

## Male Attitude towards Son Preference and its Covariates in India

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### Abstract

*Son preference refers to an attitude founded on the belief that girls are inadequate and of lesser value than boys. It is a custom deep-rooted in gender equality and is widespread in most of the societies. The main aim of the study is to examine the men's attitude towards a preference for son. In the present study, men's attitude towards son preference is considered as an outcome variable and, is constructed using a set of statements capturing preference for son. Data were collected from a research project, conducted by ICRW with support from UNFPA in 2013-14 and the study was conducted in seven states in India namely Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Odisha, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The study used Four-point Likert scale to categorize the men's attitude towards preference for son and Bivariate analysis with chi-square test was carried out to observe the association between the men's attitude towards preference for son and factors considered. The study revealed that men belong to lower socio-economic category are at higher risk of exhibiting son preferring attitude compared to men in higher economic category. The study clearly indicates that the impact of education on son preference attitude is significant and still son preference is prevalent in the society.*

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## **Introduction**

Son preference is a custom deep-rooted in gender equality and is widespread in most of the societies. Son preference means a preference for son over daughters; it refers to an attitude that originated from the belief that daughters have lesser value than sons (Clark, 2000). It can be considered as a major form of gender discrimination. In some of the societies, it is considered that the birth of a son enhances the status of the parents, whereas the birth of a daughter lowers their head. As a consequence of this thinking, women have huge pressure to produce sons only. The birth of a girl child is often not welcomed in such families, instead it is usually met with guilt, sadness or even depression from the mother for failing to give birth to a boy and many feel sympathies that the family is incomplete because it lacks a male (Social Conclave, 2018). This type of attitude has been noted by Ras-Work, (2006), through the study of 850 families conducted by Promoting Human Rights Education in Bangladesh, who has reported that 93 percent of Bangladeshi families preferred a son, viewing them as a “blessing” to home and country, while a similar proportion viewed girls as a “problem.”

Literature suggests girls are discriminated against and receive differentially low human capital investments in health or education, and also their legitimate right of access to health, education, and economic opportunities is often neglected (Pande 2003; Lee 2008; Connelly and Zheng 2003; Mishra et al. 2004). Another extreme manifestation of son preference is the practice of sex-selective abortion which has resulted in severe sex-ratio imbalance and increased crime against women in many countries (Jones et al. 2010). Son preference is prevalent in the East and South Asian Societies (Chan and Yeoh, 2002; Westley and Choe, 2007) particularly in India it is highly prevalent, where families have an explicit preference for son over daughters (Pande and Aston, 2007) and have been frequently cited as one of the major barriers in reducing the national fertility levels (Rajaretnam and Deshpande, 1994). The recent economic survey suggests India could have ‘21 million unwanted girls’ as a result of son preference. Data from census of

India of past 100 years has shown a marked difference between number of girls vs boys and men vs women. Starting from 1901 to 2001 the population sex ratio (expressed in Indian census as number of women per 1000 men) in census have shown more or less continuous decline, from 972 females per 1000 males in 1901 to 933 females per 1000 males in 2001 (Banthia, 2001). The last census of 2011 though indicates a slight reverse in trend and sex ratio becoming somewhat less masculine as it increased from 933 in 2001 to 943 in 2011.

Majority of parents expects sons but not daughters due to primary believes that sons provide financial and emotional care, especially in their old age; sons add to family wealth and property while daughters take it away in the form of dowry; sons continue the family lineage while daughters gets married and move to another household; sons perform important religious roles; and sons protect or exercise the family's power while daughters have to be protected, creating a perceived burden on the household (Das Gupta et al. 2003;Pande and Malhotra, 2006).Numerous studies have been done on the causes and consequences of son preference in India, but few have contributed to the literature by focusing on son preference as an outcome. The indicators used in most of the studies have universally shown their dependence on the sex composition of living children (Singh et al., 2015).

The attitude towards son preference is measured differently in different studies, various attitudinal and behavioural indicators are used for measuring son preference. Among the attitudinal measures used one of the measures is by asking people sex composition of the ideal family, when the response is in favour of more son's then we conclude that there is an acknowledged son preference. This type of measure or preference for son is also termed as "latent son preference". Various studies have used it and gathered information by asking what is the preferred number and composition of the children without focusing on whether or not such preference results in any typical behaviour (Brockmann 2001; Lavelly, Li and Li., 2001, Hank and Kohler 2000, Fuse 2010).

Another indirect method of measuring son preference is testing fertility preferences between families with and without sons, it is based on the assumption that there is no pre-existing difference between both the families i.e. with no sons and with one or more sons.

In the present study, men's attitude towards son preference is considered as an outcome variable and, is constructed using a set of statements capturing preference for son. Conceptualizing that an individual's son preference attitude emerges from a complex process that is influenced by factors at different levels has been explored.

### **Data and Methodology**

This study uses data of a research project, conducted by International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) with support from UNFPA in 2013-14, entitled "Masculinity, Intimate Partner Violence and Son Preference in India Study" (Nanda et al., 2014). The study was conducted in seven states in India namely, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana, Odisha, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. These states are reasonably large-sized states in the country in terms of both population and geographical spread. The study was designed to gather information from men about their attitude towards a preference for son. This is the first-ever study of its kind to be carried out in India on such a large scale. The sample was divided into 60:40 ratio in rural and urban areas and multistage sampling approach was adopted for the selection of the Primary Sampling Units (PSUs). In rural areas, PSUs were villages and in urban areas, these were Census Enumeration Blocks (CEBs). A total sample of 6,081 currently married men aged 18-49 years was considered in this study.

Here in this study, we have considered six statements to measure attitude toward son preference, which are given below:

1. Fathering a male child shows you are real man
2. A couple who has only a female child is unfortunate

3. It is important to have a son to take care of you in your old age
4. It is important to have a son to carry on the lineage or family name
5. If a wife does not have son, her husband has good reason to leave her or divorce her
6. A couple has good reason to put a female child for adoption

The responses to these statements were collected on a four-point Likert scale with categories as strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. The response to all the statements were summed and summative score was generated which ranged from 6 to 24. The summative score was divided in three categories, the lowest category were of those who had high preference for son, middle category was of those who exhibit moderate preference and highest category were of those who had lowest preference for son. Following the past research, evidence available from the literature and our question of interest we considered exploratory variables as Place of residence, Religion and caste, Socio-economic status, Witnessing discrimination against girls/sisters in the childhood, Age and education of the respondent, Current controlling behaviour (i.e. relationship with his current partner). Bivariate analysis with chi-square test was carried out to observe the association and test the significance of the association between the men's attitude towards preference for son and factors considered. In order to measure the strength of association between the outcome and predictors, multinomial logistic regression analysis has been used.

### **Results and Conclusion**

Table 1 presents the bivariate distribution of men's son preferring attitude by different level of predictor variables. Out of 6,081 married men about 40 percent of the men exhibited high son preferring attitude and about 30 percent had a moderate son preferring attitude. By place of residence, the results show that 42 percent of the men residing in rural areas have high son preferring attitude while in urban area this attitude is exhibited by 35 percent of the men. In both places the proportion of men exhibiting moderate son

preferring attitude is almost the same. Men belonging to scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, other backward class have higher son preferring attitude. About 47 percent of the men belonging to scheduled tribe and 40 percent of the men from scheduled caste and similar proportion belonging to other backward or extreme backward class had high son preferring attitude while among those who belong to none of the above three caste categories exhibit 36 percent high son preference attitude. Similarly, by religion the results depict that 47 percent of the men following Muslim religion exhibit high son preferring attitude, while among Hindu's less than 40 percent had high son preferring attitude. It is evident from the bivariate results that son preferring attitude is high among men following Muslim religion and is followed by Hindu's, while it is minimum among those who follow other religions. As far as socioeconomic status is considered, the results of association are as expected i.e. 40 percent men belonging to higher economic strata exhibited a low preference for son and only 30 percent men had high son preferring attitude. While among those men who are from lower economic strata 46 percent had a high preference for son and only little more than a fourth exhibit low son preferring attitude.

Men who have witnessed discrimination against girls/sisters in their household during their childhood exhibit higher son preferring attitude in the current time. The bivariate results clearly indicated that more than half of the men who have often witnessed discrimination against girls/sisters possess high son preferring attitude, while among those who have never witnessed such discrimination a little more than one-fourth exhibit the high son preferring attitude. Age of respondents has no significant difference in the son preferring attitudes. Around 40 percent of the men in the age groups, 18-24 years, 25 – 34 years and 35 years and above, had high son preferring attitude and around one-third or slightly less than a third exhibit low son preferring attitude across the three age categories but education of the men did show a significant relationship, 48 percent of the illiterate men had high son preferring attitudes and among those who had graduation or higher degree similar proportion exhibit low son preferring attitude. It is evident

from the table that as the level of education increases the proportion of men with high son preferring attitude decreases and increases in the counter category i.e. the proportion of men with low son preferring attitude. The data also depicts that men who possess controlling behaviour in the relationship have high son preferring attitude, among the men who have high controlling behaviour 55 percent possess high son preferring attitude while among those who have low controlling behaviour, 26 percent showed high son preferring attitude.

Table 2 reveals that the output from the univariate multinomial logistic regression, comparing low son preferring attitude with high, low with moderate and moderate with high son preferring attitude. All the variables considered here for the analysis are significant except the age of the respondent when we compare low son preferring attitude with high son preferring attitude, however, place of residence, caste and age of respondent are insignificant when we comparing low son preference attitude with moderate son preference attitude. In comparison of moderate with high son preference attitude only one covariate such as current controlling behaviour in relationship is appear as a significant factor. The likelihood for high son preference attitude in urban men is 40 percent significantly higher than the rural men in comparison of low son preference attitude. The chance of high son preference attitude than moderate is 24 percent significantly more for urban men than rural men. Similarly, the risk is high for Muslim men and Hindu men as compared to men of other religion and among caste categories. Hindu men are 40 percent more likely and Muslim men are 2.25 times more likely to have high son preference attitude in comparison of low son preference than men from other religion. Almost same result has been obtained for low Vs moderate son preference for Hindu and Muslims against other religion, but in moderate Vs high category there is no significant difference. Men from ST caste shows about 1.5 times significantly more high son preference attitude than other castes in two categories i.e. low Vs high and moderate Vs high. Socio economic status plays an important role in son preference attitude. Men from low and moderate socio economic status are

more likely to have high son preference attitude than other comparison group. Those who are witnessing discrimination against girls in their childhood are more prone to have significantly higher son preference attitude than the other comparison group. There is no significant role of age of respondent in son preference attitude. The impact of education on son preference attitude is significant. Those who are less educated or illiterate are more intended towards high son preference significantly than low or moderate son preference attitude. Men who have high controlling behaviour in current relationship have relative risk about five and times those who have moderate controlling behaviour the relative risk is 2.25 times significantly higher against those who have low controlling behaviour in the low Vs high son preference category. Similarly pattern has been observed in other categories such as low Vs moderate and moderate Vs high.

In this study 40 percent men reported about high son preference attitude however, Vadera et al. (2007) reported 58.5 percent and Puri et al. (2007) reported 57.8 percent that the women exhibit high son preferring attitude which is considerably higher than the estimate of this study. A similar study on gender preference and associated factors conducted by Bhattacharya (2014) in the north-eastern states of India detected son preference to be 40.8 percent higher than the daughter preference. The Hindu mythology and beliefs that a son can only take the family name, lineage forward and is required to perform the last rituals after the death of the parents (Vlassof, 1990) may be the reason for the higher son preference attitude.

The recent economic survey (2017-18) suggests that Indian parents continue to have children until they have the desired number of sons (Economic Survey, MoF, GoI, 2018). The results in the current study also shows that men who belong to lower socio-economic category are at higher risk of exhibiting son preferring attitude compared to men in higher economic category. Similar pattern has been observed in all the three rounds of National Family Health Surveys where desire of more children with preference for son's is higher among those with poor wealth index (Tripathi et al. 2012).

The present study clearly indicates that still son preference is prevalent in the society thus government should instigate some program to decrease gender discrimination at least in son and daughter.

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**Table 1: Son Preferring Attitude by Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Men**

Variables	N	Son Preferring Attitude			Chi-Sq. Significance
		High	Moderate	Low	
<b>Place of Residence</b>					
Rural	3721	42.2	29.1	28.7	0.000
Urban	2390	35.6	30.4	34.0	
<b>Religion</b>					
Hindu	5121	38.9	29.6	31.4	0.000
Muslim	542	46.6	30.5	22.9	
Others	418	34.6	26.9	38.5	
<b>Caste</b>					
Scheduled Caste	1301	40.3	30.7	29.0	0.001
Scheduled Tribe	635	47.0	24.7	28.3	
Other/Extremely Backward Caste	2522	39.7	29.5	30.8	
None of the Above	1623	36.6	30.4	33.0	
<b>Socio-Economic Status</b>					
High	1822	31.3	28.4	40.3	0.000
Moderate	1967	39.7	32.8	27.5	
Low	2292	45.9	27.4	26.6	
<b>Witnessing Discrimination against Girls/Sisters during Childhood</b>					
Never	1948	27.2	29.0	43.8	0.000
Sometime	2168	37.0	35.4	29.0	
Often	1965	52.7	23.4	27.2	
<b>Age of Respondent</b>					
18-24 years	525	39.0	28.0	33.0	0.465
25-34 years	2244	38.6	30.4	31.0	
35years and above	3312	40.5	29.3	30.3	

**Education of Respondent**

Illiterate	926	47.1	29.9	23.0	0.000
1-8	2216	40.2	30.0	29.8	
9-12	2190	39.0	29.8	31.3	
Graduate and above	749	30.0	27.5	42.5	

**Controlling Behaviour in Current Relationship**

High	2087	55.1	24.9	27.4	0.000
Moderate	2173	34.2	38.4	20.0	
Low	1821	26.6	25.4	48.0	
<b>Total</b>	<b>6081</b>	<b>39.6</b>	<b>29.6</b>	<b>30.8</b>	

**Table 2. Estimates of Unadjusted Multinomial Logistic Regression for Son Preference Attitude**

Background Characteristics	Relative Risk Ratio		
	Low Vs High (95 percent CI)	Low Vs Moderate (95 percent CI)	Moderate Vs High (95 percent CI)
<b>Place of Residence</b>			
Rural	-	-	-
Urban	1.40** (1.24-1.58)	1.12 (0.99-1.28)	1.24** (1.09-1.41)
<b>Religion</b>			
Others	-	-	-
Hindu	1.37* (1.05-1.77)	1.35* (1.02-1.78)	1.01 (0.76-1.35)
Muslim	2.25** (1.65-3.06)	1.91** (1.36-2.66)	1.17 (0.85-1.63)
<b>Caste</b>			
None of them	-	-	-
SC	1.25* (1.05-1.49)	1.14 (0.95-1.37)	1.09 (0.92-1.31)
ST	1.50** (1.19-1.88)	0.95 (0.73-1.22)	1.58** (1.25-2.00)
OBC/EBC	1.16* (1.01-1.34)	1.04 (0.89-1.21)	1.12 (0.96-1.29)

**Socio-Economic Status**

High	-	-	-
Moderate	1.85** (1.59-2.16)	1.68** (1.44-1.97)	1.10 (0.94-1.28)
Low	2.21** (1.91-2.58)	1.46** (1.24-1.71)	1.52** (1.30-1.78)

**Witnessing Discrimination against Girls/Sisters during Childhood**

Never	-	-	-
Sometime	2.17** (1.86-2.53)	1.94** (1.67-2.25)	1.12 (0.95-1.31)
Often	3.56** (3.04-4.16)	1.48** (1.25-1.75)	2.41** (2.04-2.84)

**Age of Respondent**

18-24 years	-	-	-
25-34 years	1.05 (0.85-1.32)	1.15 (0.91-1.46)	0.91 (0.73-1.14)
35 years and above	1.13 (0.92-1.40)	1.14 (0.91-1.44)	0.99 (0.79-1.24)

**Education of Respondent**

Illiterate	2.90** (2.29-3.67)	2.01* (1.56-2.56)	1.45** (1.13-1.84)
1-8	1.91** (1.56-2.33)	1.55** (1.25-1.91)	1.23 (0.99-1.53)
9-12	1.76** (1.45-2.14)	1.46** (1.19-1.79)	1.20 (0.97-1.49)
Grad or above	-	-	-

**Current Controlling Behaviour in Relationship**

Low	-	-	-
Moderate	2.25** (1.93-2.63)	2.64** (2.26-3.08)	0.85* (0.72-1.00)
High	4.98** (4.27-5.82)	2.35** (1.99-2.78)	2.12** (1.80-2.48)

Note: \*\*p<0.01; \*p<0.05

