Women’s Status and Son Preference in Azerbaijan

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Introduction

In patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal family systems, parents often prefer to raise sons instead of daughters. Sons in these settings are associated with a host of economic and cultural benefits, including old age support, free labor, property inheritance, continuation of the family line, and avoidance of dowry costs (Arnold et al. 1975; Arnold & Kuo 1984; Bélanger 2002; Das Gupta et al. 2003; Dyson and Moore 1983; Ebenstein & Leung 2010; Williamson 1976). On the other hand, daughters, though often loved for their “companionship” and “docility,” (Arnold et al. 1975; Arnold & Kuo 1984) are viewed as net losses since marriage severs the ties between daughter and parents (Attané and Guilmoto 2007; Das Gupta et al. 2003; Dyson & Moore 1983). Under certain circumstances, son preference can lead to imbalanced sex ratios at birth (SRBs), as it has in China, India, Vietnam, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Albania, and Georgia (Bongaarts 2013; Guilmoto 2009, 2012).

In these kinship systems, both mothers and fathers prefer and rely on sons and face social and economic consequences should they fail to produce male offspring. Men without sons may be pressured to take a second wife or a concubine to secure a son or must privately grieve the termination of their family line (Das Gupta et al. 2003). Even more so than men, women depend on sons for financial and social security. As women in patriarchal settings often have limited access to independent income-generating opportunities, mothers doubly depend on sons as sources of financial support in old age and as insurance against possible marital disruption, such as widowhood and divorce (Cain 1984; Cain et al. 1979). That bearing a son is often a woman’s only means of securing status, power, or prestige within the family further compounds mothers’
dependence on sons (Kandiyoti 1988; Wolf 1972). Women who fail to produce sons are often victims of unwanted divorce or mistreatment at the hands of their husbands or mothers-in-law (Das Gupta et al. 2003).

Given the strong association between son preference and gender inequality, demographers and policymakers alike have long assumed that improvements in women’s status reduce parents’ dependence on and preference for sons. Providing women with access to independent income-generating opportunities may reduce their dependence on sons for financial and social security (Dyson & Moore 1983). Increasing representation of women in the labor force may also foster the notion that women can be as economically productive, and therefore as valuable, as men. Improvements in women’s educational attainment may also diminish son preference, primarily through ideational pathways. Schooling may expose young women to gender egalitarian ideals (Thornton 2001), thereby reducing the likelihood that they will view sons as more valuable than daughters. Similarly, equal representation of the sexes in schools may promote the notion that women and men are equals, thereby countering prevailing patriarchal gender norms.

However, the empirical evidence linking higher women’s status with lower son preference is mixed. Mother’s education is associated with weaker but persisting son preference in Egypt (Yount 2005), India (Pande and Astone 2007), and China (Li and Lavely 2003; Murphy et al. 2011). On the other hand, mother’s labor force participation is found to be associated with weaker son preference in China (Murphy et al. 2011) and urban Egypt (Yount 2005), but not in rural India (Pande and Astone 2007). Indeed, some studies find that women’s access to material resources actually enhances their ability to implement son preference (Das Gupta 1987).

The tenuous relationship between women’s status and son preference is perhaps best
illustrated by the case of Azerbaijan, a post-Soviet, industrialized country in the South Caucasus. Due in large part to its Soviet heritage, Azerbaijan boasts an impressive record of women’s representation in the non-agricultural labor force and higher education. As of 2012, women comprised 43 percent of the non-agricultural labor force and outnumbered men in higher education enrollment 1:1.05 (World Bank). Yet Azerbaijan currently has the second highest SRB in the world, second only to that of China. If we understand son preference as a means for women to secure status and support in a gender system that disempowers them, as many do, then we would expect son preference to be low in a context where women’s status is relatively high. Azerbaijan, however, presents a paradoxical case. What drives son preference where women are educated and employed?

Using original interview data with 55 women and 41 men in Baku, Azerbaijan, I find that sex preferences for children are driven by cultural schemas that link sons with a family’s social and economic welfare – what I call “survival schemas.” In these schemas, sons are necessary for a family’s social survival because they alone can carry on the family line. Sons are also vital to economic survival because they provide support to elderly parents. I find no evidence of comparable “survival schemas” involving daughters. Though respondents report that daughters play an important role in providing companionship and assistance to mothers in particular, they are not thought to play a critical role in a family’s survival. The results also reveal that families are categorized as “strong,” “weak,” “perfect,” or “imperfect” depending on the sex composition of children. Consequently, not only will a family without sons die out, it will also be deemed “weak,” “imperfect,” or “frail” by outsiders.

The results of this study provide additional empirical evidence that in kinship systems where gender roles in the family are rigid, improving the status of adult women alone is not
sufficient to reduce son preference. The findings of this study also identify an additional factor driving son preference. That families with different sex compositions of children are hierarchically categorized suggests that son preference may not just be a function of the perceived value of sons versus daughters but also of a broader family-building calculus in which certain family types are more desirable than others. To adequately reduce son preference, then, policies must incorporate content that explicitly targets the idea that only sons or daughters can perform certain roles in the family and promotes a more pluralistic vision of what constitutes an “ideal” family.

**Kinship Systems, Women’s Status, and Son Preference**

To understand why improvements in women’s status may not reduce son preference, it is important to understand the gendered reasoning underlying most patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal kinship systems. First, in these family systems, improvements in the status of adult women will not always benefit girls (Croll 2000; Das Gupta et al. 2003). Take the example of women’s labor force participation. One may think that as women’s economic productivity increases, parents will come to view girls as economic assets, not liabilities. Where patrilocal kinship systems endure, however, parents may continue to value sons over daughters because a married woman’s earnings will ultimately benefit her husband and in-laws, not her parents. Thus, while adult women may see a rise in status as women’s labor force participation increases, unmarried girls may not. Put another way, the status of women and girls may not rise and fall together (Mason 1986).

Improvements in women’s status, then, may only reduce son preference if gender and family roles become more flexible (Croll 2000; Das Gupta et al. 2003). Son preference is rooted
in strong cultural assumptions of gender “unsubstitutability” (Croll 2000). Parents expect sons and daughters to play distinct roles in the family and these roles are not fluid. In the case of increasing women’s earnings, therefore, parents may continue to value sons over daughters even as daughters gain the ability to earn and commit income to their parents. This is because it is not socially acceptable for daughters to provide financial support to parents, while it is expected for sons to do so. Thus, even as the status of women improves, son preference will endure until social and cultural norms change so as to allow daughters to contribute financially to their parents’ welfare (Das Gupta et al. 2003). Macro-level social processes, such as urbanization and industrialization, may bring about these cultural and ideational changes, as they have in South Korea (Chung and Das Gupta 2007).

An expansive body of qualitative research in demography has documented the cultural logics underlying son preference in East and South Asia. We know, for example, that despite efforts to promote gender equality during the Mao period, parents in rural China continue to value sons for the old age support they are expected to provide in the future (Das Gupta et al. 2003). Socialist reforms in Vietnam brought advancements in women’s status, yet ethnographic and interview research has found that parents nevertheless value sons because they will provide old age support and continue the family line (Bélanger 2002). Furthermore, in India, dowry costs and the critical role of sons in funeral rites continue to drive son preference despite modest improvements in women’s status (Das Gupta et al. 2003).

To the extent that masculinized SRBs indicate son preference, it is evident that in Azerbaijan, where SRBs have risen to among the highest in the world, parents prefer sons. Yet, in contrast to the well-established literature on son preference in East and South Asia, we know little about the cultural logics underlying son preference in West Asia. This study aims to address
this gap in the literature by examining the perceived advantages and disadvantages of raising sons and daughters in Azerbaijan.

The Azerbaijani Case

Azerbaijan is a Shi’a Muslim-majority, secular country located in the South Caucasus, lying to the north of Iran and east of Armenia. The country’s current total population is 9.8 million people, with more than half (55 percent) living in urban areas. Incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1920, Azerbaijan did not gain independence until 1991. The period immediately following independence was marked by armed conflict with neighboring Armenia over the contested Nagorno-Karabakh region. A cease-fire took hold in 1994, leaving Nagorno-Karabakh and seven additional provinces under Armenian control.

Beginning in 2000, revenue from oil and gas production has reduced the poverty rate and increased infrastructure investment. Azerbaijan has both contributory and non-contributory social protection programs, including pensions, labor market programs, and social service programs. However, economic reforms have not adequately addressed weaknesses in major government institutions, such as the education and health sectors. For example, out-of-pocket (OOP) health expenditures continue to place a substantial financial burden on households, comprising 10 percent of household consumption (World Bank).

Azerbaijani families are organized along patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal lines. Generally speaking, men are considered to be the head of the household and thought to have the final say in major household decisions. It is common and expected that a family’s youngest son and his wife reside with his parents. Accordingly, property is typically bequeathed to this son, in exchange for the support he provides his parents in old age. Dowry is not practiced in
Azerbaijan. Wedding costs are typically distributed evenly between the bride and bridegroom’s families. Following the wedding, the bridegroom’s parents are expected to provide a home for the newlyweds (this may be their own home or a separate apartment/house for the newlyweds) whereas the bride’s parents must equip the home with the necessary furnishings and appliances. As in other patrilineal systems, men play an indispensable role in social and religious rituals. As the interview results reveal, continuation of the family line is paramount for families. Male offspring alone may continue the family line. Furthermore, only men may participate in the burial of a coffin.

As a Soviet republic, Azerbaijan experienced a rapid and dramatic shift in gender relations over the course of the twentieth century. Women’s illiteracy was completely eradicated and women’s labor force participation increased five-fold between 1929 and 1933 alone. It is important to mention, however, that several efforts to promote gender equality pre-dated Soviet rule. For example, women were granted the right to vote and the right to be elected to the legislature in 1919. The Soviet approach to gender equality provided men and women with formal equality in access to education, employment, and political office. However, during this period, women continued to shoulder traditional responsibilities for unpaid work, including childcare and housework. Currently, there is a large gender pay gap in Azerbaijan. In 2012 the average monthly wage for women was 47 percent of men’s average monthly wage. Furthermore, women are heavily concentrated in lower-paid, public sector activities such as education and health and social services (Azerbaijan Human Development Report 2007). Holding 16 percent of parliamentary seats, women are also under-represented in government positions.

Azerbaijan’s demographic profile is similar to other post-Soviet republics in the South Caucasus. The country’s total fertility rate declined steadily over time to its current below
replacement level of 1.91 children born per woman. Currently, Azerbaijan has the second highest SRB at 117:100 (Guilmoto 2012), followed by neighboring Armenia and Georgia. It is estimated that, on average, 10 percent of girl births in Azerbaijan are missing every year (Michael et al. 2013). The seemingly unprecedented rise of imbalanced SRBs in the South Caucasus following the dissolution of the Soviet Union has sparked a wave of demographic research aimed at examining the cause and timing of this phenomenon. Thus far, studies have reached consensus that the rise of SRBs in the South Caucasus in the mid-1990s is attributable to a convergence of multiple factors, including, but not limited to: a pre-existing parental preference for sons, widely-available and low-cost abortion services (a vestige of the Soviet legal framework), and the diffusion of ultrasound technology ushered in by a privatizing economy (Guilmoto 2009; Duthé et al. 2012, Meslé et al. 2007, Michael et al. 2013). The last of these factors, the diffusion of ultrasound technology, has occupied most of the literature thus far on son preference and SRBs in the South Caucasus. The current study is the first academic examination of the underlying determinants of son preference driving this phenomenon.

Though SRBs are an indirect measure of the magnitude of society-level son preference – mediated by other factors, such as access to sex selection technologies – they indicate that parents seek to have at least one son while minimizing their overall total fertility. That we know nothing about the factors motivating son preference in the country with the second highest SRB in the world is merit enough to study why parents prefer sons in Azerbaijan. But it is all the more pressing to examine this question in light of the fact that Azerbaijan presents yet another paradoxical case where son preference exists despite women’s relatively high status.

One explanation may be that the paradox is actually no paradox at all. That is, the relationship between high women’s status and low son preference may hold. Insofar as education
and employment are heterogeneously distributed among women in Azerbaijan, then, the population-level SRB may be driven by those women who are not educated or employed. As prenatal sex selection technologies are equally accessible throughout Azerbaijan (Yüksel-Kaptanoglu et al. 2014), disaggregating SRBs allows us to test if this true. Disaggregating SRBs by mother’s education, mother’s employment, household wealth, and urban setting, however, shows that this is not the case. As Figure 1 demonstrates, SRBs are highest among the most educated women and those who have been employed within the past year. Furthermore, SRBs are comparable across urban and rural settings. The figures also suggest a curvilinear relationship between SRB and household wealth.

[Figure 1 about here]

The question remains unanswered then. What drives son preference in an urbanizing, industrializing setting where many women are educated and economically productive?

Data and Methods

This study uses original interview data collected by the author and two research assistants (one male, one female) in Baku, Azerbaijan from April to August 2015. To capture a diverse set of perspectives, we interviewed individuals with varying age, educational attainment, marital status, and parity. In sum, we interviewed 41 men and 55 women between the ages of 18 and 70. We relied on convenience sampling to recruit respondents, drawing on our social and professional networks to identify individuals who would be willing to speak at length with a foreign researcher and/or her research assistant. As we relied on a non-probability sampling frame, the results of this paper are not intended to be generalizable to the overall population. Furthermore, this paper is not positioned to draw conclusions about secular time trends in the
magnitude of son preference in Azerbaijan or if and how the perceived value of sons and
daughters has changed over time.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of interview respondents. As 60 percent of
interviewees have at least a Bachelor’s degree, this sample is significantly more educated than
the national population. According to World Bank estimates, enrollment in tertiary education
was 20 percent in 2012. Additionally, since the sample was drawn from an urban population, just
one respondent reported working in the agricultural sector. All other respondents were students,
unemployed, pensioners, or worked in non-agricultural occupational sectors. We interviewed
teachers, chemists, psychologists, bus drivers, physicians, nurses, social workers, and barbers,
among others.

[Table 1 about here]

Interviews were semi-structured, lasted between 50 and 80 minutes, and conducted either
in Azerbaijani or Turkish. We asked questions about ideal family size, sex preferences for
children, the advantages and disadvantages of sons versus daughters, social pressure to bear sons
and daughters, and frequency and type of care work provided to parents. As such, the primary
intent of these interviews was to measure the perceived value, cost, and significance of sons and
daughters in Azerbaijan. To secure the confidence of respondents and maximize response rate,
we did not audio record interviews. Instead, we relied on handwritten notes to record responses.
Participants provided verbal consent to participate in the research study. I subsequently
transcribed, translated, and coded the interviews. I coded the interview transcripts based on the
most common schemas articulated by respondents across interviews. I use the definition of
schemas employed in recent demographic work on culture and fertility: a schema is a “mental
structure that represents some aspect of the world” (Morgan and Bachrach 2011:14) and
“provides mental maps for action” (Johnson-Hanks et al. 2011:3). Qualitative interview data are particularly appropriate for this study because they allow a fine-grained examination of the social context and cultural logic underlying fertility preferences.

Results

Value and Significance of Sons

Interview data show that the majority of respondents want two children and think it is important for at least one of those children to be a son. When asked about the value and significance of sons in Azerbaijan, respondents deployed three major schemas linking sons with a family’s welfare. I call these “survival schemas.”

Sons for Social Survival

As in other patrilineal kinship systems, sons in Azerbaijan guarantee a family’s social survival. Male and female respondents alike spoke frequently about the importance of sons for continuing the family name. Sons were described as “inheritors,” “successors,” and “the future of the family” and the mechanism by which a family stays “alive.” So strong is this notion that a few respondents likened not having sons to not having children at all. Male respondents emphasized that men in particular are expected to have successors, and that sons alone can fill this role.

In addition to being the “future” of the family, sons were also cited as constituting the “foundation” of the family. Respondents reported that families without sons are considered “incomplete” or “imperfect.” Kamala¹, a 30-year-old English teacher with a 5-year-old daughter, explains: “I know a family with three sons. Nobody considers this family incomplete. And the parents are content and satisfied. But if a family has three daughters and no son, the family will

¹ I have changed all names to protect the identities of the respondents.
feel uneasy and vulnerable.” Another female respondent reported that, “if someone doesn’t have a son, he or she will be considered unhappy, incomplete. You should have at least one son in our country.”

Social expectation to bear a son was also commonly cited when delineating the importance of having a son. Most respondents reported that at least one family member (spouse, mother, father, mother-in-law, or father-in-law) hoped they would have a son. Men in particular spoke about how men in Azerbaijan are expected to have sons, suggesting that having a son may be an important way for men to enact masculinity in Azerbaijan. On the other hand, sons as a means for women to secure social standing within the family was not commonly cited. Just two women reported that having a son “meant that I would be accepted by my husband’s family” and that “my mother-in-law loved me much more after I gave birth to a boy.” Several women, however, spoke of the prestige associated with having a son. One respondent explained that, “a woman with a son receives more respect and has a better reputation,” while another stated that, “even the phrase ‘mother of a son’ somehow gives someone an advantage. It’s like being the mom of a prince.” As these quotes demonstrate, sons in Azerbaijan are at once a family’s foundation and future. They are also an individual’s means of realizing his or her social status, as man, daughter-in-law, or mother.

Sons for Material Survival

Interview results suggest that sons in Azerbaijan are also thought to be critical to a family’s material survival, as they are in other patrilocal and patrilineal kinship systems. Many respondents explained that sons constitute the backbone of a family’s financial and physical livelihood. Sons were described as both “supporters” and “protectors.” Respondents commonly explained that sons are essential to supporting elderly parents, and that, unlike daughters, they
stay in their parents’ homes even after marriage. In this way, many respondents emphasized how having a son not only ensures being cared for later in the life course, but also, not being abandoned. “A son will always stay by my side,” explained Ismayil, a 27-year-old social worker. Similarly, several respondents described how marrying off a son means “expanding” the family and welcoming “new members,” while marrying off a daughter leaves a house “empty.” Sons are also valued for the support they may provide their siblings, as well as their parents. “I have two daughters,” stated Fatima, a 41-year-old secondary school principal, “and thought they needed a brother to support them.”

Sons as protectors was also a common trope. When asked about the advantages of raising a son, respondents referred to sons as “defenders” of the family who could provide physical protection when needed. It is important to clarify that, according to these respondents, protecting one’s family is not a role sons come to fill as adolescents or adults, but one they may carry out even as children. Dilara, a 30-year-old, speaking of her 6-year-old triplet sons: “I love my husband very much and I’m very close to him. He’s a doctor and sometimes he has to work night shifts. Before, when he was out of the house, I was afraid and missed him a lot. After my sons were born, I changed completely. They are little but their existence gives me strength.” Sons’ ability to transcend age or generation is further reflected in this respondent’s sentiment: “To a mother, a son is at once a father, a brother, and a friend.” Sons are perceived to be so crucial to a family’s physical livelihood that sonless families were often described as “helpless,” “weak,” or “vulnerable.” As these quotes suggest, sons in Azerbaijan are valued for the financial support they may afford their parents and their siblings as well as the physical protection they can offer their family members.

*Sons for National Survival*
The importance of protecting, defending, and guarding a family in these responses is perhaps explained in part by Azerbaijan’s current political standing with neighboring Armenia. Though Azerbaijan and Armenia agreed to a cease-fire in 1994, news of observed or potential cease-fire violations steadily trickle into the country. The threat of another war is always imminent, and this uncertainty undergirded many of the responses interviewees provided when explaining the cultural significance of sons in Azerbaijan. When asked about the significance of sons in Azerbaijani national culture, many respondents referred to the role of sons in defending the country. Men and women alike cited that sons alone may protect the nation from enemies. “We live in war conditions,” 38-year-old Ali explained, “our nation needs sons.” For these respondents, sons are “soldiers,” “guardians,” “patriots,” and “defenders of the motherland.” Thus, sons are not only valued for the benefits they may yield mothers, fathers, sisters, or brothers but for the benefits they will yield their compatriots. The survival of a nation rests on sons.

Value and Significance of Daughters

The majority of interviewed men and women also reported thinking it was important to have at least one daughter. This pattern mirrors the dominant sex preference for children among parents around the world – to have a mix of both sons and daughters (Fuse 2010; Williamson 1976). However, respondents deployed a different set of schemas when discussing the value of and significance of daughters.

Daughters for Mothers, as Mothers

While respondents referenced schemas linking sons to a family and nation’s welfare, daughters were thought to play a narrower role in the family. While the presence of sons is thought to
benefit the family, and even the nation, as a whole, daughters were described as an asset to
mothers in particular. “Mothers need daughters” was a commonly provided reason for wanting to
have at least one daughter. Both male and female respondents reported that daughters are
valuable for the help they provide mothers, particularly in housework and childcare. Daughters
are also important for mothers because of the companionship and emotional support they
provide. A daughter is a mother’s “friend,” “support system,” and “confidante.” Daughters can
share “secrets” and “feelings” with their mothers in a way that sons cannot. “Girls are of course
closer to their mothers than boys,” explained one respondent. “I thought she could be a good
friend to me. I expected my daughter to help me, support me, and listen to me.” In this way,
daughters and mothers are inextricably linked.

When asked about the cultural significance of daughters in Azerbaijan, many respondents
focused not on the intrinsic value or meaning of daughters, but rather, on daughters’ future
contributions as mothers. Daughters are important because “they are future mothers” and
because “they will give birth.” More specifically, several respondents explained that daughters
were important because “they will give birth to soldiers” in the future. According to Amir, a 23-
year-old psychologist, “Girls become mothers who give birth to sons, and sons are necessary for
the nation.”

It is important to note that many respondents emphasized the strong emotional bond not
just between daughter and mother but between daughter and parents. Daughters were often
praised for being “closer,” “more connected,” “more patient,” and “sweeter” with their parents
than sons and for being “the glue that keeps the family together.” Several respondents also
thought that it was important to have daughters because they take better or more care of their
parents than sons. The notion that daughters would be loyal caretakers of elderly parents
appeared in several interviews. “She will take care of us when we are ill or when we get older,” explained 54-year-old Hamid. When asked why it is important to have a daughter, another respondent replied that, “Although boys are important in the family, everybody, every mother needs a girl. Girls are good for elderly parents. In my old age, I am sure my daughter will take care of me and my husband.” Dilara, the English teacher, commented that, “girls are more sensitive to their parents and relatives than boys. Although people hope for sons, in most cases (illness, surgery, house cleaning, event organization, etc.), they depend on the help of their daughters.”

**Costs of Sons and Daughters**

Respondents were also asked about possible difficulties associated with raising sons or daughters. The overwhelming majority of respondents reported that raising children in Azerbaijan has become increasingly difficult over time, regardless of the child’s sex. Worries over an uncertain labor market and a general sentiment that Azerbaijani society “just isn’t what it used to be” were common responses. Concerns over raising sons revolved around the need to protect them from negative influences. More specifically, parents worried that sons may fall prey to substance abuse, street violence, religious fanaticism, or may fall in with a bad crowd. Sons were generally seen as less obedient than daughters and more difficult to monitor, due in part to the emotional distance between mothers and sons. “Boys are closed off emotionally,” reflected one respondent. “The relationship between mother and son isn’t open enough. He may be surrounded by bad people and I may not be aware of it.”

Though respondents thought that raising children of both sexes was difficult, daughters were viewed as being more difficult, relative to sons. The perceived difficulty of raising a daughter had little to do with financial costs. In fact, just one respondent, 38-year-old, college-
educated Leyla with one daughter and two sons of her own, stated that raising a daughter was more costly than raising a son. Rather, respondents thought that raising a daughter was difficult because parents are responsible for protecting a daughter’s honor. A daughter’s honor is at once the greatest source of pride and the root of remarkable anxiety for parents. When discussing the value and significance of raising daughters, many respondents reported that parents may derive no greater satisfaction than raising an honorable daughter. This entails guaranteeing that she is well-educated, of high moral character, nurturing, and sexually “pure.” An honorable daughter embodies Azerbaijani moral and national values, these respondents explained, and as a mother, she is expected to instill those values in her offspring. While sons are expected to guard the physical borders of the nation, daughters are expected to guard the value system that constitutes it. However, as many respondents attested to, raising an honorable daughter is daunting to many parents. “In our society, people don’t want to have daughters because they’re afraid to raise them.”

Many respondents explained that in order to maintain a daughter’s honor, parents must constantly scrutinize her behavior. Daughters require “more care,” “more attention,” and “more protection” than sons. Limiting a daughter’s freedom of movement was cited several times as a necessary means by which parents can ensure a daughter’s purity. Some respondents spoke of this with great certainty, as Maryam, a 44-year-old university lecturer with two daughters, did: “You can’t give freedom to daughters. She can’t go everywhere by herself” while others, like 22-year-old Raziya, reflected on this in a more timid manner: “Daughters have to be raised neither in fear nor freedom. I may not be able to strike this balance.” Controlling the movement of a daughter is critical to maintaining her honor and her reputation since, according to most respondents, the greatest threat to her reputation is external influence, from which she is
incapable of protecting herself because she is “frail,” “naïve,” or “weak.” In other words, daughters do not just go bad, but are made bad by “society,” the “environment,” and the “social conditions” in which they live. The responsibility to constantly monitor a daughter’s whereabouts, in turn, is thought of as an additional burden that parents of daughters must shoulder.

In addition to concerns about protecting a daughter’s reputation, respondents also referenced how difficult it is to guarantee her material and physical livelihood. Since young women are not afforded the same freedom of movement as their male counterparts, they often have limited job prospects. While it is common for men to migrate to Russia, and sometimes to Western Europe, to make a living, it is generally not considered appropriate for women to do so. While sons can “find jobs more easily,” and “can live alone without the support of their parents,” “it is more difficult for girls.” Respondents also expressed concern over the difficulty of guaranteeing that a daughter marries into a good family. Two respondents reported that raising a daughter is more difficult than raising a son because, “it’s hard to tell what kind of family she will marry into,” and “it’s hard to make sure they find the right husband.”

Discussion

This qualitative study finds that “survival schemas” – which link sons with a family and nation’s survival – undergird son preference in Azerbaijan. The results of this study suggest that sons are valued for similar reasons in Azerbaijan and countries with son preference in East and South Asia. As they are in China, India, and Vietnam, sons in Azerbaijan are valued for the old age support they are expected to provide parents. Like these other contexts, Azerbaijani families are organized patrilocally, thereby reinforcing the idea that daughters are a net loss to their parents.
while sons “stick around” and assist their parents as they grow old. As in other rigid patrilineal societies, in Azerbaijan, sons are valued because they alone are thought to be capable of continuing the family line. As in other contexts, daughters are valued but not linked to survival, be it social, material, or national, in the way that sons are.

The findings of this study also reveal differences in the cultural logic underlying son preference in Azerbaijan when compared to other contexts. First, demographers have long understood sex preferences for children as a calculus of the relative costs and benefits sons and daughters bring to their parents (Arnold & Kuo 1984; Cain 1984; Dyson & Moore 1983; Williamson 1976). As an individual, a man is incentivized to bear a son to continue his family line and to ensure his place in the afterlife. As an individual, a woman is incentivized to bear a son to secure her position in her married family and as insurance in case of marital disruption. As parents, men and women prefer sons because sons will support them in old age. In other words, son preference represents a way for an individual or a couple to maximize their life chances. This study finds that while son preference in Azerbaijan is framed in these terms, it is also understood as a means of maximizing the life chances of a family or a nation, more broadly. Respondents spoke often of sons as supporters and protectors of the family as a whole. In times of need, sons are expected to assist not only their parents, but their siblings as well. Furthermore, sons are valued because they are expected to protect the nation as soldiers. Thus, at least among this sample of respondents, sons are not only essential for individuals but are important for the collective good as well, be it family or nation.

This relates to the second finding of this study, which is that families in Azerbaijan are hierarchically categorized according to the sex composition of children. Thus, failing to bear a son is not only associated with individual consequences for mothers and fathers who may be
stigmatized or mistreated as a result, but is perceived to have an impact on the social status of the family. According to interview results, sonless families in Azerbaijan may be perceived as “weak,” “incomplete,” or “vulnerable.” These findings suggest that the desire to have a son may not just be the outcome of a calculus of the individual costs and benefits associated with each subsequent child but also a function of a family-building strategy in which certain families are deemed “better” or more “ideal” than others. These findings provide further evidence in support of previous calls in demography (Croll 2000) to expand our understanding of son preference from a focus on the child-parent dyad to the family unit.

Third, studies of son preference in East and South Asia have found that son preference in these contexts are in part driven by the perceived economic cost of daughters, be it dowry payments or the loss of a daughter’s financial support after marriage. Among this sample of respondents in Azerbaijan, there was less concern about the economic cost of raising daughters so much as the potential risk or uncertainty involved with transitioning a daughter into honorable womanhood. While daughters are valued for the companionship and assistance they provide before leaving their parents’ house, they are also considered to have great potential to become even more valuable as educated, moral, and honorable mothers. Simone de Beauvoir famously observed that, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Similarly, one may deduce that girls in Azerbaijan are not born but become assets. A daughter’s value and significance is conditional on her successful transition into honorable womanhood. However, this transition, as many respondents explained, is a risk-laden process that parents must carefully monitor. A son, on the other hand, is born an asset by virtue of his sex. Though he may acquire increasing value over the life course, his intrinsic value – at least in the eyes of his parents – is present from birth. Simply by being male, boys may provide valuable assets to their parents, by carrying on the
family name or being a physical guardian of the family, even if they do not develop into educated, moral, or honorable men. That the value of a daughter is defined in part not by who she is but who she will become is further evidence that in patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal kinship systems, the value and status of young girls is often orthogonal to the value and status of adult women.

The findings of this study open up new possibilities for future research on son preference in Azerbaijan and beyond. Interviews reveal that while women in Azerbaijan have made considerable progress in the areas of education and labor force participation, they remain constrained in other ways. Women, for example, appear to be more limited in their freedom of movement, which has direct consequences on their opportunities to find employment in an uncertain labor market. Adolescent and adult women’s limited freedom of movement, therefore, continues to contribute to the notion that daughters are more economically costly, or uncertain, than sons. Mason (1986) has long argued that women’s status is a multi-dimensional concept and that demographic studies on the relationship between women’s status and fertility must fully take into account these multiple dimensions. The findings of this study suggest that future studies of the relationship between women’s status and son preference in Azerbaijan, and in other contexts, stand to benefit by exploring with greater care how stagnation in other dimensions of women’s status may contribute to son preference even as women advance in education and employment.

That sons continue to be associated with a family’s survival through “survival schemas” in an urbanizing, industrialized country with significant representation of women in education and employment provides yet another empirical example suggesting that son preference cannot be reduced solely through policies aimed at improving the status of adult women. Instead, these findings make the case for educational programs and media campaigns that promote alternative
visions of gender roles and ideal family types. Educational and media initiatives should encourage the notion that girls and boys can exchange familial roles. They should also promote alternative visions of the “ideal family,” with a specific aim at targeting the notion that families without sons are “incomplete,” or “weak.”
References


http://www.unfpa.org/public/home/publications/pid/12405


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Figure 1 Sex ratios at birth in Azerbaijan by mother's characteristics (2001-2006)

MOTHER'S EDUCATION
- Primary
- Secondary
- Higher

HOUSEHOLD WEALTH
- 3 or fewer
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7 or more

MOTHER'S EMPLOYMENT
- Did not work in last year
- Worked in last year

URBAN
- Urban
- Rural

Source: 2006 Azerbaijan Demographic and Health Survey

n=2,567 births