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“But it’s not that they don’t love their girls”: Gender equality, reproductive rights and sex-selective abortion in Britain

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ABSTRACT

Recent demographic analysis of sex ratios at birth in the UK has signaled the issue of “missing girls” in British Asian minority populations. This paper juxtaposes the processes of reproductive regulation set in motion by this new demographic knowledge of son preference, with lived experiences of gender equality and family-making practices. Ethnographic research conducted with British Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi families reveal diverse mechanisms of family decision-making that add to and nuance the prevailing statistics. We use the lens of “gender equality” and vernacular framings of sex-selective abortion to advance conceptual understandings of son preference as increasingly disconnected from selective reproduction, at the same time as selective reproduction is connected with the governance of ethnic minority identity and reproduction.

KEYWORDS

United Kingdom; abortion; gender equality; sex-selection; reproductive governance; South Asian

Advances in reproductive medicine and the proliferation of technologies of assisted reproduction over the past three decades have heralded novel possibilities of family-making as well as new ethical dilemmas globally. These processes have disturbed the taken-for-granted nature of the core concepts of gender, kinship, and relatedness which inform practices of reproduction and childbearing (Strathern 1992). This article examines prenatal female selective abortion as one such technology and practice of assisted family-making that has raised social and demographic anxieties surrounding gender equality and ethnic minority identity and belonging in Britain.¹

Shifts to demographic data collection on selective reproduction in Britain and Europe have coincided with a decline of fertility across populations, as well as a rise in gender conservative and nationalist politics (Pine and Hauknes 2021). Major implications for reproductive governance have emerged amidst these demographic and social shifts, especially when it comes to tightening women’s access to abortion (De-Zordo et al. 2017; Franklin and Ginsburg 2019). We focus on the conflicting ways in which the rhetoric of gender equality is deployed in the context of female selective abortion by members of British Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi families and by politicians, activists, and civil society. In so doing, we contribute to the anthropology of reproduction and to a broader anthropological scholarship on the “logics of exclusion and distinction in the governance of and experience of immigrants and the production of ethnic minority identities” (Fassin 2011:214).

We turn first to the link between fertility decline and prenatal female selective abortion, situating it within a cultural and historical perspective on fertility (Greenhalgh 1995; Khanna 2014a). Currently, the global population is regarded by demographers as undergoing a period of “fertility squeeze” (Ebenstein 2010; Giulmoto 2009; UNFPA 2020). In other words, women are bearing fewer children

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Media Teaser: What does a critical perspective on gender equality bring to the discussion on current forms of reproductive governance? The issue is discussed in relation to sex selective abortion in Britain.

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and family sizes are declining. The effect of a drop in family-size, is an increase in the likelihood that couples will have no sons. In contexts where there is a strict regulation of family size, it has been noted that sex-ratios at birth become skewed toward boys with an estimated one in four parents with two girls likely to resort to sex selection to avoid the birth of a third girl (Guilmoto 2009; Jayachandran 2014). This “masculinization of birth,” Guilmoto and Duthe (2013) note, is a global phenomenon, notably in Asia and Southern Europe.

The decline in the fertility maintenance of son preference and increased access to reproductive technologies has produced unprecedented demographic anxieties especially in contexts that are characterized by patriarchal norms working alongside the state regulation of family size (Van Balen and Inhorn 2003). The increasing availability of contraceptive technologies, especially from the 1980s onwards in countries such as India and China, has resulted in a steep rise in sex selection practices in favor of boys (referred to as the phenomenon of “missing girls”: Khanna et al. 2009; Miller 2001; Patel 2007; Sen 1990). More recently in the 2000s, the practice of prenatal female sex selection was found to occur in Indian diaspora communities in the UK and US, who practice son preference amidst a preference for smaller family sizes (Dubuc and Coleman 2007; Puri et al. 2011). It is this more recent demographic knowledge that forms the subject of our anthropological analysis.

Against the backdrop of fertility decline, the demographic data on prenatal sex selection in Britain has generated contested and conflicting narratives among policy makers, parliamentarians, feminist activists, and social theorists about the nature, extent, and regulation of gender discriminatory family-making practices. Ideas about the regulation of prenatal selection, in particular the criminalization of sex selective abortion of females, are driven disproportionately by explicit claims of the threat posed to gender equality (Anitha and Gill 2018). The perceived need to “safeguard gender equality” has provided the grounds for mobilization among politically diverse sections within parliament, policy, and grassroots activists ranging from those who promote the criminalization of female sex selective abortion to those who view criminalization as a barrier to accessing abortion services (Amery 2015; Anitha and Gill 2018; Lee 2017; Purewal and Eklund 2017; Unnithan and Dubuc 2018). In this regard, the concept of gender equality – like the notion of reproductive rights – functions as an empty signifier (in Laclau’s sense, 1996), a trope whose meaning is variable enabling strategic use for diverse ends (Unnithan and Pigg 2014).

In Britain, the need to tackle the so-called “gender unequal” cultural and religious practices of South Asian ethnic minorities has been a focus of governance and debate over the last three decades (Grillo 2015). Issues such as forced marriage, crimes of control (“honor killings”), and domestic violence have dominated discourse on ethnic minorities and serve as instances where gender and gender relations have been subject to intense public and legal scrutiny (e.g. Anitha and Gill 2009). British policy and popular debate on prenatal sex selection manifest the current perceived threat to gender equality as linked to ethnic minorities (Anitha and Gill 2018; Lee 2017). The related contentions surrounding gender equality frame ethnic and religious minority groups as undermining ideas of British liberal values (Kasstan 2019). The controversial decision to leave the European Union (“Brexit”) is perhaps the clearest example of the current era of nationalism and political conservatism in Britain, which has presented profound implications for reproductive governance (see Franklin and Ginsburg 2019).

Social and political rhetoric around female selective abortion in Britain, as we describe in this article, collectively implicates an imagined “South Asian” community (which glosses over ethnic, cultural, gender, generational, and religious differences), silencing the diverse views of members from within these minorities. Understanding the diversity of perspectives is important because policy-makers attempting to criminalize female selective abortion have consistently deployed evidence from select voices to represent the practice as being widespread, entrenched, and uncontrollable – and thus requiring legal sanctions.

Activists from minority communities who represent “South Asian” women concur and differ in their perspectives on how abortion rights intersect with gender equality. At times, they diverge from the views of other feminist groups in the country as well as from the dominant perspectives of their

own minority ethnic communities (who largely tend to condemn abortion). Some ethnic minority advocacy groups, such as the “Stop Gendercide” coalition, support the criminalization of prenatal sex selection against females because they regard it as a practice primarily of “gendercide.” Other, longer established, minority women’s rights groups in Britain such as Southall Black Sisters feel it is the governance of “religion and culture” not reproductive rights per se that clashes with British Asian women’s attainment of gender equality (Golesorkh 2014).

This article builds on these insights to examine the conjunctions and disjunctions between gender equality as a mode of reproductive governance, a trope for conflicting activist mobilization and as lived reproductive experience. Gender equality functions as a signifier of governmentality and in particular, we suggest, of the conflicting processes of reproductive governance.

Governmentality and conflicted reproductive governance

Governmentality in a context of globalization, as Fassin reminds us, is associated with the processes whereby “borders as external territorial frontiers and boundaries as internal social categorisations are tightly related in a process in which immigrants are racialised and ethnic minorities are reminded of their foreign origin” (2011:24). We draw on this Foucauldian understanding to examine the production of ethnic minority identities in the context of the regulatory discourse surrounding immigrant reproductive practices. We further develop the idea of reproductive governance in this respect. Morgan and Roberts use the term reproductive governance to refer to the ways in which human reproduction is seized and acted upon through “legislative controls, economic inducements, moral injunctions, direct coercion, and ethical incitements to produce, monitor, and control reproductive behaviours and population practices” (2012:243).² We draw on these ideas to suggest instances of governance as dissonant, where conflicting regulatory and rights policies co-exist as “conflicted reproductive governance” (Unnithan 2022). The strategic use of such dissonance by powerful actors and institutions works in this instance of prenatal female selective abortion, to enhance regulatory control over reproductive and population processes and practices. As a trope, gender equality both represents and becomes a vehicle for such conflicted reproductive governance.

In its focus on intersectional analyses (of gender equality, demographic anxiety, ethnic minority identity, and reproductive governance), this article extends the notion of “disarticulation” (Amery 2015). Amery argues that claims made by proponents of a ban on female prenatal sex selection constitute “disarticulatory practices” in that they pit “well educated feminists against ‘young Asian girls’ (as both victims and perpetrators of selective abortion and thus foreclose an *inclusive* intersectional feminism” (2015:511, emphasis added). While proponents of the ban draw on intersectionality in their arguments, Amery suggests that the outcome is divisive in practice, as it is co-opted to antifeminist political agendas. It is therefore important to interrogate the trope of intersectionality itself rather than to assume it speaks for all women. Hence, our focus on disaggregating minority community feminist narratives adds a further dimension to Amery’s argument.

In what follows, we first outline the methods and conceptual approach that underpin the article. We then juxtapose the discursive framings of son preference as driving prenatal selective abortion against females in Britain with ethnographic data examining the shifting articulations of gender inequality among British Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi families. We draw on the observations and conversations we had with members of different generations of these families to set out old and new narratives of gender equality as connected with current everyday understandings of claims to family resources, inheritance, gender roles, and the value of male and female children. These conversations are then discussed in terms of the conjunctions and disjunctions they present to the broader policy and activist discourse on “culture,” religion, and the social reproduction of gender (in)equality and minority identity.

Methods

This article draws on 12 months of ethnographic research conducted in England from January 2018 to January 2019. Interviews and focus group discussions were held on the basis of three key areas, involving (i) British Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani families; (ii) policy makers, civil society groups, and community organizations working on gender equality; and (iii) reproductive health providers. Over 90 interviews took place with UK-born and foreign-born individuals who were of Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi origin. While the initial aim was to engage 30 families from each of these three communities, the majority of our interviews were conducted with British Pakistani families (40) followed by Indian (35) and then Bangladeshi families (15), which also happened to better reflect the proportional ethnic distribution of these communities in the census figures (Office for National Statistics 2013).

The study included women and men with Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh religious backgrounds, as well as from intermarried families. A majority of the British Pakistani families came from working, lower class, and middle to upper-middle class backgrounds. Participants ranged from 18 to 84 years of age enabling us to engage cross-generational perspectives on the meaning of gender equality and its transformation through time and place. While the majority of our interlocutors were women, we also interviewed younger and older men from each community both individually and in family focus group discussions. Gendered differences were more discernible in older generations with older men and women having different views on gender equality compared to more similar views expressed by both younger men and women. As our research team was constituted of an older female of mixed South Asian-European descent (lead author) and a younger male of Jewish-European origin (second author), we were able to build rapport with members of middle to older aged family members (predominantly born outside England) as well as younger men and women (born in England and defining themselves by a religious minority identity, for example, as British Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs). Language was nevertheless a barrier with the older participants – while the lead author was able to speak in Hindi (with some understanding of Urdu), we depended on translators for Bengali, Punjabi, and Gujarati-speaking participants.

The multi-sited research took place in areas of dense, “super-diverse” (Vertovec 2007) and not-so dense, established and newer concentrations of families of Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani origin living in Manchester (central and suburbs), Greater London (Newham and Tower Hamlets), Peterborough, and Sussex (Brighton, Hove, and East Sussex). To start with, we approached families who had participated in previous anthropological research, building on existing data and the contacts provided by anthropologists and other social scientists, who had already conducted fieldwork with ethnic and religious minority groups in Britain. This approach enabled us to also build on existing relationships of trust especially important given the relatively short period of our work.

Our focus on gender valuations among ethnic and religious minorities builds on previous research examining gender preferences in the broader White British population (see Lowe 2015). Yet, one of the key concerns in our research was how to approach the issue of sex selection without essentializing the practice – in studying the controversy in Britain we are also party to “fixing” it as an attribute of what it means to be “South Asian” in policy debates. By approaching the issue through the perspective of gender inequality and son preference, we found surprising resonance with our respondents who were open to discussing their own experiences and reflections on the matter. Gender (in)equality was a major trope through which a number of women we met articulated a sense of injustice based on the disjunction between the community practices they were subject to and the expectation of egalitarian norms of their own and a wider society in which they lived and valued. These discussions broadened the focus on son preference to a discussion of not only family expectations of childbearing but also about discrimination in matters of inheritance and marriage and to quotidian experiences such as access to the quality and quantity of food at mealtimes, money for clothes, access to healthcare,

education, and employment opportunities. Our inquiry also focussed on gathering instances where girls and daughters were explicitly valued, and the implications for childbearing decisions (referred to as “daughter valuation” in other studies, see Patel 2007; Purewal 2010).

Analysis of material was then iterative and shaped by emerging themes and examined on an individual and comparative basis. Moreover, key participants from each community were invited to contribute to a presentation of project findings and analysis, which served as an additional test of the data’s representation and focus on key categories of analysis. All interviews were recorded, with permission, using a digital audio device and were transcribed manually. The names of our participants have been anonymized in this paper, with the exception of those public activists who consented to be named. Ethical approval to conduct this study was granted by the Research & Ethics Committee at the University of Sussex.

Gender equality versus reproductive rights

The debates around prenatal sex selective abortion in Britain have brought to light the ways in which the focus on abortion defines reproductive rights, and sets the context for standards of gender equality. In this section we discuss the controversy and conflicting perspectives on the relationship between gender equality and reproductive rights. On the one hand, the rhetoric of gender equality in tandem with “culture” (as a perceived barrier to national values) has served as a rallying point for the criminalization of female selective abortion by certain parliamentary and Asian women’s groups (members of the Stop Gendercide campaign). On the other hand, the stance of many medical professionals, legal, and feminist activists and scholars has been to defend reproductive rights and the access to abortion for *all* women by opposing the attempts to criminalize the practice. There are also South Asian activist organizations such as Southall Black Sisters (SBS) who are less drawn into the debates of sex selection so as to avoid essentializing the practice as “South Asian,” who have instead focused on parliamentary debates around gendered religious minority issues such as the wearing of the *hijab*, religious education, the role of Sharia courts, and issues of violence against women.

Disputes around sex selective abortion are of particular interest for the fault-lines that are exposed between gender equality and reproductive rights, popularly regarded as congruent, though not necessarily in all contexts.³ While the issue of sex selection in Britain has existed for several years and centered attention on British South Asian families (Dubuc and Coleman 2007; Kasstan and Unnithan 2020; Purewal 2003, 2010; Unnithan and Dubuc 2018), it gained intense policy and public scrutiny in Britain between 2012 to 2015. This was driven by two reports in the right-wing newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph* (February 2012), and secret films made by investigative reporters who had received information that doctors in abortion clinics were agreeing to terminate fetuses based on whether they were male or female. Moreover, the journalists’ statistical analysis of the 2011 National Census was used to claim there were widespread discrepancies in the sex ratio of children in some immigrant families.⁴ They concluded that:

The practice of sex selective abortion is now so commonplace that it has affected the natural 50:50 balance of boys to girls within some immigrant groups and has led to the “disappearance” of between 1,400 and 4,700 females from the national census records of England and Wales . . .our deeper statistical analysis of data from the 2011 National Census has shown widespread discrepancies in the sex ratio of children in some immigrant families, which can only be easily explained by women choosing to abort female foetuses in the hope of becoming quickly pregnant again with a boy. (Connor 2014)

In November 2014, Fiona Bruce, a Conservative party, Christian, anti-abortion Member of Parliament (MP) tabled a Bill (Section 5 of the Serious Crime Bill) to amend the 1967 Abortion Act on the basis that it lacked any clear legal guidelines to prevent terminations on the basis of the sex of the fetus.⁵ Primarily, Bruce sought to “clarify” abortion legislation pertaining to sex selective abortion amidst broad confusion about the legal status of the practice under the 1967 Abortion Act, which governs

termination of pregnancy in England and Wales.⁶ Bruce cited a series of case studies of women from the South Asian community who were pressured to abort their female fetuses as documented by the Stop Gendercide campaign run by prominent south Asian women in support of her proposal.

In response, Ann Furedi, the (then) Chief Executive of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS), emphasized the existing legal clauses to be sufficiently rigorous, such as the HFEA code of practice (2009) for licensed centers, which restricts sex-selection using pre-implantation technologies. An amendment to include sex selective abortion in the Serious Crime Bill, Furedi argued, would increase the scrutiny of abortion providers in a context where there were already checks and regulatory measures, making the provision of services even more inaccessible, especially so for women of certain ethnic minorities (BPAS 2014). Left-leaning sections of the British media endorsed Furedi's stance and argued that efforts to change the existing law would further jeopardize women's access to abortion. It was also argued that criminalization would result in the racial profiling of women from minority communities, as had been observed previously with regard to health provider attitudes in communicating results of ultrasound screening tests (Purewal 2003). Scholars also noted that an explicit ban on sex selective abortion would do little to change the structural sexism that pressures women to abort a female fetus (Sheldon 2016, 2012).

In challenging the proposed Serious Crimes Bill, Furedi centered her response on a critique of the *choice* to undergo sex selective abortion:

Those calling for tighter controls to prevent sex-selection abortion are utterly mistaken if they believe that would help women. Supporters of clampdowns on sex-selection abortion are doing as much to undermine the future of women's abortion access as those anti-choice activists who protest outside clinics [...] Sex-selection, like rape, may not be a ground for abortion, but there is no legal requirement to deny a woman an abortion if she has a sex preference, providing that the legal grounds are still met [...] We either support women's capacity to decide, or we don't. You can't be pro-choice except when you don't like the choice, because that's not pro-choice at all. (Furedi 2014)

The central issue for *reproductive rights* campaigners such as Furedi was around how South Asian women's bodily integrity and autonomy, a key feminist ethical principle, could only be guaranteed through upholding their right to access abortion services. For proponents of the Stop Gendercide campaign, Bilkhu, Sanghera, and anti-abortionist MP Bruce, on the other hand, their campaign against sex selective abortion was upholding the feminist principle of *gender equality* in the face of the "cultural" discrimination of South Asian women, described as victims of a patriarchal ideology. As Sanghera emphasized,

The victims we are talking about here that are under pressure to abort females are hidden, they are silenced by their communities, and somebody has to speak for them [...] Notions are transported across through beliefs, notions, traditions & values here in the UK [...] It is under-reported, it is hidden, the figures are far greater than what we know. That's the evidence. (Stop Gendercide 2015).

Regarding son preference, Bilkhu added:

It's about women themselves feeling their status in their family, in their community, will be elevated because they have this trophy boy (ibid).

The Stop Gendercide campaign was a powerful mobilizing force for Bruce precisely because Bilkhu and Sanghera's moral authority was derived from their own experience of work on gender discrimination with women from their respective minority communities and of growing up in first generation (Punjabi Sikh Indian) immigrant households. In an interview as part of our fieldwork, Bilkhu explained how she had experienced son preference in her own family:

My vivid memory is on a Friday, it's not what we have now, all these take-aways you can have what you want but then it was just fish and chips [...] I only used to get chips. I just asked my mum can I have fish? "No, you are a girl. You are going to get too big, you can't have that" she says [...] My mother used to put the fish in front of him [my brother] and say to him "leave the chips coz they're cheaper," well she didn't say like "leave the chips" but she'd say "eat the fish" coz she knew that's good and then whatever's left then give it to Rani.

Bilkhu's experience of familial discrimination was also reflected in our discussions on inheritance and property with the different families we met, but what was less obvious was whether these experiences necessarily culminated in sex selection against females, as we discuss further in the following section. Everyday instances of lived gender bias were a powerful reminder of how gender in/equality was routinized, making claims and entitlements such as those around inheritance and property seem "natural."

It is important to note that other advocacy groups campaigning for Asian women's rights, such as Southall Black Sisters (SBS), came out largely in support of Furedi's (BPAS) position (SBS 2015). Distancing themselves from the position on sex selective abortion by the Stop Gendercide campaigners, they tended instead to highlight the problems associated with the adoption of multicultural and multi-faith policies especially the accommodation of religious codes in British law (what they call the "sharia-fication" of the law) as clashing with the fight for gender equality. Focusing on defending the human rights of women who are victims of domestic violence they have campaigned to access justice for minority women through use of the law. We return to discuss the notion of gender inequality in terms of cultural and religious essentialism in greater detail following the next section describing insights from our fieldwork with British families.

Talking about gender difference and "value"

The issue of gender difference was among the first subjects to be raised in our preliminary meetings as we started work with middle-aged first, second, and third generation women of Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi origin families in England. There was a dominant concern among our respondents about how gendered differences especially with regard to inheritance worked in favor of men (see also Gardner 2002; Qureshi 2016; Werbner 2002). It was through discussions around claims to property that the salience of son preference for our interlocutors became visible to us. On the one hand, son preference related to the everyday experience of gender discrimination in access to food and household resources. On the other hand, it was connected to the birth-order related anxieties and social pressures which drove a minority of the women we met to consider or be advised to consider (but not undergo) the selective abortion of female fetuses (two participants). Such distinctions became critical for us to understand how son preference involved less of a recourse to prenatal sex selection and rather a pressure to have unwanted pregnancies in the hope of birthing a son. Hence, the diverse experiences of women conflicted with the broader legislative discussions in the UK and the homogenous rhetoric of anti-abortion activists, especially regarding the perceived threat posed by prenatal sex selection to gender equality.

Nazneen (our community contact) grew up in East London but went back to Pakistan to marry her first husband when she was 16, and had just lost her mother who herself had survived the loss of her husband, when she met us. When asked about her experiences of gender discrimination, she recounted:

My mother had made a will and left the house to her three sons (my brothers). She only gave me a £1000. In Islam, the daughter is entitled to a half of the inheritance. She said she had paid for my wedding and brought me up and that was enough. Considering I had looked after my mother who was ailing, right to the end of her life, I feel I was unfairly treated by her.

For Nazneen, herself a single mother who had separated from her second husband,⁷ a share in the inheritance of the family house was critical. To make ends meet, she had undertaken part-time work as a translator, but found the cost of childcare for her youngest daughter and the cost of bringing up the children left very little by means of savings for her. Unlike Nazneen, Ravinder, a British born East African Sikh mother in her late 40s, shared a similar account of son preference when it came to inheritance. In her words, "unknown to me my mother sold the house and she gave all the money, all the money, to my brothers." Sunil (43), a British born Punjabi Sikh father of four children and a wealthy property owner, explained why sons were valued and justified the gender inequality in inheritance in terms of responsibility to elderly parents:

You're going to leave your estate somewhere. In the pecking order, the bias would usually go to the boys and there is a reason for this, because the daughter has left the house in essence of old culture and she's gone to marry possibly to another city or the same city, but into a new social and family unit. The sons always stay there, he's usually with and around the parent. There's always that heritage that passes on, it usually carries with the name of the elder.

This gendered entitlement to family property and distribution of wealth is established in religiously sanctioned legal codes. Hindu women in Northwest India, for example, inherit their share of the property in the form of moveable goods (as dowry) at marriage while their male siblings inherit immovable property such as land at the death of the family head (Sharma 1980). As the dowry in reality functions more as a marriage payment to the husband's family, the increasing demands for higher dowries are regarded as an underlying cause for female selective abortion in contexts where a couple has already two to three daughters.⁸ Ravneet explicitly referred to this:

Sex selective abortion is never going to end until dowry ends. Dowry [payments in cash and kind provided to the groom's family] is never going to go. Parents are still giving [. . .] As much as they say on the other side [groom's side] they don't have expectations, that's a load of rubbish. Just to keep the respect, as they would say, they [women's side] give.

Meera, an India-born Hindu woman in her late 40s living in Newham, also drew on entrenched notions of patriliney to explain the gender inequality in patterns of material inheritance, yet asserted that son preference existed alongside daughter valuation:

But it's not that they don't love their girls, they love them to bits, they are giving them education, money, everything, but in terms of passing on their inheritance they want somebody to carry on the name.

Younger British-born women recounted their mother's experiences as a way to signify continuities and discontinuities surrounding gender equality and the preference for sons. Hena, a Manchester-born Bengali Muslim in her thirties explained the impact of the social pressure on childbearing and on younger male members of the household:

It's like my mum, she's had these three girls and she carried on childbearing because she wanted this boy. She had this boy and she was very pleased with that. Even now, when she cooks food, she cooks separate food for him, the way she talks about him is different. But even for him it's a pressure being the one son.

Aisha, a British-Pakistani woman in her twenties who recently married a Pakistani-born man in Newham suggested a sense of guilt over gender unequal perceptions while simultaneously acknowledging the status afforded to women who bore sons:

We are influenced by it [son preference]. It plays a big part in it [how I feel]. I feel so bad saying this but it's instilled in us. If I was to see a woman and she's got daughters first, I would feel superior over her because I've got a son first. How bad is that?

Cases where the pressure of producing male offspring seemed more pronounced were where one member of the couple was not born in the UK and felt vulnerable in terms of securing the marriage. Having a son first takes off the reproductive pressure of securing a marriage for women born outside the UK as Khadija, a British Pakistani woman in her early thirties who came to the UK after her marriage in Azad Kashmir in 2006, explained:

You feel pressured. You feel like you are respected more when you have a son than when you have a daughter. You still feel insecure when you have a daughter. Your partner might not be happy with it, they will probably want a son. Your marriage can break because of that reason. I was worried my marriage might break because I didn't have a son [first].

There were also instances of how such pressure was countered and agency exercised as one respondent described:

At the time when I was expecting and I got to know the gender [sex], I had to hide the gender. I had this fear from my in-laws that if they get to know it's a girl, they are open minded, but I still had a fear, so when the delivery was due just before that I told my mum [birth mother], that I'm expecting a girl. My mother was okay with it because I did tell her.

At the same time, practices of son preference were perceived to be shifting, and where daughters with older sisters were welcomed:

My dad wasn't really arsed about getting us married or pressuring us [to marry]. His thing was always to have an education. He was the one who taught me how to read in English and Arabic. He raised six women. He saw how important it is for us to have our own independence. (Nalini 26, Manchester, British-born Bengali Muslim female)

Younger, British-born participants described how shifting perceptions of gender equality were having implications for material inheritance, departing from the experiences of their own parents. Leila, a 20-year-old British-Pakistani Muslim woman from East London, informed us, "My mum said she wants to change the [inheritance] trend and give her house to the girls."

Conflicting with popular reports that Indian-born mothers in the UK and US maintain a preference for sons and recourse to sex selective abortion against females, Sita, an Indian-born Gujarati-Hindu mother from Sussex in her late 40s explained how "things have changed, and the older generation that thought it was better to have boys are being convinced by the younger generation that it's fine to have girls." Women, too, were careful to explain that religion provided a strong counterbalance to the cultural "value" of sons.

Son preference is "cultural" not "religious"

Several second and third generation women and men, especially those who identified as British Muslim, made an important moral distinction between "culture" and "religion." "Culture" was regarded as a set of regressive customs and practices of the past, linked to geographical spaces from where one's parents and grandparents originated. "Religion" on the other hand was perceived to be about broader, positive, moral values, and practices not rooted in specific spaces or countries, enabling a broader expression of solidarity based on Islam. It was religion, rather than culture, which provided young and early, middle-aged women born in the UK with a sense of British Muslim identity. Harveen (aged 40), educated in law at university and teaching in a faith school vocalized the generational shift in ethnic minority identification that we consistently encountered:

I'm a second generation, I always think we're the confused generation, we're stuck between culture, east and west, we try to find our feet and don't know where we are at. Whereas I think the third generation, like my [school-aged] kids, they know who they are . . . our parents brought us up culturally as Pakistanis, rather than Muslims, the Muslim tag came with it . . . I think the next generation, maybe it's the times we live in, identify more as Muslims than Pakistanis. British Muslims. My kids would say that, they don't have that attachment with Pakistan that we have.

As 20-year-old Sharifa, born in Birmingham and who prefers to wear jeans in contrast to shalwar-kameez suggested:

I do [want to] know religion and practice it [. . .] I don't want to wear a head-scarf but I want to bring up my kids in a good Islamic environment because it's important for them to know what their religion is and where they come from.

The concept of culture, we found, was not only associated with national origin but also with traditions perceived as "backward" and which were identified as perpetuating gender inequality (in contrast to religion). Harveen clearly articulated this complex intersection:

I think this generation have now realized what faith is and what the actual fundamentals are. That ties into the fact that women now have equality because Islam gives us equality, but we take it away because of culture, because women are sort of seen as "you stay at home and your husband is the breadwinner" but Islamically

that is not the case [...] Because we have a greater education of Islam now, people will exert those Islamic rights and they override cultural rights. Whereas in my mother's generation, cultural rights were always far greater.

Noting Islamic positions on the division of inheritance between sons and daughters, Harveen agreed that her own children would be treated equally – although she expected women of her generation to be disadvantaged in the inheritance of immovable property. Reiterating Nazneen's point made earlier, she said:

I think because of that, the third generation, the mothers will make sure their daughter will get more and I think that's where the shift's going, with the third generation [...] Now I've got a boy and a girl we can go 50 percent split down the middle, we're allowed to do that.

Religious morality, too, was referenced as a reason to explicitly oppose sex selective abortion. While a dominant view among Muslims in Britain is that that abortion is only permissible to save the life of the pregnant woman (Shaw 2009), Harveen suggests that “there is more of it,” meaning selective abortion, in Pakistan due to the perceived imperative of having sons to maintain the economic wellbeing of the family:

Boys are seen as breadwinners. I've never seen anybody aborting if they're having a 7th son but if it's a 7th daughter there is probably more of a chance of it happening [...] Here [in Britain] I think people [British Muslims] are disgusted, deep-down inside, they're disgusted by doing that [...] we have a welfare system in this country [...] or the fact that we are exposed to pro-life [information] in this country. I think there's more of an ethical dilemma.

Harveen's view that British Muslims would be opposed to prenatal sex selection against females resonates with our own findings of a generational decline in stated gender preferences at birth within the Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi communities we worked with. It was among couples born in the UK that we found strong views against female selective abortion. Among couples where one or both partners were born abroad, there were in some instances (two participants), where in higher order pregnancies, the absence of a son may have led to a pressure to consider sex selective abortion, but more commonly, to continue childbearing in the hope of conceiving a son. Overall, among British born younger married couples there was a powerful narrative about the value of daughters leading to several instances of gender equality in property inheritance and educational opportunities.

Conclusion

In this article, we have suggested how key concepts to do with ethnic minority identity – such as gender equality, culture, and religion – are mobilized in ways that both reify as well as disrupt the use of new demographic knowledge in the regulatory practices of contemporary conservative politics in the UK. The diverse perspectives within families and communities described in the paper challenge the broader UK-based policy and anti-abortion activist discussions about the perceived threat to “gender equality” posed by “widespread” pre-natal sex selection against females in the British Asian community. The emic separation between the concepts of “culture” and “religion” in minority discourse challenges the use of these terms in UK law, policy, and governance discourse, where cultural difference is otherwise equated with religious difference. The notion of “culture” as primarily signifying *religious* difference has been central to the governance of Britain's minority groups since the 1970s. Embodied in the term “multi-culturalism,” the concept has routinely been mobilized in postwar Britain in the governance of minority communities in the country (Ahmed 2015; Gardner 2002; Grillo et al. 2009; Werbner 2002, 2005).

As feminist scholars note, the rhetoric around sex selection, especially when tied to culture, is not only problematic in itself but leads to problematic interventions (Ganguli-Mitra 2021; Nandagiri 2019), which typically focus on restricting *all* women's access to reproductive health services. Community and activist narratives⁹ around gender equality in the context of demographic shifts in childbearing further reinforce previous anthropological and social science work on minority ethnic

identities in Britain, which call for a revised approach to the inclusion of culture in governmentality (Fassin 2011), including in the context of reproductive governance – as our analysis underscores. Attempts to criminalize and control prenatal sex selection against females in England, by drawing on a combined discourse of gender and culture, have been associated with xenophobia (Amery 2015). The issue of son preference leading to selective abortion has led to the stereotyping and typecasting of South Asian women in ways that conflate “culture” and “religion” as underlying causes and which apparently threaten the norm of gender equality in the country.

Our analytical attention instead highlights the political use of demographic knowledge concerning gender preference and its deployment to fuel moral anxieties around reproduction and gender inequality, which has re-produced ethnic minority groups as foreign, migrant, and “Other.” Such discourse silences the diversity of childbearing preferences and strategies that we found to exist in women’s lived experiences, as well as how family-making is being shaped by a value of gender equality.

Notes

1. “Britain” refers to issues concerning Wales, England, and Scotland. The United Kingdom (UK) refers to a context that includes Northern Ireland. The terms “South Asian” or “British Asian” are used when referring to other studies where these terms have been used, otherwise, we refer to the specific communities involved in our fieldwork.
2. This important concept has enabled anthropologists to explore the emergence of new social subjects, the intersection between governance and human rights (Morgan 2019:114) and legal activism or “lawfare” on sexual and reproductive health rights (Gloppen 2014; Unnithan 2019).
3. As Unnithan (2019) has argued in the case of India, reproductive rights in a popular sense are understood as the right to reproduce rather than the right to control reproduction.
4. The first indirect quantitative evidence of prenatal sex selection in the UK was reported in 2007. The analysis of annual vital data registration by birthplace of mother, from 1969 to 2005 (ONS) revealed a significant increase in the sex ratio at birth to India-born mothers living in England and Wales but not for any other group (Dubuc and Coleman 2007), particularly for higher birth orders and coincided with the widespread availability of prenatal sex diagnostics (mainly ultrasound).
5. Bruce’s proposed reform was ultimately rejected, though the Secretary of State committed, “to promote change in the social and cultural patterns of behavior with a view to eradicating prejudices, customs, traditions. . . which may amount to a pressure to seek a termination on the grounds of the sex of the foetus.” <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/9/section/84/2017-06-27#section-84-5>
6. Abortion legislation in Britain is complex, but two key laws are of relevance to this paper: the 1861 Offenses Against the Person Act (OAPA) and the 1967 Abortion Act (AA). The 1861 OAPA is a Victorian-era law that was never repealed and carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment for any woman attempting to “procure” a miscarriage. The 1967 AA provides exception-based grounds for lawful access to abortion and most abortions in England are approved on the basis that two physicians have agreed “in good faith” that continuing a pregnancy would present a greater risk to the life of a woman than termination (Department of Health & Social Care 2019; UK Legislation 1967). The broad misconceptions that sex selective abortion is illegal under the 1967 AA have been critiqued (Greasley 2016) on the basis of the failure to separate the legal *grounds* for abortion from the *factual explanations* that women are required to present (also Kasstan and Unnithan 2020).
7. There is an increasing rate of divorce among British South Asian families (Qureshi 2016), making the issue of access to property and independent financial means critical for women who may not have worked before.
8. This phenomenon has been noted as rising in India since the 1980s where demands for hefty dowry payments have been a reason for female selective abortion in higher birth orders in India (Patel 2007; Unnithan and Dubuc 2018).
9. British feminists, including Pragma Patel, founder of SBS argue against the notion of “multi-cultural” Britain as it essentializes the very communities it seeks to embrace (Golesorkh 2014).

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