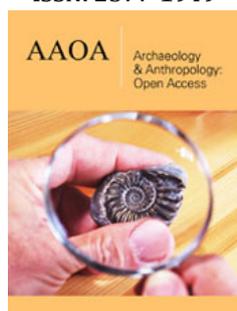


Masculinity, Violence & Son Preference in India

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ISSN: 2577-1949



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Submission:  July 02, 2019

Published:  July 09, 2019

Volume 3 - Issue 4

How to cite this article: Pradeep Kumar Panda. Masculinity, Violence & Son Preference in India. Open AccessArch & Anthropol Open Acc.

DOI: [10.31031/AAOA.2019.03.000584](https://doi.org/10.31031/AAOA.2019.03.000584)

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Opinion

The past two decades have witnessed increasing interest in engaging men and boys to ensure their role in achieving gender equality (SDG 5). Notably, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and later, the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, marked turning points in the manner in which men and masculinities were conceived and situated within the discourse of women's empowerment and gender equality.

Previously, men and boys were often seen as part of the problem and obstacles to women's struggle for equality; they were rarely identified as an essential part of the solution. Over the years, however, in-depth research on gender, power and masculinity and various programmatic efforts to engage men made it abundantly clear that men and boys must be an integral part of efforts to promote gender equality. This is especially relevant in India, where caste, class and linguistic ethnicity have tremendous influence on how men construct their sense of masculinity and define what it means to be a "real man" or what is expected of them. Recent research suggests that men's attitudes and more broadly, masculinity, perpetuate son preference and to some extent, intimate partner violence in India.

A study conducted by ICRW in collaboration with UNFPA, attempts to understand more deeply understand masculinity's intrinsic relationship with son preference and intimate partner violence in seven Indian states. Primary objective was to assess the dimensions and determinants of men's knowledge, attitudes and behavior on issues related to gender equality, son preference and intimate partner violence. Men and women's behavior and attitudes were explored to offer a comparative understanding and insights for gender differentiated policies and programs to address gender equity. How women internalize male dominance and control in their lives and its effect on their own attitudes towards gender inequality and son preference were important aspects of this study. The study also offers a better understanding of women's internalization of societal norms of masculinity. For this research, a total of 9,205 men and 3,158 women, aged 18-49 in the following seven states across India: Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana (counted as one, since they are contiguous states with cultural overlap), Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra were surveyed.

Overall, study found that economically better off, educated men who grew up in families where they saw parents making decisions jointly, were less likely to be violent and have a preference for sons. The data that emerged from the study puts a spotlight on the high prevalence of intimate partner violence in India, with 52% of the women surveyed reporting that they had experienced some form of violence during their lifetime; and 60% of men said that they had acted violently against their wife/partner at some point in their lives. According to the study, men who did exert control through violence were diverse in age, educational status, place of residence and caste status. Educated men and women who were 35 years old or more were less likely to perpetrate or experience violence.

Regardless of age, men who experience economic stress were more likely to have perpetrated violence ever or in the past 12 months. This may be because of norms related to masculinity, which reinforce the expectation that men are primary economic providers for their households. Economic stress can therefore threaten men's belief in their own abilities and may lead them to be more controlling of and violent towards their partners. With increasing education and wealth status, we also found that men were less likely to exercise control over their partners and more likely to respect equitable norms.

Men who had graduated from higher secondary schooling or above were two and a half times more likely to hold equitable traits, and men who fell in the highest wealth tertiles were twice as likely to be less rigid. Education certainly provides a higher level of exposure to new gender norms and educated men may be more likely to have educated spouses. Education and economic status may also create less pressure for men to conform to dominant societal expectations to behave in a rigidly masculine manner. If the spouse is educated, then she may likely have more autonomy and will be more resistant to her husband's control over her. In terms of preference for sons over daughters, an overwhelming majority of men and women considered it very important to have at least one son in their family.

Of those who expressed a preference for more sons or daughters, almost four times as many desired more sons than daughters. Men and women who wanted more sons were typically older, less literate, poorer and more likely to live in a rural setting. The research showed that economic status played a very significant role in determining men's preference for sons, as men with higher economic status were only half as likely to have a high preference compared to poorer men. Men's past experiences in childhood also had a significant impact on their adult "masculine" behavior, such as preferring sons over daughters. Men with rigid masculinity and women experiencing rigid masculine control showed a significantly greater desire for sons than those with more moderate or equitable masculinity.

The study findings emphasize that in India, masculinity, i.e., men's controlling behavior and gender inequitable attitudes, strongly determines men's preference for sons over daughters as well as their proclivity for violence towards an intimate partner – both of which are manifestations of gender inequality. Masculine control in women's lives affects their own experiences of intimate partner violence and preference for sons. To ultimately eliminate son preference and intimate partner violence in India, it is critical to develop and implement national policies and programs that involve men in promoting gender equity and diminishing socio-cultural and religious practices that reinforce gender discrimination.

Within the policy framework, there is a need for new mandates to explicitly recognize gender equality as an integral part of social justice and hold men accountable for engendering social change. At the programmatic level, we must create initiatives that promote dialogue between men and women to challenge intimate partner violence as an acceptable expression of masculinity. Efforts must also be made to engage with men to participate in peer-to-peer learning, which can help reduce the perpetration of various forms of traditional masculinity and resulting behaviors, such as violence against women. Such interventions need to create a mass base of change agents at the community level that understand the contextual realities of working with men and challenge deep-seated patriarchal attitudes and practices through a process of reflective learning, dialogue and action.

The findings underscore that childhood experiences of discrimination have a strong bearing on adult men and women's attitudes and behavior with regard to masculinity and control. Working on changing norms of gender equality during childhood is critical. The study results illustrated that education for both men and women appear to reduce the prevalence of intimate partner violence. Therefore, enhancing access to quality education and school completion should continue to be top national priorities. And within school settings, it is imperative to carry out reflective learning programs on gender equality to reach young boys early in their lives.

It is also important that school curricula incorporate knowledge on larger societal issues, including relevant laws protecting the rights of women and girls. Creating national and state-specific public educational campaigns that focus on redefining men and women's roles in the family also should be strongly considered.

Campaign messages must recast norms around what it means to be "a real man" and discourage intimate partner violence as well as attitudes that support gender inequality. Finally, in every effort aimed at eliminating son preference and intimate partner violence, it is essential to bring men and women together in a strategic manner, across different programs and sectors to create spaces where traditional gender roles are confronted and challenged.

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