



Almash and Beyond: Lived Experiences of Daughters Named in Hope of Sons

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Summary

- This qualitative study explores the cultural practice of giving daughters names that express a wish for the next child to be a boy.
- Examples include *Almash* (“swap”), *Burul* (“turn”), *Myrzagyl* (“mister flower”), *Uuljan* (“son’s soul”), and *Uulkelsin* (“let a son arrive”).
- These names reflect explicit gender preferences within families.
- Through in-depth interviews, the study examines how women who grew up with such names understand their identity, family relationships, coping mechanisms, and long-term psychological well-being.

Son preference overview

- Present in many cultures, most pronounced in Asia (Choi & Hwang, 2020; Gupta et al., 2017; Javed & Mughal, 2020; Klasen & Wink, 2002).
- Sen's work on "200 million missing women" (Sen, 2002) shows son preference's large demographic impact.
- Causes include patrilineality, inheritance rules, women's lower social and labour market status, and high dowry.
- Consequence: higher fertility as couples keep having children until a son is born, often disadvantaging girls.
- In extreme contexts with strict birth control, son preference may drive sex-selective abortions, skewing sex ratios.

Son preference in Kyrgyzstan & Central Asia

- Central Asia is not widely known for strong son preference or sex-selective abortion.
- However, there is a clear tendency to continue childbearing until a son is born (Hortaçsu et al., 2001; Kazenin, 2024).
- Kazenin (2023), analyzing DHS 2012 data from Kyrgyzstan, found that the likelihood of having a third or later child rises significantly when previous children are all daughters.

“Son desire” naming in Kyrgyzstan

- Some female names express a family’s wish for a son.
- Examples include: *Almash* (“swap/change”), *Burul* (“turn”), *Janyl* (“get confused”), *Myrzagyl* (“mister flower”), *Aimyrza* (“moony mister”), *Uuljan* (“son soul”), *Bekzat* (“men matter”)
- We identified ≈130 such name variations.
- Some are common (*Burul*, *Janyl*), others rare or less explicit (*Ümüt* – “hope”).
- These names affect an estimated 3–4% of ethnic Kyrgyz women.
- Estimate based on:
 - Open data (e.g., tizme.gov.kg, national voter list)
 - Quantitative surveys (e.g., LiK Study by the authors)

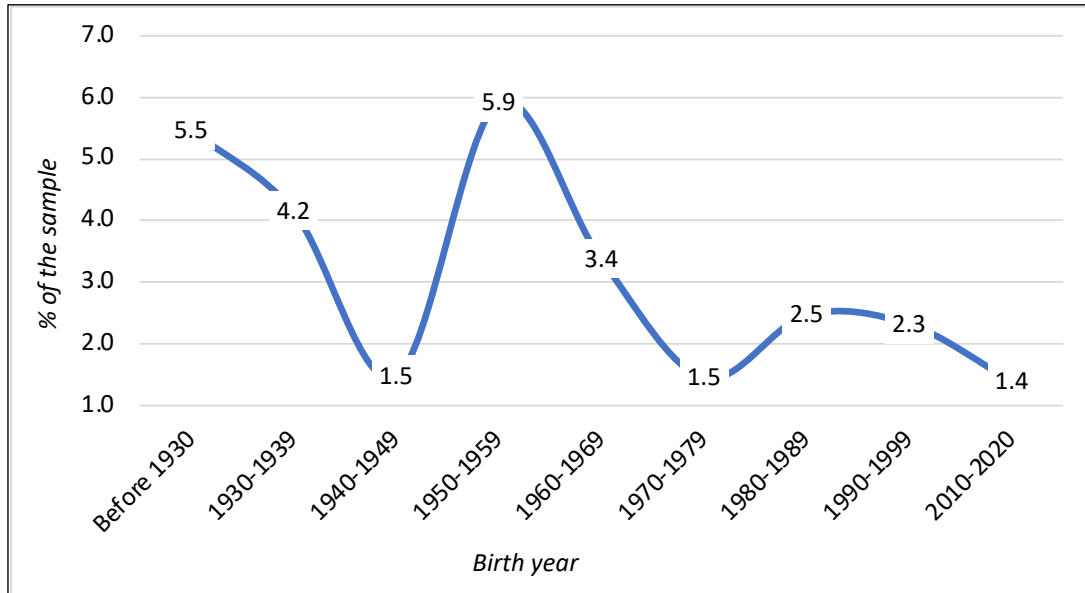
Frequency of son preferred female names

- Estimated at 2.5-3.5% of Kyrgyz female population ...
- .. based on the nationally and regionally conducted surveys

#	Survey title	Survey year(s)	Total individual sample	Female sample	Kyrgyz female sample	Kyrgyz females with son-preferred names	Share, %
	Total		56,774	28,611	21,057	662	3.1
1	Life in Kyrgyzstan	2010–19	20,115	10,404	6,999	229	3.3
2	Social Cohesion baseline survey	2014	11,872	5,793	4,169	144	3.5
3	Social beneficiaries survey	2024	12,674	6,539	5,650	142	2.5

Dynamics of son preferred female names

- Frequency tends to decline over century
- Lowest around World War II
- Highest after WW II



Source: LiK Survey 2010-2019

Research questions and method

Research questions

- What are the underlying meanings and social practices behind gender-biased naming?
- In what ways did parental son preference influence women's self-esteem, identity formation, behavior, and family relationships over time?

Method:

- Qualitative semi-structured interviews with 16 (target 20) respondents carrying such names, found through purposive sampling
- Questions on childhood experiences, the psychological impact of growing up under son-preferential expectations, their coping strategies, and the long-term effects on their lives.

Sample characteristics

- 16 women with such names are interviewed from January to September 2025
- Average age is 41 (min 21, max 73)
- 83% were named so by grandmother or grandfather
- Number of siblings is 6 (min 2, max 11)
- 75% have birth order 3 or higher
- 69% had a brother born after them

Finding 1: Grandparents do the naming

- In 83% of interviews, grandparents were the ones who gave the child's name.
- This reflects a male-child preference held by the older generation, rather than by the parents themselves.
- Elder family members often:
 - Assert their influence in family decisions
 - Express expectations about gender balance
 - Use naming as a symbolic act reinforcing traditional gender preferences

Finding 2: High pressure on mothers

- Social pressure to continue childbearing until a son is born, often from parents-in-law, extended family, community members
- Threats and consequences may include:
 - Poor treatment or neglect
 - Divorce or the husband taking a second wife
- In some regions, a woman's status within the family depends on bearing a son.

Finding 3: Awareness comes at teen age

- Awareness of name meaning emerges around ages 9–10.
- Most respondents did not report negative feelings about their names.
- Some felt discomfort when comparing their names to sisters' more feminine or neutral names.
- When a boy is born after a daughter, the girl may be praised as a "good omen" ("*mai götön kyz*") – the one who "opened the way" for a son.
- However, this affirmation is conditional.

Finding 4: Psychological impacts

- Awareness of name meaning peaks during adolescence.
- Girls may face:
 - Teasing from peers
 - Repeated questions about whether a younger brother was born
 - Subtle judgments about whether they “fulfilled” the hope implied by their name
- Over time, such interactions may become normalized but still cause emotional strain.
- No reports of gender-based treatment in families largely or from fathers
- Some participants reported engaging in activities traditionally associated with boys, such as assisting fathers with outdoor labor, or competed with male peers.

Finding 5: Naming usually starts with #3

- Pattern appears with the 3rd and after daughters.
- Third daughter: tradition often begins, as the absence of a son intensifies the family’s desire for a male child.
- The following daughter’s names may increasingly reflect frustration and become more explicit.
- In our sample, 75% have birth order 3 or higher

6: Son-Preference Names within Broader Cultural Practices

- Naming daughters with son-preference is part of traditional practices aimed at influencing future births.
- Examples of such practices:
 - Borrowing clothing from a newborn boy to attract male energy or luck.
 - Organizing ceremonies (e.g., *tülöö*) to pray or make wishes for a male child.
 - Following specific diets or rituals recommended for fertility or male offspring.

Summary

- Son-preferred naming of daughters is a common cultural practice in Central Asia, though declining in recent decades.
- This study explores the lived experiences of women who carry such names.
- Based on a purposive sample of 16 women, the qualitative research examines:
 - Naming practices
 - Intra-family dynamics
 - Psychological impacts
- The study provides unique evidence of explicit son preference, offering potential for:
 - Future quantitative research on son preference dynamics and fertility patterns
 - Analysis of social and psychological effects on affected women

Thank you!

Suggestions and ideas are welcome!

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