The Influence of Social Media Discussion on Son Preference in Azerbaijan: Reinforcing Norms, Bargaining With Patriarchy, Space for Dissent

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Son preference and sex selection of fetuses is a feminist issue, as reproductive choices are tied to women's agency. We present a study of women in Azerbaijan, where a strong norm of son preference dominates reproductive decisions. Having a male child is one of the few ways of increasing women's power. We find that women-only social media groups' discussion of son preference and sex-selective behaviors provide women with exposure to others conforming to norms, some that reluctantly conform to norms, as well as those who deviate from son-preference norms. We posit that exposure to more attitudes may have an effect on social norms related to son preference.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, son preference, male preference, social media, social norms

Son preference and biological sex-selection of fetuses is a feminist issue because reproductive choices are linked with women's agency in their household, their family, and society. In this study, we consider a women's-only Facebook group in Azerbaijan, a culture where there are strong social norms toward son preference. This preference dominates reproductive decisions. We find that social media discussions of son preference and sex-selective behaviors provide women with exposure to others' attitudes and behaviors, which can be powerful because traditionally, women would have little access to normative information outside their household. Social media discussions can have influence, and in this group, most women conformed to son-preference norms—some because they have internalized the norms and others who do not agree with the norm but are making a patriarchal bargain, having a son in exchange for security. Few women expressed deviating from son-preference norms. There was also little evidence of broader critiques

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of son preference. But overall, the potential for exposure to normative information could be important for these women.

Literature Review

Azerbaijan's sex ratio imbalance is "the most skewed in the world" (Tafuro & Guilmoto, 2020, para. 17); 113 male babies were born for every 100 female babies in 2017, down from 117 in 2010, according to the UN World Population Division. And with third births in Azerbaijan, the sex ratio is 156 males for every 100 females, according to 2011 data, and no newer data are publicly available (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu, Eryurt, Koç, & Çavlin, 2014). This imbalance indicates that Azerbaijanis are engaging in sex-selective behaviors. But we also know social norms contribute to sex-ratio imbalance (Aliyeva, 2015; Duthé, Meslé, Vallin, Badurashvili, & Kuyumjyan, 2012). And in Azerbaijan, social norms are strictly conformed to because of cultural factors related to honor and patriarchy.

In this study, we consider how these social norms impact Azerbaijani women and how a women's-only Facebook group helps to reinforce conformity to son-preference norms, but also demonstrates how some women reluctantly conform to son-preference norms as part of a patriarchal bargain in hopes of improving their status in their household, and there is *some* deviation from son-preference norms. We posit that observation and discussion in this social media group may have some influence on beliefs about what is normative, especially because Azerbaijani women often lack informational sources outside of their households.

Using a feminist lens, we examine women's lives and status, how gender is a mechanism that structures society, and how honor and patriarchy impact choices and amplify marginality (Bachmann & Eckert, 2021). We also follow Bhatia (2010, 2018) that scholarly discussions of son preference in non-Western cultures often take on an othering Orientalist tone and have tried to be conscious of this. We draw from culturally contextualized literature to bridge the gap between Western theory with the experiences of women living in deeply patriarchal societies. We scaffold with Western and Global North theoretical concepts and methodology, with "a strategic and conscientious attitude," (Bachmann & Proust, 2020, p. 72) considering the cultural environment. Contributions to theory from a Global South feminist lens are important to showcase women's constraints outside of North America and Western Europe and extend theorizing beyond those regions and gender norms (Bachmann & Proust, 2020). Azerbaijan is Global South, following Berger (2021) in that it is marginalized within the international system because of its colonial legacy and recent status as a sovereign state.

Social Norms

The study of social norms considers behaviors common to many people, driven by beliefs and practices of other community members (Bicchieri, 2006, 2017). Bicchieri (2017) defines a social norm as

> a rule of behavior such that individuals prefer to conform to it on condition that they believe that (a) most people in their relevant network conform to it (empirical expectation), and (b) most people in their relevant network believe they ought to conform to it (normative expectation) and may sanction deviations. (p. 35)

Within Bicchieri's (2017) theory, preferences are dispositions to act a particular way in a situation, with multiple choices, ranked by desirability. Preferences can be individual or social. Social takes into account the behaviors and beliefs of other people (Bicchieri, 2017).

Conformity and Deviation

Conformity to social norms is typical because the sanctions associated with deviating are costly (Bicchieri, 2006; Bicchieri & Funcke, 2018). But not everyone conforms because of fear; some conform because they attribute value to what the norm stands for (Bicchieri, 2006).

Deviation from norms is difficult. Those willing to bear the cost of deviating tend to have low sensitivity allegiance to the norm, low-risk sensitivity overall, low-risk perception, high autonomy, and high self-efficacy (Bicchieri, 2017). Sensitivity is how much one adheres to what the norm stands for, embodying one's personal reasons for obeying the norm (Bicchieri & Funcke, 2018). "Sensitivity to social expectations is often due to a lack of agency or *autonomy*" (Bicchieri, Jiang, & Lindemans, 2014, p. 11; emphasis in original). Autonomy is the ability to make one's own choices, rather than having others make choices for them (Bicchieri et al., 2014).

Norms and Non-Western Cultures

This theoretical framework has both high face validity and strong empirical support, but in North American and Western European samples. Cultural psychological research brings three factors that influence social norm conformity and deviance in non-Western cultures, like Azerbaijan.

First, there is a greater desire for conformity in non-Western cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Riemer, Shavitt, Koo, & Markus, 2014) and less likelihood for deviation (Kim & Markus, 1999). Second, the relative influence of others is stronger in non-Western cultures, which indicates that conditional preferences, particularly normative expectations, will matter greatly (Riemer et al., 2014). Third, in non-Western cultures, self-expression, including personal preferences, is less common and discouraged (Kim & Ko, 2007; Riemer et al., 2014). Thus, in non-Western cultures, conformity to social norms is more likely than what is described by Bicchieri.

Bicchieri's (2017) theory presumes choices can be ranked to create preferences. Preferences can be social, taking others into account. It also presumes autonomy, the ability to make one's own choices (Bicchieri et al., 2014). But in non-Western cultures, others' needs matter greatly when making choices (Kim & Ko, 2007). This indicates that non-Western cultures are more inclined to engage in social, rather than individual, preferences in Bicchieri's theory. In fact, "personal preferences may be a liability, especially if they are inconsistent with prevailing norms" (Riemer et al., 2014, p. 624). Thus, conformity is more likely.

Honor Culture

In honor cultures, which are usually non-Western, including Azerbaijan, honor is a cultural logic (Uskul, Cross, Gunsoy, & Gul, 2019), whereby honor is the dominant societal value, "deeply rooted in each

people's social world to the extent that people behave, create their relationships, and shape their personalities in order to build and maintain their honor" (Baldry, Pagliaro, & Porcaro, 2013, p. 364). Honor is a reputational resource that can be accumulated and/or reduced through conforming to established behavioral and social norms (Uskul et al., 2019), with women particularly needing to conform (Lokot, 2021). Honor is relational, especially shared by a family, with each member's behavior reflecting on the collective and vice-versa (Uskul et al., 2019). As such, in honor cultures, like in non-Western cultures, collective interests are typically prioritized over individual interests (Lokot, 2021). Thus, much of what is argued about conformity and norms in non-Western cultures is particularly strong in honor cultures, but with reputational considerations playing a larger role.

Patriarchal Honor Culture

Honor cultures tend to be patriarchal (Uskul et al., 2019), whereby men hold power and authority over women in actions that are socialized in families and institutionalized by society (Inhorn, 1995). Azerbaijan has a classic patriarchal system (Aliyeva, 2015; Heyat, 2002; Tohidi, 1996, 1997), whereby patrilocal residence and women's dependency on and vulnerability to men dominate life (Kandiyoti, 1988). As such, women have particular social norms to conform to with little space for deviation. Indeed, "[W]omen in areas of classic patriarchy . . . frequently adhere as far and as long as they possibly can to rules" (Kandiyoti, 2008, p. 34).

Women are socialized to believe their primary role in Azerbaijani society is to be custodians of *adǝt*, traditional customary social norms (Beyer & Finke, 2019; Heyat, 2002; Krebs, 2020; Pearce & Vitak, 2016; Tohidi, 1996, 1997). Within this, women are expected to be deferent to men and to older people, modest, and observant of sexual honor (Heyat, 2002; Tohidi, 1996, 1997). Girls are also raised to be brides as their life's goal (Sattarov, 2012). Recently married women face more difficulties than others, because of patrilocality, whereby new brides move in with in-laws' and center on their husband's family (Heyat, 2002). Daughters-in-law, known as *gelin* or *kelin* in some dialects, have low status (Agha, 2021; Harris, 2004; Ismailbekova, 2016; Kandiyoti, 2008; Turaeva, 2017; Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2021). Turaeva (2017) describes this as such "[*K]elin* is a social category that has a special status. . . a *kelin* has a very low if not the lowest status, not only in family and kinship networks but also in her neighborhood. . ." (p. 172). Daughters-in-law must show deference to their in-law family and engage in much household labor (Harris, 2004; Ismailbekova, 2016). Daughters-in-law are often isolated from friends and natal family (Harris, 2004; Turaeva, 2017; Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2021). Not only is the life of a daughter-in-law difficult, but Zhussipbek and Nagayeva (2021) go as far as to argue that daughters-in-law do not have basic human rights.

Reproduction in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan is a pronatalist culture, which is linked to classic patriarchy in many ways (Gürtin-Broadbent, 2016). Pronatalist cultures highly value children and set reproductive expectations (Inhorn, 1995). Reproductive capacity is deeply entwined with women's perceived social worth and identity. Women are under tremendous demand to have children and traditionally had many (Sattarov, 2012). Azerbaijan's national total fertility rate was 1.8 in 2019, down from 2.7 in 1990 (World Bank, 2019) and 5 in the 1970s (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu et al., 2014). New brides face immense pressure to quickly become pregnant (Buckley,

2021; Demircioğlu, 2015; Harris, 2004; Hortaçsu, Baştuğ, & Muhammetberdiev, 2001; Penkala-Gawęcka, 2017; Sattarov, 2012). Almost no new Azerbaijani brides (0.6%) use contraception, and only 2% of first pregnancies end in abortion (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu et al., 2014).

Son Preference

The combination of pronatalism, patriarchy, and patrilocalism manifests in the desire for male offspring and the cultural, economic, and social justifications and systems for and supporting that preference (Eklund, 2011; Purewal, 2010; Tafuro & Guilmoto, 2020). The reasons for son preference are tied to real economic realities and cultural practices (Aliyeva, 2015; Garenne & Hohmann, 2014; Hortaçsu et al., 2001; Puri, Adams, Ivey, & Nachtigall, 2011; Purewal, 2010; Sattarov, 2012; Tafuro & Guilmoto, 2020; Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu et al., 2014). In Azerbaijan, male offspring are expected by families (Heyat, 2002; Ismailbekova, 2016; Sattarov, 2012; Tohidi, 1997), especially by husbands (Pinar & Maralani, 2015; Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu et al., 2014).

Reproductive Agency

In pronatalist environments, reproduction is not a choice but an obligation, not only to one's spouse, but to extended families (Inhorn, 1995; Puri et al., 2011; Unnithan, 2019). There are almost no options for childless women in Azerbaijan (Gürtin-Broadbent, 2016; Sattarov, 2012; Tohidi, 1996), and infertility may give their "husband and in-laws a good excuse to get rid of her" (Harris, 2004, p. 109), amplified by son preference. When a woman cannot produce a male child, she is "threatening the social reproduction of the household and the husband's patrilineage at large" (Inhorn, 2003, p. 245). Thus, for many Azerbaijani women, they have no choice but to produce a male child. Indeed, the social norms and consequences associated with son preference and failure to produce a son is not an autonomous choice, and women are constrained in their reproductive decision-making power (Bhatia, 2010) and thus lack reproductive agency (Unnithan, 2019).

Choices Without Reproductive Agency

Considering the relationship between choice and reproductive agency, it is clear that norms tied to son preference and their associated behaviors do not allow women autonomous reproductive choices. Based on Bicchieri's social norms theory, we propose that women are limited to three options: conform to son-preference norms because they agree with the value and have high norm sensitivity; conform to son-preference norms without agreeing, with low norm sensitivity but as a strategic bargain; and deviate from son-preference norms.

Conforming to Social Norms of Son Preference, Internalized

Many Azerbaijani women defer to their husbands' and in-laws' son preference (Hortaçsu et al., 2001; Pinar & Maralani, 2015; Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu et al., 2014). In the first choice, these women are sensitive to norms, and conforming to son-preference norms is likely because in a non-Western honor culture, many women have internalized the idea of son-preference norms (Madyibi & Ngqila, 2020; Puri et al., 2011; Shirazi, 2009), Aliyeva (2015) explains, son preference has been "nurtured in the mindsets" in Azerbaijan (p. 93). With internalization, it is possible that these women align themselves with the values associated with son-preference norms. And

while most people tend to conform to norms anyway, conforming to son-preference norms is likely to be stronger because of internalization and non-Western cultural norms of conformity as well as women's specific honor norms, especially those tied to tradition. This is like what Yamagishi, Hashimoto, and Schug (2008) call a default strategy—a rational decision rule without conscious calculation.

Conforming to Social Norms of Son Preference, but as a Patriarchal Bargain

The second choice also involves conforming to son-preference norms but from fear of sanctions by deviating. In this case, women do not agree with the values associated with son preference (e.g., they're not sensitive to norms, but because of sanctions). Cohen and Vandello (2001) describe the similar phenomenon of faking honorability whereby an individual's honorable behavior *seems* advantageous to them, but the values are not internalized or privately committed to. In such cases for women who are not in agreement with the obligation to have a son, acquiesce to doing so is a patriarchal bargain. Patriarchal bargains are conformational tactics women use to cope with norms of a patriarchal system while also strategizing for their own power, autonomy, and authority within the limited options available to them (Agha, 2021; Ismailbekova, 2016; Kandiyoti, 1988). A patriarchal bargain is a compromise (Kandiyoti, 1998). Producing a child increases a woman's security and agency in a household (Agha, 2021; Ismailbekova, 2016). And producing a male child, even more so. The patriarchal bargain of conforming to the norms of producing a son is one of the few paths to status, power, and security in an otherwise insecure daughter-in-law position (Agha, 2021; Demircioğlu, 2015; Inhorn, 1995; Ismailbekova, 2016). Such gains, however, are relative, as all bargaining still occurs within a patriarchal system; bargaining allows one to work with the rules of the game, but not how to change the game (Ismailbekova, 2016). As Kandiyoti (2008) explains, "[E]ven though these individual power tactics do little to alter the structurally unfavorable terms of the overall patriarchal script, women become experts at maximizing their own life chances" (p. 34).

Conforming Sex-Selective Behaviors

For both conformity choices, women may have to engage in sex-selective behaviors to ensure a son. Latent son preference has existed for generations, as have manifest behaviors associated with it (Eklund, 2011), although these were and are low-tech (Agha, 2021; Bhatia, 2018; Madyibi & Ngqila, 2020). In Azerbaijan, women engage in spiritual or folk medicine low-tech behaviors (Sattarov, 2012). The use of sex-selective abortion, a high-tech but low-income option of sex selection (Bhatia, 2010), rose dramatically with ultrasound technology to prenatally detect biological sex in the mid-1990s and resulted in skewed sex ratios globally (Aliyeva, 2015; Duthé et al., 2012; Garenne & Hohmann, 2014; Garenne, Hohmann, & Lefevre, 2014), especially for third-born children (Michael et al., 2013). These high-tech sex-selection behaviors also impact women's choices and reproductive autonomy and create new modes of governing women's bodies (Bhatia, 2010). Despite the underreporting of abortion related to son preference, Duthé et al. (2012) estimated that at least 7% of induced abortions reported in the 2006 Azerbaijan DHS survey were a result of sex selection. Sex-selective abortion is generally considered socially acceptable (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu et al., 2014), and because there is limited access to contraception, there is high reliance on abortion as a means of controlling fertility (Buckley, 2021; Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu et al., 2014). More than half of married women have had at least one abortion (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu et al., 2014). About half of pregnancies in Azerbaijan end in a live birth, but 40.9% terminated with induced abortion (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu et al.,

2014): Azerbaijan has among the most liberal abortion provisions globally, with no restrictions based on medical grounds and up to 28 weeks for any social circumstances (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu et al., 2014). This is to say, abortion is common, and as such, although there may be some stigma surrounding the practice, with so many women having abortions, it is not disparaged.

Deviating From Social Norms of Son Preference

Finally, the least likely choice is to deviate from son-preference norms. Those able to deviate tend to have low sensitivity to the norm, low-risk sensitivity, low-risk perception, high autonomy, and high self-efficacy (Bicchieri, 2017), none of which is likely to be true based on what we know about non-Western honor cultures, and especially for women. Moreover, while there are possibilities for contestation and resistance to the realities in which women exist, they are limited by what is "culturally conceivable" (Kandiyoti, 1998, p. 150). Women are not going to push beyond what they have been socialized to believe is possible. Moreover, Bicchieri (2017) notes that honor-based beliefs about norms are among the most difficult to change.

The Role of Information

For an individual to change their belief about norms, they need to be aware of the existence of the belief itself and have new information about the belief (Bicchieri, 2017). It is clear that communication is important for normative influence, both in reinforcing norms and exposing to deviation (Geber, Baumann, & Klimmt, 2019; Geber & Sedlander, 2022; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; Real & Rimal, 2007).

Two particularly important forms of communication for expressing normative behavior are discussion and observation (Real & Rimal, 2007). These can take place in person or online (Geber & Sedlander, 2022; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012).

The process through which this occurs is explained by Geber and Sedlander (2022):

communication with group members convey important normative information. . . Group members can express what is and what is not normative in the group, by reporting their behavior in talk, by talking about whether a certain behavior is socially approved, or by presenting norms in terms of stories that provide indirect accounts for what is and what should be. (p. 4)

Observation is especially important (Geber & Hefner, 2019; Geber & Sedlander, 2022; Geber et al., 2019). Observing others' norm deviations especially can erode an individual's own norm conformity, particularly when others are socially similar and proximate (Bicchieri, Dimant, Gächter, & Nosenzo, 2022). Also, sensitivity to a norm may be subject to change with new information (Bicchieri, 2017). Discussion and deliberation matter in enacting change because they create new empirical and normative expectations, meaning that individuals have a greater sense of what others believe and awareness of other options (Bicchieri & Mercier, 2014). Exposure to alternative views and behaviors can shift attitudes and even norms, especially if there is discussion and deliberation (Levitan & Verhulst, 2016).

Social media, in their capacity as opinion climates provide a broader and larger sense of others' attitudes and behaviors, including through incidental exposure (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). Exposure can inform one's understanding of prevailing attitudes through mechanisms like informational social influence. Exposure can also confirm, reinforce, or normalize existing norms or expose people to others deviating from norms (Neubaum, 2016). Such exposure *can* lead to behavioral change (Neubaum, 2016).

This is particularly important for Azerbaijani daughters-in-law who often have little contact with other attitudes, preferences, opinions, and behaviors outside of their in-laws' home. Daughters-in-law are often isolated from health information. Mothers-in-law and other older female in-laws act as gatekeepers to reproductive health information and choices (Demircioğlu, 2015; Inhorn, 1995, 2003; Penkala-Gawęcka, 2017).

In conclusion, access to different ideas, attitudes, and behaviors and new information can have a substantial effect on daughters-in-law. These are examples of what Bachmann and Proust (2020) describe as social media deeply changing female life in the Global South. And for Azerbaijani women, this can possibly be a profound change.

Women-Only Social Media Groups

This study considers a women's-only Facebook group. Social media groups allow for easier access to find likeminded others because of membership criteria. With the boundaries around private group membership, it can also feel safer for members. This is because of a sense of collective privacy management practices in such groups, tied to trust in the membership boundaries (Mansour & Francke, 2021; Pearce & Vitak, 2016). In these spaces, there can be freer discussion (Elsheikh & Lilleker, 2021; Pruchniewska, 2019; Younas, Naseem, & Mustafa, 2020). And *some* social media groups allow anonymity or pseudonymity, which can create greater comfort in discussing sensitive topics (Mansour & Francke, 2021; Pruchniewska, 2019). It is not unusual for women in conservative environments to use pseudonyms and second accounts on social media (Pearce & Vitak, 2016). In a study of closed Facebook groups for women in Pakistan, Younas and colleagues (2020) find that anonymous peers with whom to discuss taboo topics is "a vital mechanism" (p. 1) for support. Moreover, online anonymity makes it easier for the expression of dissent or disagreement (Garner & Peterson, 2020). It is easier to deviate from norms when one believes that the choice to not conform will not become known to relevant others (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005).

Methods

This study uses virtual ethnography and thematic analysis of a closed Facebook group for Azerbaijani women who are expectant or new mothers. The conceptualization for this study originated with the second author, a student of the first author, who was interested in studying Azerbaijani women online. The second author observed women's technology use during her time in-country and wanted to explore this with a scholarly lens. The first author has written about similar topics. The authors discussed familiar online communities for Azerbaijani women, and the second author began to search for more. The first author has been a member of many online parenting groups and suggested that the second

author look for those. Both authors agreed that pregnancy and motherhood was an important time. The second author found 14 Azerbaijani parenting Facebook groups of at least 100 members. Facebook is fairly popular in Azerbaijan, with 55% of adult men and 26% of adult women regularly using it in April 2018 (Pearce, 2018). Twelve of the Facebook groups identified stated in their title or description that only women were allowed. The second author requested to join the three largest groups, each with greater than 15,000 members and at least 35 posts per day, and was subsequently added as a member to two groups in December 2017. After a month of observation, the group in this study was selected as appropriate because of being the most active and its inclusion of pregnancy-related topics. At the time, this group had approximately 20,000 members, 6 administrators, and averaged 144 posts daily. The group was closed; it could be seen by anyone, and any user could request to join. An administrator must approve members. Only group members can see posts and comments, and posts in the group do not have a "share" button to post elsewhere. To join, perspective members must answer questions related to their gender, marital status, children, and how actively they will participate. When the second author joined, she explained to the administrators that she was a non-Azerbaijani graduate student and was forthcoming about her role as a researcher. Once a member, the second author observed the group for 4 months in 2017 and 2018.

Given the size of the group, although it was a closed group, we are confident that members understand publicness because of the common use of pseudonyms and second accounts, a known strategy for managing privacy (Mansour & Francke, 2021; Pearce & Vitak, 2016). Nonetheless, we constantly engaged in feminist reflexivity. Any examples provided are obfuscated, quotations are translated from Azerbaijani into English, so identification is unlikely. The first two authors have intermediate-advanced Azerbaijani language skills. A native speaker verified findings.

For data collection, the second author monitored the group and its hundreds of daily posts for four months in 2017 and 2018. In 2018, keyword searches were conducted to collect posts related to son preference for the entirety of the group's existence. Keywords included infertility and its variants, equivalent to barren, sterile, etc.; variations on the verbs "to want, to desire, to hope," and "to wish," cooccurring with the nouns son, boy, girl, and daughter; the Azerbaijani equivalent to the phrase "finding out the sex/gender" and "it is a girl/boy"; and abortion and variants. We also searched for common misspellings, especially tied to transliteration of the Azerbaijani alphabet. Results of searches were placed into a document that included a screenshot of the post and all comments, a link to the post, and the text of the post and comments. Over 5,000 posts resulted from keyword searches, and those outside the scope of the study were removed (e.g., a discussion about abortion laws, not sex-selective abortion). The second author coded 860 posts deemed within the study's scope.

Thematic analysis was used to give descriptions to observed phenomena (Boyatzis, 1998). Line-by-line coding of each post was employed using complete thoughts as the unit of analysis. After 25% of the coding was completed, the authors discussed and refined the codebook. Next, the second author coded all remaining posts, and the first author reviewed to confirm. Finally, excerpts were exported into Excel, and meta-matrices were created to identify patterns, establish representativeness of findings, and detect negative cases. Quotations within the results section were chosen as representative of broader patterns.

Results

Influence

Normative information is conveyed in groups through reporting behavior in talk and stories that give a sense of social approval (Geber & Sedlander, 2022). Additionally, Bhatia (2010) found that online groups provide a normalizing space for discussing son preferences, even when it is less socially acceptable. In the group of study, members were exposed to frequent reminders about son preference, especially from husbands. One member posted:

> Hi, it is almost 4am and I am crying. Girls, I am 34 weeks pregnant, it pains me that I am going to have a girl. When my husband heard that it is going to be a girl, he said: "What? A girl?" Now he is not acting like himself and I don't know what to do. I got married unwillingly, and I'm very uncomfortable now. I hope the baby is delivered healthy, Inshallah [God willing].

Another member told a story of her own birth and how when her mother called her father from the hospital to inform him that the baby was a girl, her father told her mother not to come home. In an extreme case, a member said that when she told her husband the baby was a girl, he responded that he was going to throw the baby out of the window. Undoubtedly, reading such stories has an effect on what members understand to be normal behavior and attitudes.

Furthermore, approval via justification of son-preference norms was expressed. For example, in response to a post about a husband being upset about a daughter, a commenter justified the original poster's husband's preference in multiple ways:

> Miss, a lot of people don't want a daughter. If a father doesn't want a daughter, it is because the responsibility of having a daughter is huge. This doesn't mean that the men who do not want daughters are bad. My husband wants a boy and a girl. He wants his first to be a son. Does that mean he is bad? No way. It is just that men have a fear towards girls in their brains.

Puri and colleagues' (2011) participants also noted the responsibilities associated with having a daughter as a justification for son preference. This sort of justification, along with the moral judgements that son preference does not mean that someone is "bad," further reinforces son-preference norms. Also, giving a quasistatistical sense that "a lot of people" do not want a daughter can be a powerful statement.

Conforming to Social Norms of Son Preference, Internalized

The first category of women's social norm expression of behaviors is those that conform to the norm of son preference and affiliate with the value and do not express any questioning of it. And indeed, most posts in the group of study discussing son preference demonstrate that most women conform to pronatalist norms

and treat son preference as normal. And because it was normal and internalized, these women had no need to justify their attitudes and behaviors. A boy would just be "better," according to one member: "If it is a girl, I will still give birth to her. But if it is a boy, that would be much better. This is what I believe."

Another member explained that wanting a son was "natural" when asking for sex-selection techniques:

> I have two daughters, and I am planning to get pregnant again... and now I just want a boy, and I think this is natural. I wanted to understand how to calculate the right way [to conceive a boy] and that is why I joined this group.

Better and natural indicate no apprehension.

Conforming to Social Norms of Son Preference, but as a Patriarchal Bargain

Conforming through acquiescence to son-preference norms does not always mean that a woman is pleased about it but rather that she understands she needs to conform. This could be for broader cultural reasons, as was explained by respondents in Puri and colleagues' (2011) study, which seems like the justification of it being a traditional custom in Azerbaijan, and/or the woman is making a patriarchal bargain.

Not only is self-expression discouraged but also given the stakes associated with producing a male child, expression of not conforming to the norm is riskier.

One way of conforming is by not endorsing the norm. But beyond just not endorsing the norm, these women typically justified their choice. Shakiba, Ghaderzadeh, and Moghadam (2021) similarly found in their study of Kurdish women that although conformity to son-preference norms was common, justifications for sex-selective behaviors occurred without explicit endorsement. Such justification of son-preference norms and sex-selection behaviors are common (Bhatia, 2018; Lowe, 2015; Mutlu, 2017), especially related to the presence of a daughter already.

But the main justification for son-preference norms and associated behaviors was family pressure. Puri and colleagues (2011) found similar justifications in their qualitative interviews with Indian women who engaged in sex-selective behaviors, and most of their participants expressed that their reproductive decision making was mediated by their in-laws. This was typical in the group:

> I only said I wanted a boy first because my in-laws were so overbearing, saying that I needed to have a boy, so finally I said out loud, "Dear God let the first be a boy," and to myself privately, "and then it won't matter for the second as long as it's healthy."

She actively pretended to want a boy to appease her in-laws, a classic patriarchal bargain. In this group, husbands' demands for a male child were also a common justification, without endorsement, which Puri and colleagues (2011) also found. One member revealed, "In fact, I don't really want a boy myself . .

. I want one because of my husband." And "Every man wants a male child" was a frequent refrain after women vented about how they did not care about gender much themselves. Again, "every man" provides a quasistatistical claim. A member explained that: "preference for a boy is the effect of the husband. Our men's psychology is formed in a way that they want a boy no matter what. Poor women, what can we do about this?" She posits that they have no choice but to conform to the norm and again, gives a quasistatistical generalization.

Conforming Sex-Selective Behaviors

For both the values-based conformers and the patriarchal bargainers, this group served as an information source on how to conceive a son. Bhatia (2010) and Shirazi (2009) describe social media as incredible sources for information about sex-selection techniques. We found, as did Birging (2021) and Mutlu (2017), the online discussions were of mostly a mix of low-tech or folk methods with more high-tech techniques like selective in vitro fertilization. Many low-tech methods for sex-selection with varying degrees of medical accuracy were found, similar to other work (Lowe, 2015).

Low-tech methods frequently discussed were tracking ovulation, sexual positions, timing of orgasm, and astrological signs and moon phases to increase the likelihood of a son. Some low-tech methods were more involved. For example, a member posted the following: "I have a secret for the girls who want to have a baby boy. It worked for me and God willing it will work for you too." Many members were interested and in the comments the poster explained that, with a 95% chance of having a boy, the male partner should extract 2 grams of blood from a vein and reinject it daily for 10 days, while taking vitamin C.

Sex-selective abortion was discussed, but it was more divisive. Some members took a firm stand against it, calling it a sin or saying they would never do it. Nearly all commenters mentioned sex selection as the reason for an abortion, typically with a justification of the presence of daughters already. Sometimes members said their husbands requested abortions: "I got pregnant for the second time [with a girl] and my husband told me to get an abortion." There was also confusion about medical abortion with pills versus surgical abortion, as illustrated by this post:

> I have two girls, praise God, but my husband wants a boy too. I don't want an abortion because I'm scared it's a sin but I heard that if you get a blood test quickly to determine the sex there is something else you can do?

Discussions of high-tech methods were less common than low-tech and abortion, but they still occurred, in this case with justification of daughters already. For example:

> Is there anyone who has information about doing artificial insemination for having a male child? The woman is able to become a mother and there are also no problems with the man. They have daughters and just want a son—is something like this possible? Also, how much would it cost for artificial insemination for a woman without any [infertility] problems?

Deviating From Social Norms of Son Preference

Deviating from son-preference norms is unlikely given conformity tendencies and severe consequences and expression of deviation is also risky. Thus, when it did occur in the group, it was notable.

Some deviators explained they preferred a girl without justification. For example:

I'm nine weeks into my first pregnancy and I'm so nervous. All day I beg God to give me a healthy girl. I cannot imagine going for an ultrasound and hearing it's a boy. I will feel broken and incomplete.

Others expressed similar desires in the comments, one writing, "I was the same. For my first pregnancy, I was so thankful it was a girl, and then even when the second was ☺." Many traced their preference for girls to their youth, as illustrated by this commenter: "I've also always been an admirer of girls. Before I was married, I was always wishing for a daughter."

The other, rarer, way of deviating was actively critiquing son-preference norms. This did not occur often in the group of study, but when it did, it was typically about the woman's own household, not society. A member who posted about her desire for a daughter wrote, "when someone says 'let it be a boy,' I become angry at them. I really can't accept this sentence."

Mutlu (2017) found some Turkish women using social media to critique son-preference norms more broadly in society. There was not much of that, but one illustrative case from our data came from a member asking about son preference to the broader group.

I'm curious why all of our pregnant ladies here want to have a male child. Everyone in this group is interested in the sex of the child. What's the reason for this? The only important thing is that it's healthy. Think about that. Everyone checks the sex and it's really strange.

Members didn't reply. The lack of discussion may be influential in and of itself, demonstrating a reluctance to express son preference deviation.

Discussion and Conclusion

Having a child, particularly a son, is an obligation many Azerbaijani women must conform to, even if they do not agree with it. For those who make this compromise, the patriarchal bargain of having a son in exchange for more agency, respect, and security in their household is worthwhile. And few women in the group studied deviated from son-preference norms.

Overall, social media are a place for these women to observe and discuss norms that may influence their own beliefs, possibly through reinforcing son-preference norms, but also possibly through being exposed to others deviating. Especially given the isolation that Azerbaijani women generally

experience, the discussions of son preference and sex-selective techniques provide exposure about others' attitudes and experiences. And because many Azerbaijani women lack exposure to views, attitudes, and behaviors outside of their in-laws' home, this exposure could be powerful. Indeed, members frequently noted how much the group has taught them: "Even though I'm older, I've learned so many things here. Again I'm learning."

It follows that exercising choice is an important aspect of increasing reproductive agency. And the possibility of providing a sense that there are more choices than they would have otherwise known about is potent.

Non-Western honor cultures have such a strong tendency to conform that considerations of when deviation is possible is an important empirical challenge. And particularly with social media being a new source of normative information, there is an excellent opportunity to understand its potential emancipatory power.

In other work, like Younas and colleagues (2020), there is evidence that private women's Facebook groups in such societies are spaces where patriarchal constraints are subverted or suspended. We did not find much evidence of this; however, it is important to continue observing. There are possibilities for more explicit actions that push back against patriarchy emerging from groups without that as an original intention. For example, Ali's (2019) study of a Sudanese women's Facebook group that originated as a space to discuss beauty and fashion and Elsheikh and Lilleker's (2021) study of women-only beauty, fashion, and household Facebook groups in Egypt, all became major sites for political organizing. At this point in time, though, this studied group is more of an example of reinforcing norms versus subversion.

Limitations

There are limitations of this study. Certainly, members are not representative of all women in Azerbaijan, especially because to join this group, they had to have access to technology. And there are Azerbaijani women who have defied gender-based social norms in their life choices and some that actively critique patriarchy (see Aliyeva, 2020; Walsh, 2020, on Azerbaijani feminism). The study design of looking only at Facebook group posts and comments prevented larger drawing of conclusions, greater contextualization, and deeper understanding of lived experiences. We also would like to better understand the processes involved in the possible influence of social media, along with more concrete outcomes. While interviews would be optimal, they are also difficult. We appreciate Agha's (2021) detailed description of the challenges in recruiting Pakistani daughters-in-law to interview. Only years of rapport building and using intermediaries made her interview study possible. Finally, the authors are not Azerbaijani women, and although this allows us distance from the subject matter, we have tried to present Azerbaijani society, families, and women as respectfully and ethically as possible. Studying women who exist in a different cultural environment than the authors is challenging, and we try to engage in reflexivity at all research stages because of this.

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