

# How girls fare when only a son will do

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When it comes to parents' preferences for the genders of their children, there is a high level of disagreement between wives and husbands, according to a Cornell sociologist.

In a new study, Vida Maralani, associate professor of sociology in the

College of Arts and Sciences reports that in 60 middle- and [low-income countries](#), husbands are far more likely to want more sons, while wives are more likely to want more daughters, an equal numbers of boys and girls or have no preference.

However, preferences for boys are not necessarily detrimental to girls' outcomes such as education; through deeper analysis of 19 countries where sons are preferred, the researchers found a wide range of how sex preferences are correlated with children's outcomes.

"Spousal Agreement on Sex Preference for Children and Gender Gaps in Children's Education" was [published](#) in *Population and Development Review* on July 1. Candas Pinar, assistant professor of sociology at Saint Michael's College in Vermont, is the co-author.

"I'm fascinated by how much cultural variation there is in the world around the concept of gender," Maralani said. "Son preference is a great example of this. On the one hand, it is such a seemingly simple construct, and yet this, too, has so much complexity."

Using Demographic and Health Survey data collected between 2000 and 2020, the researchers looked into how much wives and husbands agree on sex preferences for children based on the common combinations of preferences when spouses disagree.

India has the highest share of agreement on sex preferences, at 59%, they found, and Niger has the lowest, 32%.

When couples disagree on their preferences, this is most likely a result of men preferring having more sons than daughters but their wives not sharing this preference.

"It is surprising to me that couples disagree as much as they do,"

Maralani said. "Even in the most agreeing country, India, almost half of them disagree. That's a country with a strong cultural preference for sons. We're naïve in thinking couples always agree."

The study also explored how parents' sex preferences for children might be associated with children's schooling by digging into the data from countries that show a strong preference for sons, revealing a wide range of how gender preferences are related to children's educational outcomes.

For instance, in four countries (Niger, Nigeria, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire), boys get more education than girls when wives want sons but their husbands don't, compared to when wives and husbands both want sons. Given that women are far less likely to prefer sons overall, Maralani said, women who express a preference for sons may hold that opinion more intensely than husbands who express this view.

In three contexts (the regions of India with high son-preference, Togo, and Liberia), girls have more education than boys when spouses both prefer daughters or have no gender preference. To Maralani, this suggests that when cultural and structural barriers favoring boys are removed, gendered differences in socialization that lead to better school outcomes prevail, just as they do in many other contexts.

"Gender plays out in many different ways across the world," Maralani said. "On the one hand, we had no idea there was such extensive disagreement between partners in how many boys versus girls they prefer to have. On the other hand, even when both spouses agree on wanting more sons than daughters, this isn't consistently correlated with girls getting less education."

**More information:** Vida Maralani et al, Spousal Agreement on Sex Preferences for Children and Gender Gaps in Children's Education,

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