



Socio-Economic Issues and Challenges in Male Child Preference in Nigeria

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Abstract

Preference for male children is a global phenomenon. However, it is more seriously practiced in highly traditional societies of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The practice is particularly widespread in Nigeria, where for cultural and familial justifications families express subtle and sometimes outright preference for male children over females. Unfortunately, this leads to unintended consequences, not only for the families involved but also for the larger society. Against this backdrop, therefore, this paper attempts to articulate the rationale for male child preference, the extent of the practice, as well as some of its damaging consequences and the attendant implications for the Nigerian society in particular. Whereas in the quest for male children, the focus is usually on the seeming gains, which constitute the motivators for families that would stop at nothing to have them. However, attention is drawn in this paper to the other side of the coin, and emphasis is laid on the need for the practice to be checkmated using appropriate institutional tools.

Keywords: Male child preference; Son preference; Socioeconomic issues and challenges.

1. Introduction

Globally, gender inequality remains a major concern to policy makers and development planners. This explains the inclusion of gender equality among the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. The aftermath of this has been for social issues that make women vulnerable and susceptible to discrimination and social deprivations to come under scrutiny, with many being gradually unearthed. And where and when they are identified, steps are taken to address them, with a view to increasing social equity and equality.

One gender-based practice that has been the basis for discrimination against women, as well as their somewhat disadvantaged position even in today's 21st century, particularly in traditional societies is male child preference. A fundamental question which this paper seeks to address is: why have men continued to be valued above women, especially in more traditional societies like those in Africa, Asia and the Middle East? Secondly, at what cost have these societies sustained this practice?

Without a doubt, plausible explanations for the continued prevalence of this phenomenon exists, but the fact remains that both sexes of human kind have their unique places, roles, as well as relevance in society. What then is the rationale for the preference of boys over girls, to the extent that sometimes in some societies like those in Asia, extreme measures like female feticide (to mention but one) are employed just to eliminate the female child? What societal values provide impetus for the structural discrimination against females in the family and society, as evidenced in the culture of male child preference?

Women are part and parcel of every fabric of society. As such, any social practice that is detrimental to their health, social, economic or psychological wellbeing will not end with them. In one way or the other, the effects will trickle down to the larger society. That is to say, although women are the ones who suffer directly from the effects of male child preference, at the macro level, society also shares in the consequences of the practice in the long run. Therefore, it becomes needful to urgently address the issue not only for women's wellbeing, but also to help rescue society and indeed humanity from debilitating social conditions like HIV/AIDS, divorce and population explosion which ultimately become the long term effects of male child preference.

2. An Overview of the Phenomenon

Male child preference, also described as son preference, is the practice of attaching greater value to male children compared to the females. It involves rating male children as more valuable than or preferable to female children. The World Health Organization describes it as involving a preference for male children, often, although not necessarily a neglect of and discrimination against female children, who are less highly valued for both ideological and straight forward economic reasons (World Health Organization WHO, 1986).

Despite widespread modernization and increased female participation in all domains of social life, preference for male children is still widely practiced. In societies with strong attachments to traditional norms, values and practices, the phenomenon is even more noticeable, although it is observable in many societies across the globe; which literarily makes it a universal practice. Singh (2000) citing Hammer (1981) revealed that in the entire world, only in five primitive societies was the reverse (female child preference) the case, adding that there are documented evidences of the practice in largely traditional societies of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, as well as more modern and Western societies of Canada and the United States of America.

Vandera *et al.* (2007), in their study among pregnant women in Jamnagar, India found that 58.5% of them indicated preference for male children. Among those who previously had no male children 68.28% of them preferred male children, while 42.5% of those who already had male children still preferred boys. This study further revealed that 20.5% of the women indicated they will go for female feticide. In the United States of America, which is a highly modernized society, Collins (1988), cited in Pooler (1991) reported that males are highly more valued. In his studies on sex of child preference among college students, Pooler (1991) observed that male American students strongly preferred a male for an only child, while their female colleagues moderately preferred females.

In Africa, which is predominantly traditional in its practices, not having at least one male child is more or less a social stigma. This according to Isiugo-Abanihe (2003) is particularly the case in Nigeria, where the practice is so strong and widespread. Eguavoen *et al.* (2007), stressed that in Nigeria, irrespective of level of education, when it comes to the issue of male child preference, traditional pattern of thought predominates. It is not surprising therefore, that their study on sex preference, decision making and fertility control in Ekpoma, Nigeria, Eguavoen *et al.* (2007) found that 89.5% of subjects showed preference for male children. Nigeria being a largely patriarchal society, a finding such as this is not strange. A few individuals may indicate that the sex of their child or children is of no consequence. In reality however, deep down, they desire at least one male child for some social and psychological reasons.

Preference for male children is so strong in Nigeria that families without at least one male child are viewed as somewhat incomplete. Wives involved perceive themselves as not having any 'root' in such homes. This is depicted in this response by a subject in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) by Eguavoen *et al.* (2007), "if you do not have a boy, you do not feel secure. As a woman, you are not the owner of the house, even if you are the only wife". With regards to the highly patriarchal Igbo people of South-east Nigeria for instance, Isiugo-Abanihe (1993) stated that, "for a woman, the birth of a male child is of paramount importance because it establishes her firmly in the family. She is said to have 'taken root' or 'established a solid foundation' when the first son arrives". In the case of husbands in families without male children in Nigeria, it is observed that a good number of them live with a sense of lack of fulfillment. Some even consider their inability to father a male child as a sign of weakness and failure in life. Still among Igbo people in South-east Nigeria, Isiugo-Abanihe (1993), noted that because of their patrilineal social structure, "the status of a man is assessed in part by the number of his sons". He added that "a man with many sons is viewed as a wealthy or an accomplished man". He noted further that the neighbours of such a man "cautiously avoid confrontation with him and that he is assured of a befitting burial at death", stressing that an Igbo man who dies without a male child is perceived as having lived a worthless life and "is soon forgotten since his branch of the family tree is ended". This explains why some of such men indulge in extramarital affairs, the intention being to have male children just to prove they are 'men enough'.

Furthermore, for a number of families in Nigeria, repeated female births are regretted. But when a male child is born, extra effort is usually made to welcome his arrival and for many Nigerian wives, giving birth to a male child is the key to enjoying new and better dimensions of affection and attention from their husbands. However, for those who do not succeed in having even one male child, the likelihood will be that such level of affection and attention will elude them. Even when just one male child is born, it is considered risky due to the still high infant mortality rate in Nigeria. As such, more attempts are made to have more male children so as to have replacements in case any dies.

3. Rationale for the Practice

Different societies place importance on male children for different social, economic and cultural reasons. In Nigeria economic issues like land acquisition, property inheritance and succession to kingship and leadership positions all constitute part of the reasons for attachment of strong importance to male children.

Land acquisition and property inheritance especially in rural Nigeria are almost exclusively men's affair. In the words of Eguavoen *et al.* (2007), "traditional inheritance in Nigeria has no room for women". Consequently families are usually desperate to large extent for male children since that is the only way traditionally to guarantee their chance to both secure lands, as well as have such lands and other landed property remain in their possession. In most rural Nigeria, it is often observed that if a man dies without a male child, his closest living male relative often moves to take over the dead man's landed property, and often, they succeed. Even where communal land ownership is practiced, as is the case in parts of South-South Nigeria, lands are usually allocated only to men and can only remain in the possession of that family as long as they produce male children, otherwise ownership of such lands is revoked. Women who acquire wealth and desire to put up structures can still acquire lands in these communities, but they do so in the name of their son or a close male relative.

A very important and largely universal reason for male preference in Nigeria is the need to preserve family name. Isiugo-Abanihe (2003), in his study noted that respondents agreed that both sexes are important in that they perform different roles, but the need for someone to carry on the family name compel parents to prefer sons. Unlike men, most women change their names after marriage. Men continue to bear their family names and transfer same to

their children. It is assumed such names are preserved only as long as male children are born into that family. However, a family without a male child is viewed in many traditional societies like Nigeria as facing the risk of 'extinction'. Among Erei people in South-South Nigeria, married women do not bear their husbands' names. They carry on with their fathers' (maiden) names even after marriage. However, such names are restricted only to them. Their children bear their own fathers' names. That means even in such communities family names live on only through male children. Thus, Igbo people in South-East Nigeria go as far as giving such names as 'Ahamefula' or 'Afamefuna' which means 'let my name not be lost', 'Ahanna', meaning 'father's name', all to reflect the extent of importance attached to having family names preserved.

The traditional institution in Nigeria is a very strong one. Notable traditional offices and titles exist and are recognized by the Federal, State and Local Governments. Examples include positions of the Oba of Benin, Ooni of Ife, Obong of Calabar, Sultan of Sokoto and many others. These traditional political offices are still very much the domain of men, even in cases when they are hereditary. Never in history has any of these offices been occupied by a woman, and there are neither conversations nor negotiations to alter the status quo, affirmative actions and advocacy for gender equality and inclusiveness notwithstanding. This means that the presence of a male child is the only ticket to succeeding, inheriting or retaining such offices, so that where a family fails to produce a male successor, another family with a male child or male children takes over. Moreover, these traditional office are accompanied with wealth, prestige, power, fame and similar privileges. As such, they are desired intensely and when acquired, there is always the desire to have them retained. Thus, concerns for successorship noted (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2003) as well as Eguavoen *et al.* (2007), provide more impetus for male child preference in Nigeria.

Lastly, Herbert (1993) cited by Eguavoen *et al.* (2007), considers support for parents as another reason for son preference, noting that girls marry and leave, making a number of parents to view any investment on them as 'lost' with marriage. However, investment on men stressed Isiugo-Abanihe (2003) is often perceived to be permanent in the family. As such, as seen in Eguavoen *et al.* (2007), there is general belief (among parents in traditional societies in particular) that "the boy belongs to us, while the girl belongs to someone else", hence the preference for male children.

4. Socioeconomic Issues and Challenges in Male Child Preference

In 2013, it was estimated that sub-Saharan Africa which is home to only 12% of the global population accounted for a whopping 71% of the global burden of HIV infection (Kharsany and Abdool Karim, 2016). Abdullahi (2006), had reported that Nigeria alone accounts for 8% of this global burden of HIV/AIDS. Currently, Nigeria alone has 1, 900, 000 people living with HIV, making it the country with the second largest HIV epidemic in the world (Avert, 2019). Unarguably, preference for male child has functioned directly or indirectly to increase cases of HIV/AIDS in Nigeria.

The quest to have male children often drives some men who failed to have them after several attempts with their wives to resort to trying with other women. Unfortunately, attempting to have male children with another woman other than one's wife would mean unprotected sex, since the aim is for the woman to conceive. Sadly, sometimes such attempts are made with several women before success is achieved (if at all). Such situations of unprotected and multiple sex involvements without doubt constitute risk factors for contracting HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections. Certainly, if and when such infections are contracted, same is transmitted to one's spouse. Thus, this is one major way through which male child preference promotes the spread of HIV in Nigeria and many other African countries.

Male child preference creates room for repeated conceptions. As such, it exposes women to risk of complications of child birth and even death; and by so doing helps to raise maternal mortality rates. In sub-Saharan Africa, maternal mortality rate ranks highest in the world, currently constituting about 66 per cent or two – thirds of all maternal deaths worldwide (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund UNICEF, 2017). In the case of Nigeria, the (African Population and Health Research Centre, 2017) reports that the country alone is the second highest contributor to maternal mortality in the world and until recently, registers an estimated 40, 000 maternal deaths annually, which amounts to 14 percent of the global total. However, between 2010 and 2013 the maternal mortality rate in Nigeria stood at 530 deaths per 100, 000 live births (Edu *et al.*, 2017), which is still high compared to other countries of similar economic ranking. Without doubt, male child preference has contributed in no small measure to this maternal mortality rate in Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular, through this aspect of pushing women into multiple conceptions. This is because in Africa and indeed Nigeria, many women who are without at least one male child often insist and go on taking in again and again hoping to conceive for a male child. Unfortunately, each extra attempt by a woman with regards to becoming pregnant in a bid to have a male child, predisposes her to child birth complications and possibly death. Sadly again, in a traditional society like Nigeria, women observed Eguavoen *et al.* (2007) have little or no say in fertility decisions. Eguavoen *et al.* (2007) noted further that even if a husband seeks his wife's opinion on the issue, being that traditionally the husband is the head of the home, he still makes the final decision. For the woman, non-compliance may mean either completely losing her place as wife or sharing him with another woman. To avoid any of these, many women in this situation continue to conceive, risking their own health and lives, with some dying in the process.

The generally large family size and population increase observed in Nigeria and other developing countries are not unconnected with the male child preference phenomenon. In fact, the quest for male children it frustrates efforts to check population rise. Oreland (1993) in Eguavoen *et al.* (2007) noticed that couples continue to bear children beyond their overall desired family size in order to achieve some favoured sex. Lie (1991) cited Eguavoen *et al.* (2007) found in a survey in Vietnam that families need at least one male and would continue child bearing until a

son is born. In the same vein, [Pathak and Arya \(2018\)](#) in a study among women in Bhopal, India, found that male child preference affects the decisions of women when it comes to contraception. Specifically, their study revealed that subjects who had their desired number of male children were more likely to adopt permanent contraceptive, while those without male children or the desired number were far less likely to adopt permanent contraceptive, implying that subjects in the latter group were likely to continue child bearing until they either have male children or their desired number of boys. Continuing child bearing until a son is born implies that family size will be larger than planned, especially if the son does not come early in childbirth. Certainly, a scenario such as this will not help fertility decline and partly explains the continuous growth in population among many developing countries, efforts to achieve population decline notwithstanding.

Furthermore, since male child preference gives room for large family size, it invariably increases the burden of providing care for the family, with the wife being particularly affected as the direct caregiver. Each extra child means extra mouth to feed, extra care to give and extra basic needs to provide. This will certainly be economically, emotionally and even physically tasking for parents. This could also be a remote reason why some children are forced into street hawking just to augment family income. On the part of the children, the average attention and care each of them would receive will certainly reduce because such care and attention have to be spread across many children. For the wife in such a family, the level of difficulty she will encounter as the direct caregiver as already noted will also increase. This will further expose her to stress and stress-related health problems.

The desire to have sons also creates in women emotional health conditions like anxiety; and as observed in [Rouhi et al. \(2017\)](#), it continues to exert hidden pressure on child bearing women in developing countries to dispose them to depression during pregnancy. These emotional health conditions are usually occasioned by feelings of uncertainty that surround these women over either their fate or how their husbands, family members or even their immediate communities would regard them should they fail to give birth to a son. As such, in Nigeria, some women have even wished they had even a son who died, so it would at least be on record they had a male child.

Emphasis on male children also exposes girls born in families without a boy to a different emotional problems. Not having a male sibling like other families, mistreatment of their mother and expression of dissatisfaction by their father could function singly or collectively to cause anxiety, depression and inferiority complex in such girls. Some of such girls have even become unusually aggressive in order to make up for the role of a male child to their mother and other siblings.

Male child preference according to the Advocates for Human Rights (2019) also gives room for harmful practices such as the deliberate neglect and abandonment of the girl child. Girls born amidst an only son could be deprived adequate care and education especially if resources are lean. In the face of limited resources, the case in many Nigerian families is usually for attention to be concentrated on the boy, since it is widely believed that it is only the investment on the man that is permanent, while that of a girl is temporary, being that she would someday be married off to another family.

Furthermore, the yet high level of illiteracy among the female population in Nigeria and many other developing societies is not unconnected with male child preference. As [Etuk et al. \(2019\)](#), observed, for many parents, until recently, the opportunity cost of sending girls to school was considered to be high because they are needed for house chores. As such, parents, noted [Etuk et al. \(2019\)](#) would rather send off the boys to school while leaving the girls at home to help out with housework. This is further fuelled not only by the belief that the girl would someday be married off to another family, but also by the perception that any investment made on her would be to the benefit of her future family rather than her family of orientation. On the other hand, it is believed that the man would stay put in the family and as such, investment on him will continue to be of benefit to the entire family. Consequently, in matters of education, sons are usually given priority, while daughters in many instances are denied such opportunities. This resulted in thousands or even millions of Nigerian and indeed African girls remaining uneducated and unequipped for development like their male counterparts.

Citing a joint statement by OHCHR, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women and WHO, the [World Health Organization WHO \(2011\)](#), maintains that sex selection in favour of boys - which is male child preference- portrays injustice against women and is a manifestation of violation of women's human rights. As such, countries with higher rates of son preference are usually associated with increases in gender violence like forced marriage ([UN Women, 2011](#)). This is expressed in the fact that as [Etuk \(2019\)](#) observed, in Nigeria for instance, it was common place for girls to sometimes be forced to into early marriage so that their bride price could be used to invest in the education or apprenticeship of their male sibling.

As already noted, [UN Women \(2011\)](#) associated son preference with increases in gender violence. Domestic violence constitutes one of such gender violence. In Nigeria where it is common place to blame the failure of a couple to have a male child on the woman, ill feelings by some men resulting from their wives' 'inability to give them a male child' often drive some of them to become aggressive towards their wives and sometimes they unleash violence on these women.

Apart from domestic violence, marital separation and divorce, resulting from persistent marital disharmony and domestic violence are also possible fall outs of male child preference. Moreover, the desperation to have a son drives some men to try with other women if attempts with their wives fail. Attempts with a woman or women outside ones wife is nothing short of extramarital affair, which has been identified by [Ezeukwu \(1998\)](#) as a major cause of divorce. Certainly, no woman will take it lightly knowing her husband is involved with another woman. This usually creates tension between the couples involved and when such tensions are not properly managed, marital separation or divorce might follow. These could also happen as result of a husband's change of attitude towards his wife for her 'failure' to give him a male child. This could be by way of denying her care and attention. In Nigeria, there have

been countless incidents of men abandoning their wives in the hospital because of repeated female births. This can be emotionally devastating for the women involved and may negatively impinge on their marital relationship.

5. Conclusion

Male child preference offers the Nigeria and other developing societies much more than the observed benefits. The phenomenon appears harmless but has underlying harmful dimension. The implications the practice holds for the Nigerian society and Africa in general with regards to population growth, maternal mortality, spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, as well as the risks it poses to marital harmony, women's emotional health and their overall well-being have been outlined. Presently, around the globe, there is intense campaign against population explosion, spread of HIV, and maternal mortality among other social problems. This paper draws attention to the fact that as efforts are intensified against these undesirable social conditions, it is necessary for development planners and similar stakeholders to pay attention the subtle issue of male child preference with a view to dismantling value systems and social structures that lend it relevance. By so doing its role in facilitating the continued existence of its attendant problematic negative social conditions can be eliminated. In other words, using relevant government policies and programmes such as family counseling and awareness/sensitization programmes, the undue importance attached to male children in the Nigerian society can be deemphasized. In so doing, extramarital affairs, multiple conception, marital disharmony, increased family size and other issues that emanate from the quest for male children, which in turn give rise to the negative social conditions discussed, can be avoided or at least minimized. There is no doubt that success is continuously being recorded in the fight against the negative social conditions outlined, more successes will definitely be recorded if these problems are tackled from the angle of male child preference. No identified stone must be left unturned.

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