

Gender Differentials in Health and Morbidity among Children of Karnataka

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Abstract

There has been a resurgence of interest in recent years on the issue of gender differentials in child health and mortality. A number of cross-sectional studies in the 1970s and 80s on child mortality levels and differentials have indicated excess female child mortality in South Asia in general and India in particular. Sex-linked differential treatment of children has often been found to be the major reason for the differentials in mortality of boys and girls. Varying degrees of discrimination of the girl child in both preventive and curative care have also been reported among Indian States. While most researchers agree on the strong preference for sons over daughters, there is little consensus on the major determinants of such disparities. Given this background, this study looks at the various dimensions of gender disparity in health care and nutrition among the children of Karnataka. With the existing regional differentials in various development indicators, this study also looks at the magnitude of gender differentials in childhood feeding, morbidity, treatment of illness and nutrition in different regions of Karnataka.

This study uses data from National Family Health Survey-2 Karnataka where detailed information was collected on breastfeeding, supplementary feeding, immunization, treatment sought for common childhood illness and various anthropometric measures for children born during the preceding three years of the survey. Using this information, gender differentials in various indicators of child care has been analysed for major regions of Karnataka. Further the study also addresses some of the major determinants of gender differentials in childcare. The study finds the existence of significant gender differentials in Karnataka in many indicators particularly in the developed southern region.

The study shows that throughout Karnataka gender differentials towards female disadvantage is observed in indicators of childhood feeding, immunization coverage, treatment-seeking and nutritional status. The regional analysis indicate that although the

child health indicators are much better in southern Karnataka, the intensity of gender discrimination is much higher in south Karnataka than in north Karnataka.

The gender disparities across socioeconomic variables have brought out several findings of interest. The gender disparities in various indicators across education show that, although the general health indicators are better for children of literate mothers, the gender gap is wider among the children of literate mothers. In the same way, household living standards also show that the intensity of gender discrimination is higher among the children of higher living standards than for the children of low living standards. The caste and women's work status do not show any clear pattern. The results of multivariate analysis shows that after controlling for different socio-economic variables a significant gender bias observed only in case of giving immunisation and treatment for diarrhoea but not in case of giving supplementary food or in morbidity pattern.