

# Research Briefing

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## Son preference in the UK

### CONTEXT

#### Exploring generational changes in family decision-making, son preference and gender expectations among South Asian communities in the UK

Gender preference and the increasing availability of prenatal sex-selective technologies (such as abortion and prenatal implantation diagnosis) have directly influenced family decision-making in Asia, North America and Europe. Concerns that prenatal sex-selective abortions were occurring in the UK surfaced in 2012, and have since impeded attempts to reform and liberalise abortion legislation in order to meet the diverse sexual and reproductive health needs of women.

Sussex academics, Professor Maya Unnithan and Dr Ben Kasstan, are aiming to understand how son preference is practiced in South Asian families, and how shifts in gender roles over time are having an impact on family-making decisions. They will be conducting qualitative research and semi-structured interviews with over 90 families of Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani origin living across the UK from January to December 2018.

Parliamentary attempts to reform and liberalise abortion legislation in the UK have been hampered due to concerns that prenatal sex-selection is being practiced due to a 'cultural' preference for sons, so their research will clarify how gender preferences and expectations actually influence family-making decisions among ethnic minority groups. The research aims to inform policy-makers of the issues surrounding sex-selective abortion as part of future legislative reform in the UK.

### Key research questions for families of South Asian origin:

- **What does the ideal family look like?**
- **What influences family size?**
- **Is there a pressure to have a certain kind of family?**
- **Do families prefer boys to girls?**
- **How are family values changing?**

### Engagement with policy-makers

The issue of prenatal sex-selective abortion is a current parliamentary and public health concern, so our research has important implications for politicians and policy-makers involved in designing national (and global) recommendations on abortion care.

In 2017 we contributed recommendations on sex-selective abortion to the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Population, Development and Reproductive Health for hearings on abortion in the UK and internationally. We will continue to engage with APPGs, non-governmental organisations, sexual and reproductive healthcare providers, civil society groups, and national and local media to shape current debates on gender equity and reproductive rights.

Historically UK politicians have represented prenatal sex-selective abortion as an issue relating exclusively to South Asian communities. There is a need to understand family-making decisions in the context of minority and migrant backgrounds.

**We would like to involve policy makers in our research to inform meaningful changes in future legislation regarding abortion care.**



## Research approach

Our qualitative research is investigating generational shifts in family dynamics with regards to son preference and gender roles among families of Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani origin in the UK.

- our research addresses the nuanced ways gender preference and expectations are practiced and influence family-making decisions
- we are examining how son and daughter preferences are changing over time, and how decisions about family size and composition are influenced by religion, culture, education, employment, migration and reproductive technologies
- we are engaging with over 90 South Asian families from a diverse range of socioeconomic, ethnic and religious backgrounds across London, Manchester, and the South East of England

This qualitative research forms part of a broader three-year (2017-2020) interdisciplinary study of prenatal sex-selection against females in the UK.

## CONTACTS

To get involved in our research contact:

**Professor Maya Unnithan**  
Qualitative Research Lead  
[m.unnithan@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:m.unnithan@sussex.ac.uk)

**Dr Ben Kasstan**  
Qualitative Research Fellow  
[b.kasstan@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:b.kasstan@sussex.ac.uk)

Our research partners at the University of Reading are:

**Dr Sylvie Dubuc**  
Principal Investigator  
Quantitative Research Lead  
[s.dubuc@reading.ac.uk](mailto:s.dubuc@reading.ac.uk)

**Dr Bernice Kuang**  
Quantitative Research Fellow  
[b.kuang@reading.ac.uk](mailto:b.kuang@reading.ac.uk)

## FURTHER INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Further information about our research project can be found at:  
[www.sussex.ac.uk/anthropology/research/uksonpref](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/anthropology/research/uksonpref)

Unnithan, Maya, and Sylvie Dubuc. 2017. Re-visioning evidence: Reflections on the recent controversy around gender selective abortion in the UK. *Global Public Health*.

Unnithan, Maya, and Ben Kasstan. 2017. Submission of qualitative research evidence on prenatal sex-selective abortion in India and the UK. University of Sussex: Centre for Cultures of Reproduction, Technologies and Health.

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