

Gender Discrimination in Education: What motivates parents to invest more in sons?

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Abstract

Gender discrimination within the household exists in many contexts. In societies where the norm is to not expect future support from daughters, parents may invest even less in the health and human capital of girls. In India, as in other patriarchal societies, the eldest son occupies a special position as the heir and potential head of the extended family and is expected to assume responsibility for parents' welfare in their old age. In this paper, I explore whether part of the observed pro-male bias in educational expenditures and school enrollment can be explained by parents choosing to invest in the (male) child who is the most likely to be the heir and care for them in the future. Using data from the nationally representative India Human Development Survey, I confirm the presence of a pro-male bias and an additional preference for the heir. Accounting for bias in favour of the heir reduces the pro-male bias in educational expenditures by 28.8 percent and in enrollment by 18.5 percent. In families with more children and greater competition for resources within the household, the pro-male bias falls and the bias in favour of the heir is greater. Parents in the highest income bracket, who are also less likely to be dependent on their children, discriminate less in favour of the heir. Finally, I find evidence suggesting reverse discrimination, i.e. discrimination against sons, in the state of Meghalaya which follows a matrilineal system where the youngest daughter takes over as the head of the household.

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