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Understanding parental gender preferences in advanced societies: Lessons from Sweden and Finland

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Abstract

Extending recent research on parental gender preferences in the Nordic countries, this study uses unique register data from Finland and Sweden (1971-1999) that provide us with the opportunity to compare childbearing dynamics and possible underlying sex preferences among natives and national minorities, namely Finnish-born immigrants in Sweden and members of the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland. Moreover, our Swedish data allow us to investigate regional and educational differences in child-sex specific fertility behavior of two-child mothers in 1981-1999. For Finland, we observe a continuous boy preference among the national majority and the Swedish-speaking minority as reflected in higher third-birth rates of mothers of two girls than of mothers of two boys. Evidence of similar preferences is found for Finnish-born migrants in Sweden, where the native-born population appears to have developed a girl preference, though. In all cases, we also observe clear indications of a preference for having at least one child of each sex. Generally speaking, our findings support an interpretation of parental gender preferences as a longstanding cultural phenomenon, related to country of childhood socialization rather than language group. Our analysis of regional and educational differentials in Sweden reveals no evidence which supports diffusion theories of persistence and change in parents' sex preferences for children.

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