

Birth Spacing in the Presence of Son Preference and Sex-Selective Abortions: India's Experience over Four Decades

1. The key contribution of the paper is the use of birth spacing and sex ratios to examine changes and differentials in possible sex-selective abortions. While there is large literature using differential stopping behaviours (DSB) and sex ratios to examine sex selection, the use of birth spacing is new and could potentially provide new insights. The methodology used is rigorous and suited for the purposes of the paper.
2. The paper would need to articulate its contribution clearly. The paper seems to be focussed too much on methodology and less on contextual, theoretical and substantive matters. As there is already well established literature on sex-selection and son preference, the paper must articulate what is substantially different in the paper. As one of the key features is the focus on spacing, expanded review of the literature on spacing is required.
3. The literature review must be systematic. The paper seems to move too quickly to estimation strategy. Before presenting this, the literature on spacing, sex ratios, sex-selection should be presented. This would help the paper to make a stronger case of its place and contribution to the demographic literature.
4. The demographic literature, for example, by works from Christophe Z Guilmoto, doesn't seem to be consulted. Guilmoto and colleagues many papers including recent work in Population Studies and Lancet are important to consult as they cover the same substantial issues of sex ratios, sex selection and abortions as addressed in this paper. Though these demographic papers do not necessarily use spacing, a similar understanding of sex-selection could be obtained using examining parity progression. Therefore, the added insights from using spacing need to articulated much more forcefully.
5. The use of competing hazard models is not new in demographic research and doesn't require long exposition. This section can be cut sustainably. I don't think the methodological innovation is a key contribution of the paper as the methods are established even if they have not been used to examine spacing.
6. The use of NFHS data including the most recent data are welcome. An additional limitation to those addressed in the paper is the issue of date imputation in DHS/NFHS. NFHS as with other DHS data routinely use imputations for year and month of birth. I don't have the reference for India (please check data quality reports on DHS website), but the imputation of month of birth was done for large number of cases in earlier rounds of DHS. This could be a possible reason for seeming large number of pre-marital conceptions which do not make sense in the context of India.
7. It is not clear why exactly 22, 23, 25 years are used a cut-off points.
8. I understand the empirical reason for not increasing the number of variables. However, a key variable that is essential to consider is region. This is important because regional influences on birth spacing and sex selection are very strong as established in the literature. Sex selection and abortion is especially strong in certain regions but not in others. The regional differentials in fertility transition, contraceptive use, spacing, sex ratios, abortions are clearly documented in the literature. So it is vital to include this.
9. The three tables are logically organized and contain a wealth of information. But there are too many comparisons to make in each of the tables and I wonder if it would make sense to split the tables or present some of the information in a much more reader friendly way (for instance by using charts for some of the information).

10. As sex composition and sex ratios has been examined in the literature, I think it would make sense to not present findings on that in great detail. As the paper states, the central question addressed is spacing, and so all other questions should not be dealt in detail
11. The results talk about compression of spacing. This is important and literature on it should be presented in the intro or lit review section. There is evidence of compression of the reproductive span at least in some regions (see Padmadas, et. Al 2004). It would be important to consider how this fits in with the results presented.
12. As there are many results presented, it would make sense to have a paragraph at the beginning of the conclusion highlighting the key findings.
13. Overall, the paper is empirically strong but needs to build on the contextual, theoretical, and prior demographic literature. As the readers of Demography are diverse, it would be good to have a balanced presentation of all the sections. Currently it seems the paper is too concerned with the methodology and empirical work at the expense of other areas.

PADMADAS S.S., HUTTER I., WILLEKENS F. (2004), "Compression of women's reproductive spans in Andhra Pradesh, India", *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 30(1), 12-19