

# The Missing Link Between Parents' Preferences and Daughters' Survival: The Moderator Effect of Societal Discrimination

REBECA ECHÁVARRI<sup>a</sup> and JAVIER HUSILLOS<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Glasgow, UK

<sup>b</sup> University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

**Summary.** — The premature mortality of female children is an alarming demographic outcome in many countries of the world. The most popular explanation for this phenomenon is the prevalence of son preference. However, empirical findings indicate that the assumption of a positive relationship between wanted daughters and female children's survival is not found in every scenario, and it does not have a clear explanation in the literature. To fill this gap, we present a simple model that provides insights into how the positive marginal effect of wanted daughters on their survival might decrease with higher societal discrimination against young females. The model draws on the emerging literature that examines the erosion of cognitive and noncognitive skills that results from poverty and discrimination. Our theoretical findings are tested for the case of India, using the third round of the National Family Health Survey, with Zero-Inflated Poisson models. Our estimates provide support for the interaction of parents' preferences and societal discrimination against female children. In particular, we show that the statistical significance of the marginal effect of wanted daughters on their survival disappears in contexts of high societal discrimination against female children. Our study contributes to the literature by questioning the commonly held assumption of additive separability between the effect of family and societal characteristics. One central implication is that the alleviation of poverty alone might fail to automatically reduce sex-based discriminatory practices, and that multidimensional interventions are required that target the individual and society.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Millions of women are missing because of discriminatory practices carried out all over the world (Anderson & Ray, 2010; Sen, 1992). An alarming type of discrimination is intra-household discrimination against female children (Lin, Liu, & Qian, 2014; Mangyo, 2008; Oster, 2009a, 2009b; Qian, 2008; Rohlfs, Reed, & Yamada, 2010; Rosenzweig & Schultz, 1982).

The most popular explanation for the intra-household discrimination against young females is the prevalence of son preference (Lin et al., 2014; Pande, 2003). It is argued that son preference results in a biased allocation of the scarce time, energy, and resources needed to fight against the avoidable morbidity and premature mortality of female children. However, recent empirical findings indicate that the positive relationship between son preference and female child deprivation is not so straightforward. In India, for instance, a decline in the number of unwanted girls across all socioeconomic groups (Retherford & Roy, 2003) has failed to be associated with a decrease in the mortality of young females (Mukherjee, 2013). Another troublesome finding results from examining the effect of sex-selective abortions on young girls' survival. Sex-selective abortions, which reduce the number of unwanted girls, as well as the number of girls that are raised in large families and in poor conditions, are expected to improve the health conditions and survival of young girls (Lin et al., 2014). However, in many scenarios, this relationship fails to arise (Nandi, 2014; Shepherd, 2008). Nandi (2014) finds, for instance, that a reduction in sex-selective abortions, as result of the ban on prenatal sex diagnostics, and which would have increased the number of unwanted girls, had no impact on the mortality of young girls in Maharashtra (India).

Although important steps have been taken to better understand the complex relationship between preferences and

discrimination against young females (Rohlfs et al., 2010), to our knowledge, no study has yet provided a comprehensive explanation of why, contrary to what was expected, the positive relationship between the number of wanted female children and their survival is not found in every scenario. The reason why previous works provide an unsatisfactory explanation of this phenomenon could rest on the lack of comprehensive theoretical analysis of the particularities of human behavior under circumstances of societal discrimination and poverty (Appaduai, 2004; Ray, 2006). In particular, further analysis should be conducted on the role played by societal discrimination on the relationship between parents' preferences and child survival.

To overcome this shortcoming, we incorporate recent insights from the psychology of poverty and discrimination literature (Dercon & Singh, 2013; Haushofer & Fehr, 2014; Pasquier-Doumer & Risso Brandon, 2015; World Bank, 2015) on the study of intra-household discrimination. Poverty, stigma, and discrimination undermine cognitive and noncognitive performance, and limit a person's aspirations (Ghosal, Jana, Mani, Mitra, & Roy, 2013; Hoff & Pandey, 2006). The analysis of the person's own aspirations and the aspirations for others is very important if inter and intra-generational poverty and discriminatory trap wants to be understood and

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overcome. For instance, in a study carried out in Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Vietnam, [Dercon and Singh \(2013\)](#) found a robust relationship between parents' aspirations for the future of their children and the children's own aspirations and achievements.

Bringing these findings into our study, we argue that the overwhelming discrimination against young females might erode parents' aspirations for the survival of their daughters, making them more likely to overlook health risks for their female children. Moreover, the poor performance of parents in the context of overwhelming societal discrimination against females might be reinforced by the human tendency to act in accordance with observed behavior ([Kahneman, 2003](#)). Parents exposed to sex-based discriminatory practices in their community might be prone to undertake prevalent discriminatory practices. Indeed, the propensity to replicate observed behavior is one of the main mechanisms that contributes to perpetuate discriminatory practices, even when the basis for discrimination has been removed from society ([World Bank, 2015](#)). In our context, parents who want boys and girls equally might still overlook the health of their daughters, because they take for granted the discriminatory practices of their community. We bring these insights into a simplified model of family decisions, and show how societal discrimination might moderate the relationship between the number of wanted girls and female child survival. Specifically, our model points to a decrease in the positive marginal effect of wanted female children on their survival, where there is greater societal discrimination against young females. The examination of this marginal effect sheds light on the particularities of the relationship between parents' (cognitive and noncognitive) performance and the characteristics of the society, which in turn, we argue, are crucial for gaining a better understanding of the fundamentals of a sex-based discriminatory trap.

To validate our theoretical approach, an empirical analysis is carried out for the case of India, using the National Family Health Survey (2005–6). Our estimates show that, holding constant other socioeconomic and cultural factors, having wanted daughters increases their survival. However, an interplay exists between the number of wanted daughters and societal discrimination against female children, so that the positive effect of wanted daughters on their survival is reduced with societal discrimination against female children. Indeed, the statistical significance of wanted daughters disappears in contexts of extremely high societal discrimination against female children. The results are robust to changes in specification, sample, year, and variable definitions.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides the theoretical background of the paper. In Section 3, we present the data and methods. The empirical results are displayed in Section 4. Discussion and conclusions are given in Section 5.

## 2. A PSYCHOLOGY OF DISCRIMINATION PERSPECTIVE

A great deal of research has been conducted to examine both the effect of parents' son preferences and the effect of (sex-based) discriminatory institutions on the survival of children. On the one hand, parents might bear son preferences and allocate survival resources unequally between sons and daughters ([Qian, 2008](#); [Rohlf's et al., 2010](#); [Rosenzweig & Schultz, 1982](#)). On the other hand, discriminatory institutions might limit what parents can do to fight for the survival of their female children ([Branisa, Klasen, & Ziegler, 2013](#); [Luke & Munshi, 2007](#)), for example, through the characteristics of

the social actors involved in the care of their children, such as physicians who could also bear son preferences ([Patel, Badhoniya, Mamtani, & Kulkarni, 2013](#)). However, less attention (if any) has been paid in this field to examine the effects of the interaction between individuals' preferences and their discriminatory socioeconomic and cultural context, to explain observed behavioral patterns in a society.

Laboratory and field experiments carried out in different cultural environments demonstrate how discrimination and stigma foster negative psychological dispositions, and contribute to the erosion of cognitive and noncognitive skills of underprivileged individuals, which undermines the person's potential. [Hoff and Pandey \(2006\)](#) show how the public revelation of the young boys' social identity (the caste) in rural north India affected the cognitive task performance and ability to respond to economic opportunities of low-caste children. These authors found that as social identity was made public, the negative thoughts of underprivileged people increased, eroding their confidence, learning, and trust in their own success. [Ghosal et al. \(2013\)](#) showed how the enhancement of psychological characteristics, such as the self-esteem of sex workers in Kolkata (India)—while keeping invariant the amount of material resources that they were entitled to—made them more proactive, as shown by their savings choices and health-seeking behavior. [Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, and Master \(2006\)](#) reduced the racial achievement gap (40%) of African-American students in a suburban school in the United States, as the experimenters enhanced the students' sense of personal adequacy (see also [Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Aughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009](#)).

The psychological mechanisms through which discrimination undermines the performance of underprivileged population are multifaceted. The pressure of dealing with poverty ([Mani, Mullainathan, Shafrir, & Zhao, 2013](#)) and discrimination ([Cohen et al., 2006, 2009](#); [Hoff & Pandey, 2006](#)) could overwhelm the human cognitive system based on reasoning and judgment, leading to low performance by the underprivileged. Discrimination might also erode the person's noncognitive skills. Authors such as [Appaduai \(2004\)](#) or [Ray \(2006\)](#) identify a phenomenon called "the aspirations failure"; the gap between the person's current aspirations and their own potential. The rise of a gap in aspirations with discrimination makes it possible that noncognitive skills contribute to the exacerbation of chronic deprivation ([Ghosal et al., 2013](#)). Going further in this direction, [Dalton, Ghosal, and Mani \(2015\)](#) examine how the inability of human beings to internalize the long-term consequences of their actions (*e.g.*, the long-term returns of effort) might be one of the main origins of aspiration failure, and the low effort levels undertaken by the underprivileged population.

Attention is redirected by the psychologist [Kahneman \(2003\)](#) to the structure of the human mind. He supports the idea that the cognitive system, based on reasoning and judgment, coexists with another (automatic) system, comprising thoughts that come spontaneously to the person's mind. The salience of the automatic cognitive system, which prioritizes shared understandings of a community (mental models), would contribute to the perpetuation of poverty and inequality ([World Bank, 2015](#)). By acknowledging that discriminatory environments might foster parents' internal constraints (*e.g.*, aspiration failure for their daughters), or cause them to behave in accordance with shared (sex-based) discriminatory mental models, thus compromising the effort that parents devote to fight against the premature mortality of their daughters, we move to a framework that helps us to understand why the marginal effect of being wanted and surviving might fail to

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