

HOW TO HAVE A SON? CULTURAL PRACTICES OF SON PREFERENCE IN ARMENIA



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INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies testify to high rates of son preference in Armenia¹. The current gender imbalance indicates that the roots of the phenomenon are deeper and are conditioned by cultural perceptions. Families dream of having a son for different reasons: to safeguard the symbolic patrimonial continuity of the dynasty, to ensure stable economic provision, and for many other reasons reflected in studies.

In recent years research has also revealed high rates of abortions conditioned by son preference in Armenia. Extensive public debate over the issue and projects carried out by numerous international and local organizations have considerably enhanced the level of public awareness and concentration on the issue.

In 2016 a legislative amendment was initiated and enacted envisaging that sex-selective abortions in weeks 12 to 22 are prohibited. The RA Law on Reproductive Health and Rights to Reproduction defines that every woman has the right to abortion prior to week 12².

Despite changes and restrictions imposed by the law, and due to deep and sturdy cultural traditions of son preference, Armenian families continue to practice different methods to plan or predict the sex of the future child. Some of these practices are traditional, others are new. Most probably, parallel to introduction of normative restrictions on sex-selective abortions, circulation and use of such practices will intensify.

¹ Sex Imbalances at Birth in Armenia: Demographic Evidence and Analysis, Christof Gilmoto, IRD/CEPED Paris, 2013 http://www.un.am/up/library/Sex%20Imbalance%20report_arm.pdf; The lost Balance: Son Preference in Armenia, book project, UNFPA, http://www.un.am/up/library/Son%20preference_project%20book_arm.pdf; G. Shahnazaryan, S. Hovhannisyan, Systematic and Cultural Causes of Sex-Selective Abortions in Armenia, World Vision Armenia 2017, http://www.un.am/up/library/Son%20preference_project%20book_arm.pdf:

² The RA Law on Reproductive Health and Rights to Reproduction, <http://www.arlis.am/>

The purpose of this study is to reveal whether modern Armenian families use methods of gender planning and prediction, what methods they use, in which cases they apply these methods, as well as other related questions that will help identify the cultural context of son preference, as well as the practices of safeguarding the viability of this preference.

Research Methodology

For research purposes, preference was given to qualitative research tools, such as in-depth interviews, group discussions and expert interviews.

The research was carried out in 11 communities of 4 provinces of the Republic of Armenia.

- The town of Talin, as well as Lusaghbyur, Nerkin Bazmaberd and Arteni villages in Aragatsotn Province.
- The city of Gyumri, as well as Marmashen and Kamo villages in Shirak Province.
- The town of Ijevan, and Gandzakar village in Tavush Province.
- The town of Gavar, and Gandzak village in Gegharkunik Province.

These provinces have been selected with consideration that WV Armenia is implementing here its “Care for Equality” program. In each of these provinces group interviews have been conducted with women and men, and individual interviews have been conducted with women only.

Interviews were conducted using the qualitative research method, utilizing a semi-structured questionnaire-guide with open questions.

Individual interviews were conducted with women of different ages – with seniors, middle-aged and young women, to follow the changes in cultural practices.

Interviews were decoded and analyzed using the generalization method.

Based on availability, expert interviews have been conducted with local obstetrician-gynecologists or family doctors.

For effective implementation of the study it was important to have opportunities to conduct participant observation. I want to express my special gratitude to Angela Isahakyan, Doctor of Maternity Section of “Austrian Child and Mother Hospital in Gyumri” CJSC, who helped me spend one day at medical consultations of pregnant women and listen to opinions and expectations of 15 of them about the sex of the future child. The study was also largely supported by the management and staff of

Gyumri Maternity Hospital, Health Center of Arteni Village of Aragatsotn Province, Clinic of Nerkin Bazmaberd, Aparan Maternity Hospital, Clinic of Gandzakhar Village of Tavush Province, who engaged in the study as experts and provided opinion and information.

The smooth progress and success of the study can be largely credited to the social image and reputation of World Vision in the communities covered by the study.

I want to express special gratitude to local teams and social workers of WV-Armenia whose helpfulness and positive reputation in local communities helped ensure meetings with study participants.

Notes from the field

In all areas covered by the study participants were aware of high rates of sex-selective abortions in Armenia, which indicates to effective awareness raising policies. Television was mentioned as the main source of information. In all provinces and areas participants agreed to take part in interviews. Whereas participants in Aragatsotn and Shirak provinces were more restrained and less wordy based on local cultural habits, women in Tavush and Gegharkunik were more open about issues under study. In Gegharkunik province, the town of Gavar, they were less informed about legal prohibition of “preventive” practices that were largely used in their communities towards female feti, hence they elaborated about the “roadmap” of having a boy in more detail.

Observations of mixed group interviews showed that men were more firm and resolute in their arguments towards son preference, and displayed indifference to discussions about girls. Women were more inclined to discuss the issue and share their experiences, given that the researcher was female.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations imposed on scope and duration of the study prevented coverage of all typical cultural/ethnographic areas of the selected provinces.

Limitations of duration of the study dis not allow to observe the issues “in their own environment” over a longer period of time.

The sensitivity and intimacy of issues under study have been alleviated through qualitative methods. It is obvious, however, that some of the information has been left out of discussion due to confidentiality, legal

vulnerability, and conflict with public morality, such as the real mechanisms and “roadmaps” for pre-arranged sex-selective abortions.

The large public campaign on sex-selective abortions has indisputably been productive. On the positive side, it created an active flow of media information which led to increased public awareness and helped to record existence of the problem. The study showed that the campaign has had other effects too: *in result of targeting sex-selective abortions, families which practice “cleansing” of female feti strive to conceal this information from neighbors and relatives, and the problem gradually becomes more “latent” and “closed” for discussion.*

At the same time, “familization” of the problem, its confidential nature, and the requirement of promptly returning to daily life and forgetting “what has happened” deprives women, as well as other members of the family, of the opportunity to achieve emotional and physical recovery.

With consideration of gender sensitivity, it was decided from the start to exclude from the study women who have had sex-selective abortions, to avoid stigmatizing and causing stress. Information about practices they utilize has been received indirectly during the meetings, without personalizing stories, by presenting them as anonymous stories heard from others, with the exception of those cases when women voluntarily wished to share their own experiences.



STOP 1

At the Start of the Roadmap to Having a Boy

Oh, the road to having a boy is very tough...

(Gavar, a woman, 30)

Why a Boy?

“Nowadays only poor families bear a child without family planning, because the state pays money for the child. They have a child in order to pay their loans...” (Talin, Arteni)

Desire to have a son is typical of the Armenian society. Reasons behind this desire have been discussed in various international and local studies: the patrimonial kinship system, ensuring viability of the cultural tradition of sons living with parents, the need for a man as a workforce in poorly developed agricultural settings, and others.

At the same time, studies have identified all the preconditions which lead to gender imbalance in Armenia: a strong preference for having a son, a radical reduction in the average family size, changes in birth rates, and the increased availability of modern reproductive technologies. These, in their turn, are conditioned by social, demographic, anthropological and economic, as well as many other factors³. Some surveys, however, highlight incompleteness of ethnographic data in the “roadmap” for having a boy⁴, which hampers comprehensive coverage of the issue and development of policies for improvement.

To avoid duplication of the results of previous studies, this study will focus on the social/cultural challenges faced by women who do not have sons and their families.

³ http://www.un.am/up/library/Sex%20Imbalance%20report_arm.pdf p. 9-10

⁴ Sex Imbalances at Birth in Armenia: Demographic Evidence and Analysis. http://www.un.am/up/library/Sex%20Imbalance%20report_arm.pdf, page 35:

From the start of the study, I posed a philosophical question: how a woman can “filter and eliminate” her own type. The study showed that son preference and the hard road to having a boy are beyond women’s control, and are simply implemented through women. In the context of gender inequalities in Armenia, son preference is seen as a consequence and a result of inadequate appraisal of girls and women, and sex-selective abortions – as another form of gender-based violence towards not only the unborn child, but also the woman carrying that child⁵. The cultural practice of having a boy is so important, that it directly affects perceptions of women’s status, authority and opportunities.

Wheat Grows from Wheat, Barley from Barley

In public consciousness it is firmly rooted, or is deliberately being voiced and publicized, that the responsibility for the sex of the fetus rests with the woman, in contrast to the established biological thesis that it is determined by chromosomal combination of the man’s sperm.

“When a girl is born, the woman is being blamed for it. So, to avoid reproach and scolding, she does a dozen abortions until she gets pregnant with a boy”. (Gavar, a woman, 30)

Not having a boy is perceived to be the fault of the woman. Generally, women, especially those who have only daughters, are constantly being criticized before, during and after pregnancy. Although results of the interviews showed that everyone is aware of the men’s role in determining the sex of the child, in public labeling this knowledge is not circulated. To the question “who is responsible for the sex of the child” women cautiously whispered that it is the man, and cited the proverb “wheat grows from what, barley from barley”⁶.

Even women who have no children yet, but who have only sisters, find themselves in the role of potential culprits, as according to popular folklore they may “take after their mothers and bear only girls”. Later, in case of having only daughters, “accusations” are directed solely to women. “*When*

⁵ A. Voskanyan, Sex-Selective Abortions as Part of Gender-Based Discrimination in Armenian Family. <http://ysu.am/files/Anna%20Voskanyan%20pdf%20eng.pdf>

⁶ Although this saying is about the impossibility of the difference between the seed and its product, nevertheless it has a message about underestimation of the female child. In the Armenian culture wheat has always been considered a more valuable seed than barley. The boy’s association with wheat, and the girl’s association with a more inferior grain, the barley, shows the deep-rooted culture of male child preference.

I gave birth to a girl, my mother-in-law said, awful, I am afraid you took after your mother” (Talin), or

“She took after her mother, she bears only girls. You’re a lazy girl, you failed to have a son”. (Gyumri)

“When a girl is born they blame the woman. They say, you cut the smoke of my house. Or they say, she took after her mother, she bears only girls...”. (Tavush Province, Gandzakar)

In case of having a boy the woman is gets praised: *“May your father’s house flourish, may you be healthy and happy”* and with other such expressions.

Following the stereotypes of the patriarchal society, men also “believe” that the baby’s sex depends on women, and when a girl is born, they act accordingly. *“How could I have a girl!”* (Gyumri, a man).

In the context of the traditional underestimation of girls, men who have only daughters become targets for irony. Hence they try to avoid getting into such situations.

“I had a pregnant patient who gave birth to their first daughter. The father was a famous guy in the area, and did not want to take the child home. He said, the neighborhood (the district) will scold me for having a girl”. (Gyumri, a gynecologist)

Or

“My brother has three daughters. Before the birth of each child my father told him to eat onions, and my brother would retort, I hate onions. Then, when he had his third daughter, my father said, and now that you have three girls, don’t you hate yourself? (Shirak Province, Amasia, a man)

Middle-aged women in particular often remember stories when men ignored wives bearing their second or further daughters, and did not even visit them in the hospital or bring them food.

“When my third girl was born in 1979, my husband did not come to the hospital. He was working as a mechanic, but he immediately bought a ticket and left for Russia. He came back some six months later. My father-in-law showed him the child, but for a long time he did not hold the child and did not love her”. (Tavush, Ijevan, a woman, 64)

Women also strive to have boys, as it is a real opportunity to strengthen their position in the family, gain a higher status, and ensure a stable future. The viability of the phrase “had a boy, got a standing”, conditioned by the inferior and subordinate position of young women and daughters-in-law in the family, can be observed even today. “*I have a boy, while the wife of my brother-in-law has a girl. For our father-in-law I have a higher position, he assigns me a higher status and treats me better;*” says a 25-year-old woman from Gyumri, who lives with her husband’s parents and brother, and can assess on routine basis the differences in attitude and treatment.

Particularly after the birth of the first daughter talks about a subsequent son become ceaseless in the family.

“The elders in the family may refrain from words, but will utilize actions and behaviors to constantly remind that they need a grandson, and about those who do not have sons, they say “worked the other way around”, i.e. had a girl”. (Talin, a man, father of three girls and one boy)

Social pressures imposed by such cultural perceptions cause tension in family relationships, and women themselves, striving to avoid these upcoming intransigent and tense conversations, try to carry out their primary mission of having a son as soon as possible. “*This is my first pregnancy, and it doesn’t matter what we will have, but perhaps I would prefer a boy, just to be done with that issue*”, confesses the young woman attending gynecological consultation.

Gynecologists also highlight the issue of women feeling obligated and responsible for bearing a son. “*Yesterday a woman visited, it was her first pregnancy, she’s asking, doctor, is it a boy? I ask her, why do you need that? She says, pray, I want them say she gave birth to a son*”. (Gyumri, gynecologist, a man).

Or: «*We even have a doctor who says, shall I not bear at least one son for my husband!*». (Gyumri, gynecologist, a woman)

A family therapist from one of the villages in Tavush province recollected how a woman from their village who had three daughters dared to have a boy despite the risk it posed to her health. “*She would say, I shall bear a boy for my husband.*”

In the context of Armenia’s high migration rates, especially in the provinces covered by this survey, having a boy allows women to expect that the husband will not leave the family to form another one, or will not

stop sending money home. *“My relative’s wife went to a fortune-teller. Her husband was a work migrant, and she wanted to know how to have a boy so that her husband would stay with her. Eventually everything worked out, she had a boy, and her husband stays in touch”.* (a woman, Gegharkunik, Gavar)

Active dissemination of information on the man’s role in determining the sex of the fetus can contribute to destructuralization of the myth that the woman is the primary culprit for “bearing a son”, and can help change the axis of public discourse.

Waiting for a Whip and a Cookie: The Birth of a Boy

Whereas not having a boy results not only accusations towards the woman, but also indifferent treatment and expectations of the lowest prospects from her husband, having a boy, especially a long-awaited one, leads to improved treatment of the woman. The difference in attitude starts to manifest itself from the moment when the sex of the fetus is disclosed: a more considerate attitude towards the pregnant woman, higher attention to her wishes, positive response to her nutritional preferences, attention to pregnancy-related complaints, redistribution of household responsibilities as much as possible, consideration by members of the family of emotional moods of the pregnant woman, and many other routine manifestations. According to both pregnant women and other participants of the study, all these is not applied to women who are expecting their second or third daughters.

Even obstetrician-gynecologists point out that women, conscious of their important role in bearing a boy, often manipulate pregnancy-related problems trying to sell their “delivery-of-a-boy” for a higher price.

In line with the tradition from the soviet-era, the nurse who delivers the news of the baby’s birth to the father and relatives receives money called “magharich” as an expression of gratitude. The study showed that when a boy is born relatives of the child display higher “generosity” than when a girl is born.

“There was a man in our village. When his fourth daughter was born, me and the orderly were arguing who of us should deliver the news. The orderly told me, in other times you hurry to tell them the news, why won’t you do it now? So I had to go. The father saw me, and asked: so? I said, brother, it’s a fair-skinned... He says, so? I do

not dare say it's a girl, and I continue, it is a tall, beautiful... The father gets angry, tell me, who is it? So I had to say it's a girl. He almost attacked me". (Aragatsotn Province, an obstetrician)

Staff members of the maternity hospital first denied the existence of contemporary diverse manifestations, however, in the course of interviews they started to recollect different stories about the apparent joy and enthusiasm that birth of a boy is accompanied with.

Discharge from the maternity hospital in our days is also accompanied by certain festivities. As a rule, the first child of the family is discharged with celebrations: a special gown is prepared for the baby, relatives video-shoot the process, they bring balloons and flowers to the hospital. Both the research participants and medical personnel report that long-awaited baby boys are discharged from hospital with more explicit celebration and joy of those waiting near the hospital. In one of maternity hospitals in Gyumri, the husband gave a new car to a wife who bore a baby boy and who did not even know how to drive, and the car was delivered in holiday packaging to the yard of the hospital.

"I, my husband, our four girls, my mother-in-law, father-in-law, and her mother-in-law were living in a small house. My husband said he wouldn't repair the house until I had a boy. My boy was born in October, and by the end of November the second floor of our house was ready", recalls the story of her lifestyle improvement Granny Galya from Aragatsotn province.

As a rule, women who have boys receive gold jewelry from their husbands or mothers-in-law more frequently, which in Armenia is considered an expression of appreciation. Whereas the birth of the second and further girls usually goes more "unnoticed". *"My husband did not do a "magharich" for my three daughters, but for my son he did it with great fanfare"* (a woman, Tavush province, Gandzakar).

When a baby girl is born, the content and form of celebration changes.

Expressions like «it's ok, just let her be healthy, it's ok that she's a second girl, you'll have to have a third child" clearly testify to cultural stereotypes rooted in the society. *"Our neighbor had three boys, my mother had three girls. When our neighbor's first grandchild was born a girl, my mother said congratulations, and she answered back in an offended tone that we shouldn't rejoice over their misfortune..."* (Tavush Province, a woman, 30)

The birth of a long-awaited boy (i.e., when there is already a girl in the family) is accompanied by special celebrations particularly organized by

the father and grandfather. All friends and relatives get together to celebrate. On the other hand, when a girl is born, particularly if it is the second girl, the mother can sense the “silent dissatisfaction” of family members, relatives and neighbors, accompanied by wishes reflecting expectations of a boy: *“It’s ok, the next one will be a boy. Don’t worry, if you can bear a girl, you can as well bear a boy”*.

«When my second girl was born, my father-in-law did not congratulate me, and when the third one was born, he did not even talk to me”, recalls a woman living in one of the villages of Shirak province, who after having four girls eventually fulfilled her father-in-law’s desire and had a boy, whom they named after him.

In the context of existence and circulation of such cultural stereotypes, women, clearly conscious of the key expectation-requirement posed on them, apply different tricks and go through all kinds of difficulties to fulfil it as soon as possible.



STOP 2

How to Have a Boy? Practices of Predicting the Baby's Sex

yan ▶ Armenian Parents' Corner
2016 · 21

Barev jez. Mayrikner jan, uzum em aroxj TXA balik unenal. Kogneq gtnel lav ginekologi, vor apaga yerexayi ser@ hashvi kam ayd harcum ogni.



8 մեկնաբանություն

Armenian Parents Corner 2016

Hi, mothers. I want to have a healthy baby BOY. Could you please recommend a good gynecologist who can calculate the sex of the future baby, or help with the issue.

8 comments

Such comments and verbal inquiries are widespread in Armenia. Following their desire to have a boy future mothers, their mothers-in-law, mothers, relatives, neighbors and friends seek reliable and proven methods to succeed.

At the start of the study I was worried that the research thesis would not be confirmed, and it would turn out that the main method is ultrasonography. The survey, however, showed that there are a variety of stops along the “roadmap” of having a boy. There is a set of specific knowledge and practices through which people try to plan the future baby's sex, predominantly male. Especially in rural areas covered by this study no case was ever presented where parents would use tricks to plan for a girl.

Some of the registered practices are passed traditionally from one generation to the other. Others are more modern and are linked to developments in medicine and increased access to information.

Through Passage/Lifecycle Rites

Passage Rites are those which reflect a person's move into a new social category or acquisition of a new status⁷, such as birth, marriage, maturity, maternity/paternity, and death.

The most popular of these, which is still used in our days and marks the beginning of the "road", is the rite of putting a baby boy in the lap of the bride during the wedding with the expectation that "*next year this time may you be holding a strong and healthy baby boy of your own*". This passage rite of marriage reflects the importance of ensuring reproduction of sons and is so substantiated in cultural perceptions, that nothing changes it. "*At the wedding of our neighbor's son the bride first held a baby girl, and later during her first pregnancy she had a miscarriage. I cannot say if that was the reason or not, but their grandmother was very upset that the bride first held a baby girl*". (a woman, Talin)

In fact, the rite implies participation of a boy in various stages of the traditional wedding ceremony. There was a tradition in Gegharkunik province according to which when preparing the wedding gowns "they deliberately brought in a boy from the outside, and when the bride first entered the home of her father-in-law, a baby boy was put in her lap so that they also could have a son"⁸. Or they would put a boy on the horse that carried the bride. All these measures were eventually called to ensure fulfillment of the main task of the bride – having a son. In Gegharkunik Province, the desire to have a son is so predominant, that it is reflected even in "atamhatik" celebrations. "Atamhatik" is celebrated when the child's first tooth appears, indicating transition to the next stage of maturation. During the celebration, they try to predetermine the child's future profession through different items placed in front of the child. It is rumored that during this ceremony in Gavar they also place a knife among other items, and if the baby picks up the knife, then the next newborn in the family will be a boy.

⁷ Van Gennep A., "The Rites of Passage".

⁸ Lalayan Y., "The Province of Nor Bayazet or Gegharkunik", 1907, Ethnographic journal , N 16.

Practices of Sex Selection through Vision-Dreams

These practices gradually diminish, but they are still remembered and used as an addition to more accurate methods of checking the sex of fetus. Seeing saints in dreams and prediction of a child's birth by the saint is interpreted in case of infertility simply as a prediction of having a child, and in case of expecting a boy, as a prediction that a son will be born.

“I did not know that my daughter was pregnant. A man with a beard and a crook appeared in my dream and said that a baby would be born. Then I learned that my daughter was pregnant, and when the baby was born we named him Gevorg, after Saint Gevorg”. (a woman, Tavush Province, Ijevan)

Pilgrimages

Visits to sanctuaries known for their power to “grant” a child, including boys, were traditionally widespread, but nowadays they lose significance among the youth. Nevertheless, there are many stories on how long-awaited boys were born after the largely mythical 7 years of pilgrimage. *“I was told by women here that I needed to go to a sanctuary. For seven years I have been going on foot to St. Hovhannes for the sake of having a boy after my four daughters,”* said Mrs. Galya, who in result of the pilgrimage eventually gave birth to a son, though he was born on St. Gevorg day. The boy was named Gevorg, but since they were convinced that he was a gift from St. Hovhannes, thirty-five years after his birth, in 2011, they placed an appreciation cross-stone near St. Hovhannes Chapel.

Situated in Hartagyugh village of Lori Province, St. Hovhannes Chapel has been and is still known among the population of Shirak province, Talin and Tavush for its power to grant children. Traditionally people brought here children with epilepsy, and it was recommended that women with infertility or those desiring to have a son paid a visit to this sanctuary, as well as to the Toparlu Eyelet Stone in Hatsik village of Shirak province⁹. Usually people visited St Hovhannes Chapel on the Assumption Feast, or paid personal visits, silently climbing the hill, sometimes even barefoot. Women carried brooms and swept the yard of the chapel as if serving it. They brought gifts and sacrificed a lamb. When visiting the

⁹ H. Abrahamyan, “Vardavar Sanctuaries of Shirak” (brief), Shirak Center for Armenian Studies, NAS RA, Scientific Works, XV, NAS RA “Science” publication, Yerevan, 2012. <http://shirak.asj-oa.am/456/1/159-168.pdf>:

Eyelet Stone, boys who were “finally” born were carried through the stone, after which they were considered to be protected.

A story told in Tavush province also suggests that long-awaited boys were protected by all possible means. *“My husband is the youngest brother of 5 elder sisters. When he was born, there was a clay bucket in their house, they cut the bottom of the bucket and carried him through it”*. In the Armenian culture, imaginary borders and trials, and rituals of moving from one world to another were utilized to protect mainly boys, as the more appreciated and important members of the family.

Fortune-Telling

Fortune-telling about the expected baby has been a common practice for women forever. In the traditional Armenian society such practices were diverse and were applied in all situations of life. In modern days also fortune-telling and analysis of dreams are of particular significance¹⁰, especially in the context of prospective vital events, such as the birth of a child, and especially a boy. Families dreaming of baby boys pay attention to a variety of symbolic phenomena, which otherwise would perhaps go unnoticed.

While expecting a son, **analysis of dreams** gains special importance. If mythical, divine characters were associated exclusively with the birth of a boy, routine dreams were being analyzed to decide whether a boy or a girl would be born: knives and agricultural tools were considered to indicate to the birth of a boy, whereas those who saw a needle, a button or an apple would be expecting a girl. *“In my dream there were small knives all around the yard. I collected them, then gave some to my sister, and kept three of them. I had three sons and my sister had three sons too...”* (a woman, Aparan). Interestingly, dreams related to the sex of the child were being “seen” not only by the pregnant woman, but also by members of her family, her neighbors and relatives, and they made sure to communicate their dreams to the pregnant woman.

Magic, charms and fortune-telling were utilized not only to predict the sex of the expected child, but also to “order” boys. Different types of fortune tellers – **clairvoyants, candle-pourers, prayer-makers, charm-makers, and even astrologists** offered their services along the “roadmap” to plan for a boy. Whereas in traditional societies with tight community relations

¹⁰ Антонян Ю., Магическое целительство и гадание в Армении (диссертация на соискание ученой степени кандидата исторических наук), Ер., 2007

and communal lifestyles fortune-telling was practised by people who were perceived by community members to be gifted oracles, today the demand has brought forward commercially motivated offerings. In modern realities public discourse does not encourage fortune-telling, and these services are being consumed as secretly as possible, without publicity, which contributes to the continuity of the ritual. In Gegharkunik province, especially in Gandzak community of Gavar, a fortune-teller named Varsik enjoys recognition not only for her attempted violence against her daughter-in-law¹¹, but also for her gift to guarantee the birth of a son. *“My relative came to Varsik, she looked and said on which day she has to get pregnant to have a boy. She then made a charm /a method of making magic/ so that her husband came back from Russia. And it worked out exactly like that”.* (a woman, Gavar, Gandzak community).

In Bazmaberd village of Talin they still remember how people carrying a “black hen” went to their fellow villager Moso to learn their fortune. *“He had divine books brought from the Land, and he made charms so that people could have sons”.*

Coffee cup gazing also was a frequent thing along the road of having a son. Predictions based on coffee cup gazing were done not only by women specialized in it, but also by “amateurs”. Whereas organizing “professional” coffee cup gazing was somewhat difficult - a special arrangement was to be made, and perhaps gifts to be prepared, groups of women entertaining themselves with coffee often resorted to this form of fortune-telling. After drinking coffee made in a coffee pot they turned the cup on the small plate. The coffee grounds flowed down and created different images on the walls of the cup, which they interpreted trying to make predictions. *“One day I and my girlfriend were walking home from the fields. She said, you know, I am expecting a baby. She already had two daughters, and she thought this one was also a girl. She said, I want to have an abortion, and I said let’s go to our house and I will do coffee cup gazing for you. I looked at the cup and said, it is definitely a boy, don’t do abortion. There was no ultrasound in those days. She believed me and kept the child. As the months went by, my heart was melting. What if a girl is born? Luckily, it was a boy. Now when I see that boy, I remember that I am the reason he exists”.* (a woman, 50, Aparan).

¹¹ <http://hetq.am/arm/news/30981/bakhtagushak-varsiki-khoshtangumneri-entarkvats-harsn-ardarutyun-e-pntrum.html>

Through the Looks of the Pregnant Woman

“Our neighbor was expecting her third child. She went to Yerevan three times, but never managed to get an ultrasound scan. One day in front of her home she meets a fellow villager, who was known for predicting the sex of the child by touching the belly. Without knowing her problem, she puts her hand on the belly and says that it’s a girl. Later she underwent an ultrasound, and again they said it was a girl, so she had an abortion”. (a woman, Gandzak, Ijevan).

Prediction of the child’s sex by the position of the belly and changes in the looks of the pregnant woman has a very long history and tradition. In modern times of course such predictions are not seen as a decisive factor on the road to having a son, but they are actively circulated throughout pregnancy – for entertainment and curiosity reasons. One of the traditional beliefs has it that if the pregnant woman finds a pin, a broom or a shovel, she will have a boy, and if she finds a needle, a sweep or a thimble, she will have a girl¹². Some of these predictions are still viable nowadays. *“I am the first child in our family. When my mother was pregnant with me, my father had found a needle on his way from work. He had brought it home, and his mother had explained that the needle signified a girl. My father then had taken it back to where he had found it, but it obviously didn’t help, and I was born”.* (a 23 years-old woman, Gavar).

Predictions **through the looks and wellness of the pregnant woman, and through the behavior of the fetus** are also commonplace. *“If it moves to the right side, then it’s a boy, if to the left, then it’s a girl”* (N. Bazmaberd, Talin)

“If the child is swimming like a fish, it’s a boy, if it is seated like a frog, it’s a girl”¹³.

“If the pregnant woman’s face is bright, then a boy will be born, and if her face is “dark”, i.e. sad, then a girl will be born”¹⁴.

With the same logic, people in Talin believe that “if the beauty is gone, and ugliness has come to the mother”, then it will be a girl.

“If the mother feels ill during pregnancy, then it’s a girl – she’s tormenting her now, so as not to torment later” (Tavush Province).

¹² Lalayan Y., “Mush-Taron”, 1916, book 26.

¹³ Lalayan Y., “The Province of Gandzak”, 1900, book F.

¹⁴ Lalayan Y., “Mush-Taron”, 1916, book 26.

If the belly was upwards, then a boy was expected.

During the study elder participants recalled that before the introduction of sonographic examination experienced obstetrician-gynecologists determined the sex of the baby by counting the heart rate or examining the position of abdomen.

Nowadays, the technique of thread is being used: a thread is pulled through a ring, then it's kept immobile over the belly of the pregnant woman, and the sex of the fetus is determined by the direction of movement of the thread – round or linear.

Predictions were made also using the traditional New Year cake – if the cake made for the daughter-in-law waved upwards in the oven, then they expected a son to be born into the family¹⁵. Similarly, predictions were made by throwing a dough into the oven – if it bended, a boy was to be expected, and if it remained on the bottom of the oven, a girl would be born (Vayots Dzor, Malishka). In fact, all predictions clearly reflected the cultural preference and high value of a boy over a girl, hence features that were traditionally perceived to be wrong and bad - the left side, ugliness, feeling ill - are associated with birth of a girl, and positive features – with birth of a boy. There were also other forms of predictions, when breast milk was dripped into the water, if it dissolved, the next child would be a girl, and if it retained its form, it would be a boy (Gavar), or the pregnant woman spat on a special insect, if it died, then a boy would be born (Amasia), etc.

Measures to Protect Long-Awaited Boys Through Personal Name

Birth of the first daughters would typically alarm parents, and they would start using different preventive measures. One of the primary methods was to apply a personal name that would prevent the birth of further daughters. For this purpose, girls were often named with words signifying finish or end – Bavakan, Tamam, Verjik, Bolik, Herik(naz), Evel(ina), with the hope to stop unwanted births so that the next child was a boy. Meanwhile, for boys parents chose names indicating a start or a

¹⁵ Ա. Օդաբաշյան, Քրիստոնեական Ամանորի հետ կապված որոշ ծիսական վերապրումներ, ՀՍՍՌ ԳԱ տեղեկագիր, 1965, N3, [http://basss.asj-oa.am/2605/1/1965-3\(91\).pdf](http://basss.asj-oa.am/2605/1/1965-3(91).pdf) ; Հ. Խառատյան, Հայ ժողովրդական տոները, Զանգակ, Եր., 2005; Ռ. Ծատուրյան, Հայոց ավանդական տոնական ուսեստը, Գիտություն, Եր., 2011:

beginning - Avag, Arajin, Andranik, Karapet¹⁶, to indicate that these were the firsts in a row of boys, and the rest were yet to be born¹⁷.

Long-awaited boys were often named after Christian saints and phenomena – Narek, Hovhannes, Gevorg, Avetis, stories about whom are widespread in modern life. “*Our fellow villager has five daughters, they named the 5th Bavakan (means enough), and then a son was born whom they named Narek.*” (Talin, Aragatsotn)

“*My aunt has two daughters, the third child was a boy, they sacrificed a lamb, and named him Avetis (means ‘good news’)*” (Tavush, Ijevan).

“*My uncle had 3 daughters, the fourth was a son. He had gone to St. Hovhannes Chapel and had promised, if a boy is born he will be called by your name. They carried a broom and swept the yard there, as a sacred broom...*” (Shirak Province, Amasia)

Christian-inspired names became widespread in the post-Soviet era, whereas in previous periods long-awaited boys were protected by using Turkish names. “*My uncle’s wife was having babies, but they did not survive, all died. Finally a boy was born, and they decided to sell him to the Turks. They called their close friend, who took the baby into his lap, put his shirt on the baby and named him Hamid*” (Tavush Province, Ijevan).

According to the same beliefs, these evil forces were perceived to be speaking a different language and having a different lifestyle. So in this manner parents and close relatives tried to deceive these powers, as if the babies belonged not to them, but to those whom these forces favored¹⁸. This habit continued until the 1970s, but later, due to developments in healthcare and reduction in infant mortality, it faded away, and finally disappeared after the independence of Armenia. Instead, naming children after Christian saints became commonplace as a means to protect them, particularly boys.

N. Margaryan in his research on the choice of personal names among Armenians brings many examples of how the names associated with

¹⁶ The listed names are epithets of John the Baptist, and were given to children baptized on the day of that saint.

¹⁷ Ն. Մարգարյան, Անձնանվան ընտրությունը արևելահայոց մեջ 19-րդ դարի վերջ-20-րդ դար, 2000թ., Թեկնածուական ատենախոսություն, անտիպ, ԳԱԱ Հնագիտության և ազգագրության ինստիտուտի գրադարան

¹⁸ Ն. Մարգարյան, same work.

preservation, strength, and success are envisaged for boys, and those with a symbolism of fertility and birth of boys are used for girls¹⁹.

Caregiving efforts

The joy of having a boy was often accompanied by the expectation to multiply, or as they used to say in Shirak and Aragatsotn provinces, to double it, a habit widespread even today. Meanwhile, the question of multiplying girls was totally out of discussion. In traditional households, while bathing the child for the first time, the grandmother/nurse in case of a boy left several taps of water in the pot so that the next child would also be a boy, and in case of a girl poured out all the water, so that “just like that water is cut, the girl’s “roots” be cut and no more girl be born”²⁰. No remnants of these rituals have been registered in the course of the study, however the presentation of these rituals is aimed at displaying the roots and history of contemporary perceptions and the resulting contexts.

Misleading the Evil Spirits

Protective measures applied after the birth of a long-awaited son included a variety of promises and sacrifices.

Parents often “promised, vowed” not to cut for seven years the hair of boys who were born “as a result” of pilgrimage to sacred sites, and later the first ritual hair cutting was performed after making a sacrifice at the sacred chapel. The ultimate purpose of this ritual consisted in the protection of the child through making him unrecognizable for the evil, harmful forces. Stories about such rituals were told in Tavush and Shirak provinces, the latest cases of them, however, had been recorded about 7-8 years ago.

Interestingly, there were rituals in the Armenian culture designed to protect the child, particularly in those families where infant mortality was high and few of the children survived, all efforts were directed to protecting children, especially sons from evil forces and diseases: their hair were not cut to make them unrecognizable (no information was provided on protecting girls from evil forces). These measures are based on the assumption that children die prematurely because of some invisible adversary forces, wicked spirits, and evil angels.

¹⁹ For details, see Ն. Մարգարյան, same work.

²⁰ Lalayan Y., “The Province of Nor Bayazet”, 1907, book 16.

These rites were practiced until the 1970s. Later on, with the development of healthcare and decrease of infant mortality, they faded and finally disappeared after the independence of Armenia. Instead, the habit of naming children after Christian saints became widespread as a means to protect particularly boys. The tradition of sacrificing a lamb is still somewhat viable in Armenia, when people visiting sacred sites “promise” to make a sacrifice if or after the request is granted.



STOP 3

Planning and Ordering a Boy

They go to St. Hovhannes, to majic inscription practictioners, to thread counters, and do so many absurd things – they put a wallnut into a glass pot and bury it on top of a hill...

(Gyumri, a gynecologist)

Methods of pre-pregnancy sex selection require sperm sorting, genetic predispositioning in the pre-fertilization stage, or access to complex equipment necessary for artificial fertilization. Nonetheless, cost and access factors limit the use of these technologies in Armenia²¹. However, the information that “genetic analysis” allows to “order” a boy is widely circulated particularly through online platforms. However, these discussions never grow more active because of the lack of information, the high cost and the complicated procededures.

The study showed that middle-aged women and men are more aware of the traditional methods, and to some extent believe in their credibility. Young women and men have heard of such methods, but they no longer use them, preferring to create “their own traditions” - the consumption of commercial offers.

Nowadays, if there are already girls in the family, parents as a rule do not dare have the next child without making calculations.

Different methods of “calculation” are perceived as the most decisive factors in planning a boy. Moreover, calculation practitioners have their own hierarchical ranking – from friends, acquaintances and neighbors who know how to calculate, to experienced and celebrated specialists and services. People dreaming of having a boy voyage through a multilevel process of calculation – they try and combine several pieces of information

²¹ Sex Imbalances at Birth in Armenia: Demographic Evidence and Analysis. http://www.un.am/up/library/Sex%20Imbalance%20report_arm.pdf, page 16:

from the internet and from friends, and when they come to a decision, they apply to the help of more experienced “specialists”.

The study showed that health care providers, midwives, and in some cases even therapists, particularly in the provinces, are also involved in sex-selective calculations, and engage in such practices both voluntarily and for money or a gift.

“I took my pregnant daughter-in law for a medical consultation, the doctor was a friend and said let’s count before registering her, she was already in the third month, and she already had a daughter, let’s see what you will have this time. She asked different questions, they calculate in a professional manner, you see, then she said it would be a boy, and she really gave birth to a boy, though later the ultrasound also confirmed that it was a boy” (a woman, Aparan, village)

Fetus sex calculation services are also available online. A Facebook page called “Sex Calculator” offers its services in helping to have a happy family. In response to questions posted in different groups and forums these services offer reliable and effective methods to calculate the child’s sex – by correlating the age of the couple, the year and month of fertilization, the date of the last period, and other information as needed. In Shirak Province, especially in Gyumri there are also a number of specialists who are perceived to make calculations with high precision.

Apart from provincial calculation experts, there are also those who enjoy a nationwide recognition²². Women pre-register with them and wait for months before getting pregnant. At the same time, even when the calculation service has been paid, the “specialist” does not hold responsibility for results after the woman gets pregnant.

The probability of the birth of a son is calculated through several common methods:

By blood reflux. It is believed that men’s blood is “revitalized” every 4 years. At the time of fertilization the age of the woman should be divided by 3, the the age of the man by 4, the sex of the baby will correspond to the sex of that parent who gets a smaller balance, i.e. who has a “younger blood” at the moment of fertilization. Serious blood loss, such as childbirth, miscarriages, abortion, blood transfusions, also affects the calculations.

²² The names of sex-calculation practitioners are not mentioned to avoid maximizing their popularity. Nevertheless, we believe that there is a need to further target the issue by identifying and showing cases when calculations have failed to produce the desired results.

Chinese and Japanese calendar-based calculations are also widely circulated through online platforms, and if knowledgeable, people can use them without professional guidance. However, as a result of unlimited accessibility, these methods are considered less reliable.

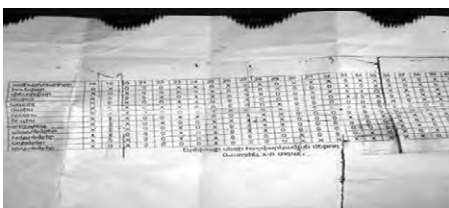
Instead, tables cut out from old Soviet or Russian newspapers (resembling parchment and old writings) enjoy greater credibility, as they are carried out by and between the calculation practitioner, i.e. “the magician” responsible for the ritual, and the believer.

СЕРИУСАИ АСТАИЗУСЦИЧУСЦИ АСТАИЗУСЦИЧУСЦИ АСТАИЗУСЦИЧУСЦИ

Ще изчислите мъжеския или женския възраст на човека, който е роден в дадена година и в даден месец. За да направите това, използвайте следната таблица. Тя е взета от стария руски календар.

Мужески възраст: M (18 до 45), F (46 до 73)

Януари	О	О	Х	Х	О	Х	Х	Х	О	Х	Х	О	Х	Х	О	Х	Х	О	Х	Х	О
Февруари	Х	Х	О	Х	Х	Х	О	Х	Х	Х	Х	О	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	О	Х	Х
Март	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х
Април	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х
Май	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х
Юни	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х
Юли	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х
Август	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х
Септември	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х
Октомври	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х
Ноември	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х
Декември	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х



Не верите — проверте

Мальчик или девочка — решают родители

По этой таблице, в основе которой лежат исследования древних китайских ученых, вы можете вычислить, кто у вас родится — мальчик или девочка. По горизонтали указан возраст женщин от 18 до 45 лет. По вертикали — месяцы зачатия ребенка, М — обозначает мальчика, Д — девочку. Например, если женщине 22 года и ее ребенок зачат в январе (по китайскому лунному календарю), то этот ребенок — девочка.

Таблица проверена на практика и имеет высокую точность с погрешностью 0,1%.

	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45
ЯНВАРЬ	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М
ФЕВРУАРИ	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М
МАРТ	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М
АПРЕЛЬ	М	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д
МАЙ	М	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д
ИЮНЬ	М	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д
ИЮЛЬ	М	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д
АВГУСТ	М	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д
СЕНТЯБРЬ	М	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д
ОКТОБЕРЬ	М	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д
НОЯБРЬ	М	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д
ДЕКАБРЬ	М	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	М	Д	Д	М	Д	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д	М	Д

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
18	се	че	се	че	се	че	се	че	се	че	се	че
19	се	се	че	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
20	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
21	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
22	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
23	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
24	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
25	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
26	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
27	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
28	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
29	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
30	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
31	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
32	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
33	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
34	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
35	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
36	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се
37	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се	се

These images and other similar prints are “boy-calculation tables” which totally contradict to the principles of science and medicine, and are entirely unreasonable, hence they often become a reason for further disappointment, deprivation, and emotional distress. *“My mother-in-law does calculations, she says she has learned it from some fiction book back in her student years”*, says the woman from Gyumri.

Moreover, when there is a need to determine the exact date for “fertilization” or “son-bearing”, calculations often go beyond these simple tables. For several months, starting from the 3rd, the woman has to stay in the “claws” of the calculation practitioner. After determining the desired day of fertilization through menstruation-based calculations, practitioners continue their work for 3-9 months, charging for it initially 20,000 drams, and later 3-5,000 drams per month. The use of these methods leads to limitation of the chronological threshold within which a boy can be expected. *“Well, he calculated for me and said either by the end of this year, or no earlier than 2019”*. *“My cousin practices calculations, she tells you on which day to get pregnant to have a boy. My daughter-in-law and that of my brother-in-law got pregnant as she instructed, and both had boys. My other brother-in-law’s daughter had two girls, she got pregnant again, we called the practitioner, she calculated and said it was a girl, so they did an abortion. She also told them they would have a boy in 2019, because it’s a seasonal thing... later again they had an abortion upon her advice...”* (a woman, Aparan)

These restrictions and the insatiable desire to have a boy gave rise to a new form of reproductive practices. *“I know cases when particularly in Gavar the calculation practitioner indicated the concrete date for getting pregnant. The husband was in Russia, she got a ticket and flew to him, now they have a boy”*. (a woman, Gavar).

These methods and networks of sex calculations could have been ignored have they not been perceived as determinant in deciding whether or not the child will be born. After getting pregnant based on calculations, women do not hurry to get registered in a hospital. They silently wait for 10-12 weeks to have an opportunity to check the result, and only then publicize the fact of their pregnancy. Stories about “erroneous” calculations which eventually add up to the number of unborn girls in Armenia, have been circulating throughout the study, without any regional particularities.

“The sonography doctor said it was a boy, then a girl was born, and they were chasing him, as if they wanted to kill him” (Tavush, Ijevan)

Or,

“My girlfriend is a married to a state official, she has a daughter. This pregnancy... she calculated and said it was a boy, but it turned out to be a girl, and now, well, she will have to have it, but they are going through a lot of stress”. (a woman, Gyumri)



STOP 4

Order Adjustment: To See and Make Sure It Is a Boy

You first go to ...yan's mother who does the calculation for you, then you go ...yan for checkup, you make sure it is a boy, and only then you register with ...yan who is a good gynecologist.

Gyumri, a woman

“That sonography Machine Ruined the Family”

(Aragatsotn, Nerkin Bazmaberd, a man)

Upon getting pregnant after different predictions and fortune-telling practices, women step into the next stage, i.e. confirming the fact of existence of a male fetus through ultrasound scan. In the provinces covered by the study everyone was aware of the method of “checking”, “sonography”, “doing sono”, “doing ultrasound” (Shirak, Aragatsotn), “getting through the machine” (Gegharkunik) as the only reliable mechanism for determining the sex of the fetus.

Ultrasound scan has been added to the range of pregnancy checks since the 1990s. Currently it is widely used and is perceived as a method for determining the sex of the fetus. The elder participants of the study recalled earlier uses of this technology in the capital of the USSR, in Moscow. *“I already had two daughters. I was pregnant with my third child, and I told my husband, let's go to Moscow for examination. It was 1986. But he did not let me, he said, even if you have one hundred daughters, you will eventually bear me a son.”* (Tavush province, Ijevan, village).

Other participants of the study also believe that this was a turning point in the context of the issue under discussion. *“In the past, people traditionally had many children, 6-7 in average, and in the worst case one or two of them would be boys. And now people do not want to have more than two children, so the tension grows, and they want to secure themselves through ultrasound scanning”*. (a man, Aparan).

Middle-aged women who knew and talked about traditional fortune-telling practices for sex-selection, mentioned that these activities in fact did not save the situation, and the sex of the child was becoming known only after the birth.

So, what's the issue when the pregnant woman simply wants to find out the sex of the child? Collected ethnographic data allowed to identify this apparent stop along the “roadmap of having a boy”.

In healthcare it is defined that the sex of the fetus can be detected from 12th to 14th weeks of pregnancy²³. Ultrasound scanning as a method of determining the sex of fetus is reflected in this part of the study only because its undesirable results play a decisive role in decisions related to abortions.

These practices are typical of women who have “ordered” and are expecting a boy. According to gynecologists, however, inquiries about the sex of the child are commonplace even during the first visit and registration. *“Yesterday a pregnant woman came to me, it is her first child, and she asks me, doctor, could you tell me the sex. I tell her, why do you need that, she says, to buy cloths and other things. That same woman, when she learned she was going to have a girl, instantly got frustrated”*. (Gyumri, a gynecologist)

And so, the pregnancy test or the delay in menstrual cycle suggest a possible pregnancy to the woman who impatiently awaits a boy. It is followed by silent and tense months of waiting. *“We have one boy, now we came to find out the sex, our father is waiting in Russia, he wants a boy, you see, every boy needs a brother. I want a girl, but since the father wants...”* (Gyumri).

In order to confirm that they are expecting a boy, pregnant women take an ultrasound scan, or visit celebrated specialists in their provinces or in Yerevan. Moreover, results of checkups by local

²³ Fetal gender assignment by first-trimester ultrasound Z. EFRAT, T. PERRI, E. RAMATI, D. TUGENDREICH and I. MEIZNER, *Ultrasound Obstet Gynecol* 2006; 27: 619–621

specialists are later rechecked one or more times in Yerevan. While ultrasound scanning is a required pregnancy test and is supposed to be free of charge, fetus sex identification is something people willingly pay for, which in case of experienced specialists amounts to 5.000-10.000 drams. Study participants had the perception that disclosure of the sex of fetus implies a separate payment not included in the amount of pregnancy counseling. In the course of the study participants told stories when the ultrasound scan specialist, feeling that disclosing the fact of a female fetus could be fatal, told the parents that the position of the fetus did not allow to see the sex, and suggested to come back in two weeks, with a hope that in case of a later pregnancy parents would be more reluctant to decide in favor of an abortion. *“I did not want a girl, I was in the 14th week of pregnancy, I went for the ultrasound, they said they could not see the sex, and now I understand that they deceived me. My daughter was born. And now from the distance of years I can confidently say that the most sensible thing in my life was having my daughter”*. (Tavush province, a family doctor).

Of course, these stories sometimes have a happy end, but the most ambitious parents, who longs to have a boy, commit persistent efforts and resources and ultimately find the specialist who discloses the sex of the child. *“The doctor of the machine calculated and said it would be a boy, then she twice took the machine test and they said it was a girl, so she had it removed”*. (Gegharkunik, Gavar).

Gaining access to reknowned ultrasound specialists also requires extra time – initial registration, paying a concrete fixed fee, queues, waiting for long periods of time.

“You cannot imagine the awful situation at the ultrasound. There is a well-known specialist in Gyumri, once I went for an examination and saw women waiting for him in the corridors. They were so strained... When their turn came, they crossed themselves before going in. And then when one of them came out and she was told a boy, those in the queue eagerly asked what was she told, and she joyfully said a boyyy, and put her hand on the head of the other women, as a sign of sharing her luck”. (Gyumri, a woman)

In general, particularly in provinces, spouses do not go for ultrasound scan together, the pregnant woman is usually accompanied

by her mother-in-law, sister-in-law, her mother, girl-friend, and other female relatives. In the framework of the study I personally was present at such friendly gynecological visits, and it is clear that this format deprives the physician and the parents of the future child of the chance to jointly discuss and “comprehend” the situation. *“I have an elder sister, when my mother found out that she was pregnant, it was 1993, she went to the doctor of the machine, the latter said it was a girl, and she decided she did not need it. My father came home and saw that my mom was not home, my grandmother told him that my mother with her mom had gone to do an abortion... My dad ran all the way to the hospital, and that is how I was saved. I could have not be born, but why? What had I done to my mother? I still cannot forgive her, when I remember this...”* (Gegharkunik, Gavar)

Doctors say that in exceptional cases when they felt that the female fetus was in danger, they had called and discussed it with the woman’s partner, and in result of explanatory work the pregnancy had continued.

“Last year we told one of our pregnant women that it was a girl (it was the first child). Early the next morning her mother came to the doctor’s door and was asking, tell them some good lie, my girl’s home is in blood, her husband does not want it. Later we talked to them, and the girl was eventually born...” (Gyumri, a gynecologist)

Skilled specialists of ultrasound scanning are famous in Armenia, and there are only a dozen of them. Among them there are the more “mythical” characters who can tell the sex of fetus from the first moments of scanning, and even after visiting other specialists, pregnant women who feel strained strive to get the final convincing information from them. *“That is the god of the Sassoon people, the last word always belongs to him, whoever they go to, eventually he is the one who says the right things”* (Aragatsotn, N. Bazmaber, a man).

Doctors and gynecologists tell different stories when the pregnant woman and her relatives get ill-disposed to them upon learning that they will have a girl. *“I knew these people well, they were intelligent, normal people. Once the woman came with her sister, and learned that it was a girl, and she rudely shut the door in my face and left. I went after her and asked what I had to do with that, what was my fault? Her sister said she was very upset, so she burst out...”*

Undoubtedly, the news about expecting a boy makes parents and relatives extremely generous. *“My husband was in the skies with happiness when the doctor said it was a boy. He gave money to him, and said, when my boy is born, I will visit you again. When the boy was born, he again visited them and gave brandy and chocolate. The doctor was very surprised, and said, I did not expect that you would remember me afterwards”.* (a woman, Gyumri)



LAST STOP

Refining the Wishes – We Need a Boy, Fullstop

What to do, to let the girl live, or not? Parents who long to have a boy, and find out they expect a girl have to face these questions and respective solutions.

Sex-Selective Abortions

It is believed that a concrete situation of son preference can be cited only when a woman who has a daughter has had more abortions than a woman who has a son. Based on these indicators, Armenia is considered a country with strong son preference, because the cultural preference of a son evolved into concrete actions of getting rid of unwanted female fetuses.

Not all pregnancies with girls of course end with an abortion merely because parents are awaiting boys. However, the results of this study combined with results of other studies suggest that the problem exists. Throughout the study stories about abortions following discovery that it was a girl circulated actively.

“There was this pregnant woman, she had two daughters and was expecting her third child. Once she came and said, take me out of registration, I am no longer pregnant, I had an abortion, it was a girl again, and my husband categorically said, we don’t need it, have it removed and only then come to join me in Russia” (Gyumri, a midwife)

Or

“There was a woman from Akhalkalaki, I had been treating her against infertility for three years, then she finally got pregnant, they learned that it was a girl, and interrupted ...” (Gyumri, a gynecologist).

«There was a woman, she interrupted pregnancy in Yerevan in quite a late stage, because her husband had said he would divorce her otherwise». (Aparan, a gynecologist)

In response to public concerns, in 2016 a legislative amendment was initiated and implemented stipulating that sex-selective interruptions of pregnancy during weeks 12 to 22 are prohibited²⁴. Meanwhile, the RA Law on Reproductive Health and Rights to Reproduction states that each woman has the right to interruption of pregnancy (abortion) before week 12²⁵. This timing is determined by considerations of the correlation or proximity of the period of determining the sex of fetus with the period when abortion is allowed, as well as of decreasing the emotional, financial and healthcare risks associated with abortion in earlier stages of pregnancy.

A series of research has been carried out on abortion indices in Armenia²⁶. Discussion of abortions is not the subject of this study. It is addressed here only as the last stop along the “roadmap” of having a son.

In the areas covered by this study artificial interruption of pregnancy is referred to as “removal”. Interviews with study participants and medical personnel allow to state that in public perception there are no strict public morals imposed on sex-selective abortions. *“They are indifferent, they say, so what, it was just a two months pregnancy?”* (an obstetrician, Gyumri).

Women and men discuss sex-selective abortions without any emotional tension, considering it an act of family planning and implementation of one’s right to have a baby of the desired sex. *“Well, people want to have a boy, what can they do, shall they have the baby and then be unable to take*

²⁴ In the course of the study no feedback on this legislative amendment was received from the medical personnel.

²⁵ The RA Law on Reproductive Health and Rights to Reproduction, article 10, provision 2. <http://www.arlis.am/>

²⁶ Առողջություն և առողջապահություն.վիճակագրական տարեգիրք, Երևան, 2016, էջ 130-132 http://old.moh.am/uploadfiles/Health_Health%20Care%20Year%20Book_2015_Arm.pdf; Armenia Demographic and Health Survey: Kew Indicators Report 2015-2016 ; Listening to women’s voices: perceptions & experiences with contraception & abortion in rural Armenia by Ani Jizloyan <http://pqdtopen.proquest.com/doc/1499237987.html?FMT=AI> ; Knowledge, attitudes, and practice of abortion among women and doctors in Armenia Erica Chong, Tamar Tsereteli, Susanna Vardanyan, Gayane Avagyan and Beverly Winikoff, Gynuity Health Projects, New York, USA, Gynuity Health Projects, Tbilisi, Georgia, Women’s Rights Centre, Armenia, and State Medical University, Armenia, The European Journal of Contraception and Reproductive Health Care, October 2009;14(5):340-348 , <http://www.tandfonline.com/sci-hub.cc/doi/full/10.3109/13625180903131348>

care of it, and send it to orphanage?” (Amasia, Shirak province).

Inquiries during the study showed that no expressions of public censure / accusation are applied against women who have had sex-selective abortions, or against their families.

There are two mechanisms of sex-selective abortion: self-conducted abortion and medical abortion. In case of a self-conducted abortion, women receive information from their environment, friends, elder women. Among the areas covered by the study only in Gegharkunik and Shirak provinces the traditional or more “copyright” methods of abortion were still viable, in other provinces participants were aware of the traditional or local methods, but both they and the medical personnel stated that nowadays women are afraid to take the risk, and if it comes of abortion, they seek to have it done under the doctor’s supervision. *“In older times they did all types of things, they put in an aspirin, and did everything else. But now they are afraid to do that”*. (Talin village, an obstetrician, 40 years of experience). The medical personnel emphasizes and highlights the impact of various international and local programs on raising awareness on the problem. *“Now young women are more educated, knowledgeable, they are afraid of the old methods and do not use them. These trainings are also very helpful, we distribute booklets to future mothers, watch movies...”*(Aragatsotn, N. Bazmaber, a family doctor)

However, in the course of the study participants reported about the use of home-based methods of abortion which have been applied to avoid the need to go to a doctor and spend money, and to conceal the fact of pregnancy and get rid of it unnoticed. Not all cases of use of these methods are for sex-selective abortions, of course, however it was decided to include this information in the current part of the study with the expectation to preserve and transfer the registered material, as well as to provide additional information to interested people. At the same time, we believe that in case of introduction of impediments to sex-selective abortions, awareness of such methods will help prevent their use and expansion.

Proofreading 1. Methods of Inducing Miscarriage

And thus, the best known methods among research participants of inducing miscarriage are different tinctures with cognac and pepper, or cognac and aspirin, eating 10 boiled eggs with shells, as well as miscarriage through physical exertion, such as jumping from a height, heavy lifting, rubbing the belly, installing different items, drugs or products in vagina, and other methods that are colorfully summarized in a the description

provided by a gynecologist from Gyumri: *“My patient tells me, dear doctor, I had two beers, an aspirin, then my mother said, your grandma was inserting an egg inside her, so I took the shell off and inserted the egg, then I took a hot bath, I bled slightly... Then we removed that woman’s womb”* (Gyumri, a gynecologist)

The use of cytotec as a common drug was also mentioned among proven methods²⁷, although the participants were already aware that it had become a prescription drug, and purchasing it was already too difficult.

Proofreading 2. Medical Abortion

Inquiries related to sex-selective abortions were the most secretive part of the study. Participants knew that sex-selective abortion are prohibited in Armenia. However, they were familiar with people / practices when sex-selective abortion was performed to remove the unwanted fetus. In this sense, participants found it difficult to present details about this irreversible stop along the “roadmap” of having a boy. The stories usually ended with the phrase *“they had it checked, saw that it was a girl, and went and had it removed.”*

Further inquiries showed that in the areas covered by the study women faced abortion alone, because their husbands as a rule did not accompany them. Instead, as in case of gynecological consultations, they are accompanied by their female relatives or friends: *“well, how can the husband not know about it, he pays for it, though he does not come with her”* (a woman, Gavar). Funding, sometimes also transportation, and the man as a rule gets off the “road”.

Interviews showed that usually sex-selective abortions are not conducted in small regional medical centers, and according to participants, those of the local medical centers which conduct abortions do it secretly, without registration, during evening hours or on weekends, paying doctors 15-30,000 drams and adding additional 10,000 drams for every week exceeding the 12th week. *“Went to Yerevan, had it removed and came back”* was presented as a widespread formula particularly for sex-selective abortions. In some cases medical institutions in Yerevan offer combined services of checking the sex of fetus and performing abortion if the fetus is of undesirable sex. This option is particularly comfortable for pregnant

²⁷ For details see: Listening to women’s voices: perceptions & experiences with contraception & abortion in rural Armenia by Ani Jizloyan <http://pqdtopen.proquest.com/doc/1499237987.html?FMT=AI> or <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/69836>

women from the provinces, because it saves extra time and effort of orienting in a new environment and a new city, and going through the abortion.

Little consideration is given to the physical and psychological state of women after sex-selective abortions, in any case no such concerns have been voiced during the study. How women go through all this, what physical and psychological challenges they face, are questions which need further research and publicity. Women return to ordinary life unwittingly and as soon as possible, and start to wait for the next “real boy”.

Retrospective Outlook: The Boy is a Must, The Girl is a Necessity

Implementation of any study indirectly becomes a participatory tool and a platform offering an opportunity to reflect on the goals and objectives of the research. This study as well. Participants, who could not have possibly had the opportunity to discuss issues of son preference in their routine life, in the course of the study revealed through reflection patterns and trends related to the issue. Especially the medical personnel, who at the start of the study usually expressed an opinion that the issue was exaggerated, was aimed at distracting public attention, infertility indicators were more horrifying than issues related to son preference, by the end of discussions eventually confessed that yes, the issue existed.

At the same time particularly middle-aged participants reassessed their life experiences and voiced the non-rationality of the cultural tradition of son preference.

In the context of high rates of poverty and work emigration among men in the regions participants mentioned that perhaps the sex of the child no longer conditioned the safe life of parents: *“Nowadays the country is in such a situation, that both those who have girls and those how have boys eventually stay alone, everyone is in Russia...”* (Gandzakar)

Or

“I have a daughter, my sister-in-law laughed at us all her life, saying, who will you leave your home to: She had sons. But now, eee, her door is closed and there is a huge lock on it. Everyone is in Russia...” (a woman, Ijevan)

Older parents in need for care particularly highlight the importance of daughters and their caregiving.

“That’s right, burying and placing a gravestone is the responsibility of the son, but now daughters are more responsible than sons. My daughter calls me daily, and asks, have you eaten? While the son may even forget to ask whether we’re alive or dead”. (a woman, Ijevan)

It turns out that the expectations of “guarding the smoke of the house, keeping the door open, giving a glass of water to parents” voiced at the start of the roadmap are reconsidered from the depth of ages and come to be summarized in Mrs. Amalya’s formula: ***“The boy is a must, the girl is a necessity.”***