) observed that although educated women wanted to have smaller families, their

reported ideal number of sons fell less dramatically compared with their desired number of daughters. Additional evidence from India and South Korea demonstrates that sex preference slows demographic transition when the end of a woman's reproductive career is postponed until she gives birth to a son (Arnold et al. 1998; Larsen et al. 1998).

Sen (1990) brought attention to the less visible aspect of son preference, the women who were "missing" from certain populations, by means of pointing to imbalances in the sex ratios of certain countries (for updates see Sen 2003 and Das Gupta 2005). Das Gupta and Bhat (1997) proposed that as fertility decreases, sex discrimination could become more evident at lower-parity births if the decrease in family size is not accompanied by a decrease in the desired number of sons. This "intensification effect" is based on results from China and South Korea indicating that excess mortality of girls became more pronounced as fertility fell because parents discriminated more at each parity (Hull 1990; Zeng et al. 1993). Pressure to produce sons can result in families' making use of medical technologies to manipulate the outcome of sex composition through sex-selective pregnancy termination (Miller 2001; Arnold et al. 2002), infanticide, or neglect (Das Gupta 1987; see Greenhalgh 2005 for a discussion of Chinese examples); but Das Gupta and Bhat (1997) caution against overestimating the role of sex-selective abortion technologies in imbalanced sex ratios, particularly in India.

In Nepal, no documented evidence has demonstrated that the pressure to produce sons in fewer attempts has resulted in excessive mortality of girls or the use of sex-selective abortion. In the past, a preference for sons made some Nepalese willing to have families larger than their stated ideal (Stash 1996), which is likely still to be the case in rural areas of Nepal where total fertility rates remain markedly higher than in urban areas. A national study, based on data from the 1996 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS), estimated the sex ratio at last birth for women who claimed to have completed their families or been sterilized at 146 males to 100 females (Leone et al. 2003). This imbalanced ratio at last birth suggests that childbirth-stopping behavior was driven by son preference.

How is son preference redefined in a context in which the total fertility rate has fallen to 3.1 but women still "need" sons? In what ways does son preference persist, and how does it manifest itself in people's behavior? This ethnographic research offers an in-depth look at a generation of women caught in the middle of dramatic fertility decline and conflicting discourses on the value of women (and daughters) and son preference. The article examines changes in cultural beliefs in Nepal related to son preference, analyzing which norms were questioned by contemporary couples and which remained intact.

Background

Despite the country's status as one of the world's poorest and despite the challenges to development of its extreme topography, Nepal is undergoing a fertility transition. According to the 2006 NDHS, the infant mortality rate and the under-five mortality rate, although dropping, remain high at 48 and 61 (per 1,000 live births) respectively. Acute respiratory infections and diarrheal diseases are the most prominent killers of infants. The large majority (81 percent) of NDHS respondents who gave birth between 2001 and 2006

delivered at home, and not necessarily because a hospital was unavailable. (I found that even women who live within a short ride to a hospital often give birth at home [Brunson forthcoming].) Despite high infant mortality rates and problems with both access and quality of care for women during delivery, the total fertility rate declined from more than 6 births per woman of reproductive age in the 1970s to 3.1 births in 2006 (MOHP et al. 2007).

Nepal is a nation of disparities. A small, educated, wealthy, and worldly elite class lies at one end of the spectrum, and a rural and impoverished majority lies at the other end. The lives of individuals at these two extremes are utterly different. The study population addressed in this research represents the middle ground. Much of the middle hills and the Tarai (the southern plains) regions are becoming part of a global economy and society; Kathmandu and other urban areas are almost fully so. The mountainous region that stretches over the northern length of the country offers a formidable challenge to the development of infrastructure and the provision of such services as education and health care, or even passable roads. Consequently, fertility rates are lower in urban areas, which are concentrated in the middle hills and Tarai, among the well-educated and the wealthy.

Contributing to fertility decline is the marked increase in the use of temporary methods of contraception between 1996 and 2006. Historically and presently, sterilization has accounted for the largest share of contraceptive use in Nepal, but originally this share may have been attributable to the emphasis placed on this method by family planning programs and subsequently by local practitioners or field-workers. Although it is popular, permanent contraception is adopted (primarily by women) with caution because the experience of child mortality is not uncommon. The age at marriage has also increased, but the median age at first birth, age 20, has changed little in the past two decades (MOHP et al. 2007).

The pace of economic development has been slow for Nepal and has been impeded further by political events, civil unrest, and the intensification of the Maoist insurgency between 2001 and 2006. The violence and fear caused by the insurgency and the army's response also increased the divide between life in urban and in remote rural areas. Most of the fighting took place in the countryside, and a substantial number of men fled to urban areas and sometimes abroad in order to escape the violence and find employment. The drop in fertility documented by the 2006 NDHS may be driven, at least in part, by the resulting separation of couples. In addition, with opportunities for education, employment, and new forms of leisure, the costs and benefits of childrearing have changed, and individuals have been exposed to new ideas that may influence fertility behavior in Nepal (Thornton and Fricke 1987; Axinn 1992; Axinn and Yabiku 2001). In semiurban areas such as the one described here, the transition away from agricultural labor as the main means of production toward small businesses and various kinds of wage-paying employment is well underway. People recognize the value of education, as well as the costs associated with it, but they often express discouragement that education does not necessarily result in employment.

In summary, the total fertility rate for women of reproductive age in Nepal fell from around six children per woman to three within two generations. An increase in the age at marriage, the accessibility and heightened value placed on education, and the availability and acceptability of contraceptives all played a role in this transition. High infant mortality and

low returns on investment in education continue to trouble people in Nepal, however. This combination of positive and negative conditions for fertility decline creates conflicting needs: people desire fewer children, but remain concerned about high infant mortality and the importance of having a son (and subsequently a daughter-in-law) to carry on the family.

Methods

The semiurban village of Vishnumati¹ was chosen as a locale that would be fairly representative of the areas in Nepal that are in the middle stages of fertility transition, which is the approximate stage of the country at the aggregate level. The village sits just below the rim of the mountains that surround the Kathmandu Valley, at the end of the road from Kathmandu. I enumerated households (N = 794) of the two most populous sections (“wards”) of the town, and surveyed a random sample of 248 households for basic household history and demographic and birth information.² The data gathered in the survey provided information for choosing families for in-depth case studies according to a sampling matrix of the following characteristics—caste, socioeconomic status, education, and age—in order to capture and account for variation created by each of these categories. This endeavor was instructive in two ways. First, no low-caste families in my sample fell into the category of moderate or high socioeconomic status. Being a member of a low-caste group was positively correlated with low socioeconomic status in the area. Second, surprisingly few low-caste families were in the sample at all, despite my efforts to ensure that impoverished families were not excluded in the original household enumeration. For several months, I sought to determine why this was the case. I learned, finally, that many low-caste families lived nearby but in a different ward from the two included in my study. Several low-caste families were integrated in the bazaar within my study area, but an indistinct settlement of land-owning low-caste families lived in a more rural, peripheral area bordering the two wards in my study. In order to include several low-caste families in my case studies, I had to seek out additional families who were not part of my original household survey.

Ultimately, I selected 28 case-study households that represented de facto joint and nuclear families of each caste and, other than the low-caste families, of middle or low socioeconomic status.³ I limited my case-study households to Hindu-caste Nepalis—a substantial and influential group, yet only one of many diverse cultural groups found in Nepal.⁴ This group includes Brahman, Chhetri, Thakuri, and Dalits, and is culturally similar to Hindu groups in northern India. I interviewed the married women of each of the 28 households using a semi-structured, open-ended format for an average of five times during the final seven months of my research. I also held many informal conversations with them along the way. In the joint-family household case studies, I interviewed both the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law. These mothers-in-law, together with women in nuclear family households who were of an age at which they were socially recognized as no longer reproducing (that is, they had at least one grandchild), make up the group I refer to as

¹The names given here of the location and the people interviewed are pseudonyms.

²I excluded households in which either husband or wife or both were not Nepalese citizens.

³Wealthy families were few and anomalous in the area, so I excluded them from my case studies.

⁴I excluded Newars from the case studies because although many are Hindu, they are culturally and linguistically distinct from the Hindu castes.

“mothers-in-law.” Daughters-in-law and the women of socially recognized reproductive age in the nuclear family households make up the category I refer to as “young mothers.” Therefore, when I refer to changes in attitudes toward son preference, I am describing the difference in attitudes between these two generations, not changes measured by comparing attitudes at two points in time. The first two introductory rounds of household interviews were not taped, but after building rapport with respondents I used an audio tape recorder for the remaining three interviews. All quotations in the study are direct translations of women’s recorded statements. I analyzed themes in the transcripts with a combination of concept-driven (or open) and data-driven coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Emerson et al. 1995; Kvale 2009) using the qualitative software package NVivo.

In addition to employing these methods, I immersed myself in the community by becoming an “adopted” member of a local family and conducting daily participant observation. I attended weddings, first-rice ceremonies, and special observances at the local temple, and I spent time in local family planning clinics and in the maternity wards of several hospitals. Learning the rules of my status as an honorary daughter in a family, and gradually as a member of the community, was invaluable for developing an ability to discern the slight yet significant acts of deference and authority that imbue every social interaction. My status as fictive kin of a local Nepali family was also a prerequisite to gaining credibility in the eyes of families in the community and to the ability to conduct in-depth research there.

The study of reproduction necessarily includes a consideration of the role of hegemony in reproductive lives (Greenhalgh 1990 and 1995; Ginsburg and Rapp 1995), ranging from the personal politics of women’s relationships to the global politics of the messages and services of international population programs. In this forum, however, I engage only briefly with global influences through the description of international family planning programs and national fertility trends and differentials. The majority of evidence comes from in-depth study of individual women and their families. I place their individual struggles in the context of larger structural factors and take their experiences as indicative but not statistically representative of other similarly positioned women.

Individual negotiation, agency, and variation within the kinship system, including the differences found in nuclear households, are examined here in order to avoid the reification of the extended family system and to emphasize that part of its power lies in its existence as an ideal. In this way, this research captures the dynamic, living aspects of family systems (see Collier and Yanagisako 1987) rather than being beholden to static models of kinship of the past that were sometimes equated with “culture” itself in demographic research (see Kertzer and Fricke 1997). Examining how people negotiate societal expectations through their relationships with others reveals how, through the process of everyday dealings, people manipulate, tear down, or reinforce norms and larger institutional frameworks (Bourdieu 1977; Ortner 1984).

The challenge in studying individuals and fertility behavior lies in “giving demographic actors agency without endowing them with a utility-maximizing rationality” (Greenhalgh 1995: 19). Reproductive decision making, much like human agency, “is correctly understood not as a sequence of discrete acts of choice and planning, but rather as the

reflexive monitoring and rationalization of a continuous flow of conduct” (Carter 1995: 61). Ultimately the “decision” to give birth is more a process than a moment, one that involves power dynamics between the sexes and among family members. The kind of tension between agency and structure writ large is manifested at the microlevel, or “up close,” in the state of internal conflict that Nepali Hindu-caste women expressed over fertility decisions during this research.

Young married women’s conflicted feelings about the necessity of producing a son are presented here within the context of fertility decline and the discourses surrounding it, and simultaneously within and against the older generation’s explanations of the importance of having sons. Instead of the commonly repeated narrative of South Asian husbands and mothers-in-law pressuring young married women to produce a son, this research reveals a more complex picture of women in this setting who have internalized the need for sons, recognized the practical reasons behind that need, and acted accordingly. Women act pragmatically in matters of procreation within the current sociocultural climate, but all the while they proclaim that they do not “need” a son.

Findings

The dominant family system among Hindu Nepalis, along with much of Hindu South Asia, is characterized by multigenerational extended families, patrilocal marriage practices, and patrilineal inheritance and kinship. Not all families are joint families at every point in time, however. Fricke’s (1994) research, for example, conducted with a Tamang group living not far from my research site, exhibits in detail the cycle of joint families and describes how married sons split off from the stem family when the number of family members becomes too great for maintaining harmony or for sharing resources as a single unit. A number of families, therefore, will remain in a nuclear stage within a joint-family system (see Skinner 1997); thus, detecting a trend toward a conjugal family system is tricky. The length of another generation or two, for example, would be required to determine whether the nuclear families in my study will remain nuclear. More important for this study, in the end, was respondents’ belief that they would belong to joint families again.

Nuclear family households compose a sizable proportion of overall households in the joint-family system found among Hindus in Nepal and northern India. According to my survey of households in Vishnumati, sons break off and form new households when the number of members in the stem family outgrows its ability to support them or the household runs out of space. Another common reason for a split, evidenced by the countless films and television shows that portray it, is discord between the mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law. Other reasons revealed by respondents for forming a nuclear household were migration to find work, flight from the violence caused by the Maoist insurgency, and elopement to form a love marriage. In a fertility regime in which producing multiple sons is the norm, at any given point one can find more nuclear families than joint families without negating the joint family as the overarching system and ideal.

In a joint-family system, young couples are absorbed into the larger economic unit of the family and provided with a cushion that can help reduce the costs of childbearing. In

Vishnumati, living in a nuclear family is often characterized by economic hardship. Assuming that the split from the stem family is an amicable one, a son and his wife may claim some of his inheritance but will be unable to depend upon the stem for additional major financial support. Moreover, most of the son's inheritance is usually tied up in land and is, therefore, inaccessible. A common reason for an amicable split is to migrate to an urban area in search of a better income. If the separation results from a fight or disagreement, the resulting nuclear family undoubtedly will be in financial difficulty because a dependable cash income is difficult to come by. Therefore, rather than splitting from the stem family, sons often rely upon the wealth or agricultural income of their parents in an economy that cannot support enough wage-paying jobs.

As a result of financial hardship, Vishnumati women in nuclear families are more likely to be working either in a one-room local shop nearby, in neighbors' fields, or, if low-caste, as tailors. In addition to working outside of the home, women in nuclear families have more autonomy within the home. They are responsible for running the household and making decisions regarding food, and if working they have some say in the household's finances. The key component that allows this autonomy is the lack of a traditional familial hierarchy within the home. Instead of being the lowest person in a multigenerational household, the woman is second in status only to her husband.

Despite these differences in the roles of women in nuclear and joint families, I found across the case studies little difference between the two groups in women's ideals of family size and of sex composition of offspring. This finding should be interpreted with caution in light of the study's small sample size ($n = 28$). Although I expected to find that women living in nuclear families would extol the virtues of such scenarios and wish the same for their children, I found the former to be true but the latter to be false. Women confirmed that in multigenerational joint families, a new wife assumes the lowest position in the hierarchy of family members. She works the hardest, eats the least of choice foods, and has little to no say in household decisions. Joint-family members live in close proximity with little privacy. Unsurprisingly, when asked to name their major source of happiness, women in joint families said "when the family members get along well with one another." They agreed that conflict among family members is absent or much reduced in nuclear-family settings. When asked, however, about their hopes for their sons' living situations, 14 out of 15 of the women living in nuclear families wished that their sons would remain at home and bring a daughter-in-law into the household.

Need for a Son

The women of Vishnumati debated the necessity of having sons; some debated internally, some debated it with other women in their household in my presence, and some thought that the question was moot—of course a family needs to produce sons. Some women proclaimed defiantly, "What good are sons?" Most, however, conceded that having a son or sons is a great benefit. Young women who had sons were relieved to be exempt from the implications of such a discussion.

In their discussions of procreation, many women referred to the "happy family," two-child model that was commonly promoted on radio and television. Beginning with their

establishment in Nepal in the 1960s, internationally funded family planning organizations spread the message that a small family is a happy family (a slogan that can be heard in different languages throughout the developing world). Indeed, Nepali women stated that two, otherwise three, children are enough. This model would not have been acceptable locally, however, without the creation of a favorable environment in terms of economic and social circumstances: the increased value of schooling, wage-paying jobs, and modern accoutrements. Yet the “happy family” ideal presents a problem, an inherent contradiction apparent in the logo of the Family Planning Association of Nepal: the image of two parents with two children, one daughter and one son. The presence of one son is crucial in this cultural context. How can a family ensure that the sex composition of their offspring will reflect that of the logo? When applied to the perceived need for sons, the same pragmatism that led Nepalis to have fewer children in response to social and demographic circumstances drives them to continue to have children until a son is produced. But why are sons so important, and how susceptible to change are the reasons for their importance?

Mothers-in-law's Rhetoric about Sons

According to the older generation of women (the mothers-in-law), sons are necessary for a family for two reasons: for performing funeral rites and for bringing a daughter-in-law into the family. In discussions of the necessary number of children to have, the presence or absence of sons in the formula always changed the end sum. Many women said about their daughters-in-law, “This generation gives birth to up to three, no? Why have more than that?” When asked about a situation in which all of those three were daughters, the common reply was, “If they are all daughters? One son is needed. One son is needed for the funeral rites.” Most members of this older generation agreed that a son was needed during the funeral rites to light his parents’ pyres and ensure their passage from this world to the next. This is an important and pervasive Hindu belief, yet people had difficulty explaining the significance behind the tradition. One Brahman woman, the wife of a respected local Hindu priest, was in a position to explain:

We need one son because without a son we cannot do anything when the parents die. A daughter cannot perform her parents’ funeral rites, according to our religion. A son has to perform them. . . . Whatever no-good, drunkard, thief, and gambler a son may be, society cannot have funeral rites without a son. Even at the time of death you need a son, because daughters are married off to other houses; they will not be able to come home at the time of emergency. From that point of view, too, a son is badly needed. Otherwise there won’t be a single person to give you a drop of water on your death bed. Who will take care of the parents in the family if a son is not there?

These women claimed that if families are lacking a son, they have to find a nephew to perform the funeral rights; a daughter will not do. As with most such traditions, situations arise that are far from perfect, situations in which there is neither son nor nephew, for example. Anecdotally, I heard of brothers and even daughters who lit the pyre.

The other reason that sons are needed, according to mothers-in-law, is because a family’s own daughters are lost to other families through marriage, and a son will bring a daughter-

in-law into the household. In a lively discussion of gender roles on the front porch of a large, multigenerational family, the mother-in-law from the neighboring house summed up the role of daughters. She joked loudly to the group, “The daughter runs off—if she is given away, she goes; if she isn’t given away, she goes. If there is a son, he will care for [the parents].” She was making the point that whether a woman elopes or her marriage is arranged, eventually she leaves her parents’ household. Everyone recognized the truth of that statement. Sons, on the other hand, remain with their families and care for their parents as they age. The *jethi buhaari* (daughter-in-law married to the eldest son) of the family added:

After one becomes old, parents, we old people, won’t be able to work. [We] can’t do fieldwork, can’t care for livestock. For that a son is needed. After a son is born, a daughter-in-law [*buhaari*] will come. After the *buhaari* comes, they will manage things and do the fieldwork. They will have babies. And for these things isn’t a family necessary? Without a son, where does a *buhaari* come from?

Sons, therefore, are needed for a much more practical and pressing reason than conducting funeral rites. A son brings a daughter-in-law into the household. More than an issue of religious tradition, the introduction of a daughter-in-law is a matter of acquiring help with daily responsibilities and the functioning of the household and family. The introduction of a daughter-in-law significantly changes the allocation of responsibilities in the household: the matriarch and daughters in the family pass on to the new wife duties such as fetching firewood and fodder, cooking, washing clothes, and cleaning. The new wife bears the greatest burden of time- and labor-intensive domestic duties and suffers the lowest status in the hierarchy of her new family (Bennett 1982; Cameron 1998; Jeffery et al. 1988). Over time, her position improves with the birth of children, especially sons, and the introduction of another young wife into the family by her husband’s brother or, eventually, by her own son (Das Gupta 1995).

The following account, from an elderly but active mother-in-law about her eldest son’s wife who left the family out of shame, highlights the potential dangers of having few or no sons in light of the country’s current social structure and demographic realities. One of the woman’s junior daughters-in-law began by saying, “During our time, we didn’t know about this ‘happy family’ [*sukhi pariwar*].” The mother-in-law continued:

Before [people] didn’t know, but now, after having two or three children, they practice family [planning]; although this family planning doesn’t suit some people. It suits some, it doesn’t suit others. Our eldest daughter-in-law—her one daughter is still living—she had two sons and then practiced family planning. The two sons died. And the mother became naked, no? It’s like that, it doesn’t suit some. . . . Her daughter ran off, and her sons died. And didn’t the mother become empty? It’s like that. Now, I don’t allow the daughters-in-law to practice family planning. However many children they have, they will have. . . . After having them, may they rear them; after they grow older, may they earn and eat.

As this story attests, a woman may be left metaphorically “naked,” exposed and vulnerable, and “empty” in society if she produces no sons or loses the ones who were supposed to care for her.

Young Mothers' Responses to Discourse about Sons

Women who were still reproductively active (meaning those who had not become grandmothers) objected to what "society" says regarding the need for sons. These younger women declared that they did not understand such "traditions" as the requirement that a son must light the funeral pyre. One young high-caste mother expressed her frustration about feeling pressure to produce a son:

So, here's my problem. People have no sense. They say that [a son] is needed at the time of death. They say that "the door will be closed." So "the door has to be opened." I can't understand people's talk! "The door will be closed at the time of death if we have only daughters," they say. And if there is a son, whatever kind of son, the door can be opened, it is said. What kind of thought is this of society? Even if I quit thinking bad things, others will talk badly. Even if one tries to be satisfied oneself, others say bad things. What can you do? Society is like that.

Young wives such as this one who no longer believe in the unassailability of traditions nevertheless expressed the importance of conforming in order to avoid the scorn and gossip of others.

Most young mothers in Vishnumati downplayed the necessity of having sons, stating that girls were just as good as boys and that they did not favor one over the other. In fact, two women commented that girls were better because of the support that a daughter offers to her mother. One woman said that having a daughter is like having a friend in the home, and another commented that daughters are more attentive than sons. During the research period, however, women who had sons were clearly in a position of being able to deny with ease the importance of sons, whereas the experience of women who did not have a son was entirely different. All of the young mothers in my case studies who did not yet have sons were concerned about whether they would give birth again. These young mothers without sons were the ones who had to negotiate the pressure to produce a son.

The pressure on individual women to give birth to sons came from many sources. The value of sons was reinforced subtly through the popular media, such as television serials, and in less subtle ways, for example, by doctors who discourage women from being sterilized if they have only one son. Women in Vishnumati experienced the pressure to produce sons most directly through their in-laws, their husbands, sometimes their neighbors, and, notably, through their own attitudes.

Durga, a young high-caste woman with two daughters, lived in a sizable cement house with her many joint-family members. Despite her parents-in-law's strictness, particularly that of her mother-in-law (*saasu*), Durga said that she was the person most disappointed when she gave birth to her second daughter. Although some husbands beat their wives if they do not produce sons, she reported, her husband had said nothing to her. She explained:

In fact, when I used to get angry with the daughters, with being unable to get a son, their daddy used to convince me that there is no difference between son and daughter. The second time when I gave birth to a daughter, he told me not to be angry because I gave birth to a daughter. . . . I had asked the doctor whether I had

had a son or daughter. If a daughter, how would I go back home? When I asked that, [my husband] scolded me.

Durga's husband and parents-in-law said nothing to her about having a second daughter. By her own admission, no one in her husband's family (*ghar*) had expressed disappointment that she had not yet produced a son, but she felt disappointed nonetheless. She had internalized the necessity for sons. When I asked Durga if she felt she needed a son, at first she said no. Later she admitted, "No, it would have been better if she [the second daughter] had been a son. Thinking that I would get a son, I gave birth [the second time]. I didn't get a son, and what can be done?" She made the point that she could not control the sex of her children, but nevertheless felt the disappointment of not producing a son. In the end, she concluded, "If I have [another child], then [it will be] much later, after they [the two daughters] get bigger." Durga was 27 at the time of the interview. Her daughters were aged seven and two. She felt that everyone was implicitly expecting her to have another child, yet she was reluctant to do so.

Another young high-caste woman also expressed the necessity for having sons primarily in terms of her own internalization of that expectation. Sita had two daughters, at that time aged four and seven, and when asked whether she needed to have a son, she said, "I don't need one, but others disagree." Others, she said, meant her parents-in-law. "They say they need at least one." When asked about her husband's preferences, she replied:

He doesn't need one. Now he says not to give birth. My husband says, "Why have many births? It will be alright if we don't have another birth." We are only two; because of others we are not able to [avoid giving birth again]. I practiced temporary family planning. I haven't adopted a permanent measure. I feel that I don't know what to do. It is uncomfortable. It would have been so nice if the youngest daughter had been a son. It would have been carefree [*ananda*]. No one would have been able to say anything. In our society, it is said that a son is needed; that isn't good. And also Deuraani (her husband's younger brother's wife) had a son; I had two daughters. When sisters and aunties came, they told me that they wanted to see one from me. Everyone that came [said that]! I couldn't do anything. What to do?

When asked what her husband thought after the birth of the second daughter, she assured me, "He didn't behave badly, he didn't. But I felt bad myself when I gave birth to a daughter in the hospital at that time." Contradicting her earlier general comment that her parents-in-law needed a son, Sita said that her parents-in-law were supportive after the birth of her second daughter. Her parents-in-law told her that a daughter is just like a son and not to feel disappointment (*dukha*). But this statement was a consolation, not a negation of the need for a son. Even though no one in her family said anything negative to her about giving birth to a second daughter, she had internalized the expectation of a son. "I thought, 'What will others say because [I had] another daughter?' So I felt bad. But no one said anything. I felt bad myself." Although no one said anything, Sita felt unsatisfied (translated literally, her "heart did not understand"). As with many expectations within Nepali families, there was no need to express aloud that which was already understood.

Toward the end of the interview, an hour into my fourth discussion with Sita over a period of seven months, she contradicted her earlier statement that she did not feel the need to have a son:

I will see once. I will give birth once more. And if it isn't [a son], what to do, no? They told me to give birth. No one listens to me. What to do? I will try one more time. If again it is a daughter, then I will go to my *maiti* [woman's parental home], have [the sterilization] operation there, and return. [I will do that] whether or not it causes my husband to marry another. It doesn't matter to me. I am thinking that now.

This couple may have agreed on a philosophical level that they do not need a son, but on a more realistic level they felt the need for one. Sita will likely try for a son one more time despite having used Norplant® to avoid becoming pregnant for the past five years. She seems to be testing the limits to the rules about producing a son, waiting to see what would happen and how bad the situation would get before she allows herself the possibility of becoming pregnant again.

Some women were more adamant about not giving birth again. They asserted that their daughters were just as good as sons. Radha, a 24-year-old with a 10-year-old daughter, did not hesitate in responding to the question of whether she was interested in having another child:

If [my husband] needs a son, then I will ask him to take another wife. After all, can we give birth to a son if we want one, or to a daughter if we want to have a daughter? If we have a daughter, [people's] behavior is so different; they insult. The very behavior of the family changes with the birth of either son or daughter. So how can we have that? We are not machines. So what guarantee is there that my next child would be a son? Suppose I get only a series of daughters, then what? It will be very difficult to care for all the girls. We can't kill them, we have to look after them well, we have to earn. It is very difficult.

Radha summarized the observations of several young mothers living in nuclear families when she said, "Look at my own husband. He neither serves his parents in times of need nor cares for his wife. So I don't feel that a son is highly necessary. Instead, I feel that our daughter will give more love." Another woman living in a nuclear family remarked, "A son is no longer necessary. What have sons done in recent times? . . . If I can do well for my daughter, she too will take care of me. In the case of earning well, she too can do well." In response to her husband's opinion that girls are worth little and do not need to be educated, Radha conceded, "He is also correct in some ways, because a daughter is married off, whereas a son will be compelled to look after his aging parents."

Even the young women who were the boldest in their opinions could not dispute the fact that daughters leave their parents at the time of marriage. The patrilocal joint-family system undermines the logic of women who said that having daughters is just as good as having sons. Women living in nuclear families hoped that their sons would stay with them and bring daughters-in-law into the household—recreating a joint family. Therefore, although young women were dismissive of traditions related to their culture and religion, such as

requiring a son to perform funeral rites, they could not escape their society's underlying assumptions about patterns of residence and marriage.

Conclusion

In Nepal, women and girls are viewed as more capable and valuable than ever before, but the women in this study reported that they had internalized the society's, the local community's, and their family's expectations of having a son. Thus, despite being positioned within recent trends of comparatively lower fertility, women are still expected to produce male offspring. In practice, this means that the stakes are raised for each birth. Nepali women find themselves located at the point of conflict between the ideals of lowered fertility and the value of having sons. The lower the parity at which a son is born, the more quickly the family can breathe a sigh of relief.

My ethnographic data suggest that while ideological or religious explanations for needing to produce a son are fading, the multigenerational family ideal remains strong. Having (or expecting to have) a joint-family household influences a couple's desire for sons because they will want to have a daughter-in-law to replace the daughters lost to other households through marriage. Despite their resistance to the necessity of having sons, women are unable to escape the facts that (1) increases in the potential contributions of women to the household benefit them only through daughters-in-law, and (2) having a son results in the acquisition of a daughter-in-law for the household. Having (or merely expecting to have) an extended family household influences a couple's desire for sons. Women's verbal opposition to the higher value placed on sons in their culture ultimately did not overcome their desire for a daughter-in-law who will provide labor and care and ensure the continuation of the family. The patrilocal extended family system thus continues to drive observed son "preference," despite changes in gender norms and education. Women's ideas and attitudes about the relative value of sons and daughters ultimately are not realized in their reproductive behavior because of limits to new constructions of gender enforced by the extended family ideal.

These findings support the conclusions of previous studies that aspects of kinship or family systems, such as norms for marriage, inheritance, and living arrangements, have bearing on demographic outcomes (Dyson and Moore 1983; Das Gupta 1997; Skinner 1997). More specifically, these findings align with a recent comparative project on China, India, and South Korea—all patrilineal, patrilocal societies—that underscores the important role of a similar kinship system despite local cultural differences in perpetuating son preference (Das Gupta et al. 2003). As Croll (2000) notes, the most striking aspect of the intergenerational contract between parents and children in contemporary South and East Asia is that it remained a parent-son contract. Moreover, she concludes that discrimination against girls was on the rise despite increasing economic development, declining fertility, and the overall improved status of women. My research does not address this discrimination, but it does suggest that strides toward gender equality are limited by the structure of the kinship system. Nepali women may value daughters as much as sons on an ideological level, yet they remain unable to escape the practical implications of losing daughters to other lineages and households.

In the future, if parents begin to see that their investment in girls pays off through remittances from their daughters' employment, the counter-discourse to the necessity of having sons will grow. This possibility is foreshadowed here by the women in nuclear families who proclaimed, "Can't my daughter care for me?" Without a significant change in the patrilocal and joint-family system, however, daughters cannot care for their parents. Once they are married, daughters must serve their parents-in-law, either directly through their labor in the household or fields or by means of their income from employment outside of the home. Fong (2002) presents a fascinating case in which the one-child policy in China created a new social order and forced an increase in the status of daughters in urban China because parents had nowhere else to turn. In patrilineal, patrilocal countries without this type of state-enforced limitation on the number of births, son preference persists.

Alternatively, if what appears to be a temporary nuclear stage in a joint-family system turns out to be building momentum toward a nuclear family system in Nepal, the daughters in a household would not need to be replaced by daughters-in-law. Either a son or a daughter could provide for and care for parents, or aging parents might be placed in a growing number of facilities for the elderly. Like many trends that appeared first in India and later in Nepal, the "bad family"—characterized by the decline of the joint-family system and of respect for elders (Cohen 1998; Lamb 2000)—may take hold in Nepal. In any of these alternative scenarios to the patrilocal joint-family system, the patriarchal nature of society might not subside. The findings of this research indicate, however, that in these scenarios son preference might weaken. A shift toward a nuclear family system does not necessarily lead, however, to a more bilateral kinship system. The question of whether women in nuclear families have closer or more supportive relationships with their natal kin bears investigation.

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