



Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode

Working Paper

IIMK/WPS/373/ECO/2020/03

March 2020

Son Preference in India: Is it a Cultural Bequest?

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Abstract: *According to the literature, son preference is more prevalent in South Asian countries like India. The son preference has led to skewed sex ratio and thus “missing” women in India (GOI, 2018). But as per the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data indicates that the share of the daughters only families has increased from 5.15% to 6.65% from NFHS-1 to NFHS -3. This daughters-only family is more predominant in the southern states of India. In this context, this paper examines whether education and having a paid job has reduced the son preference. Pretested, semi-structured questionnaire-based in-depth interviews were conducted among 300 married women aged between 22 to 55 years in the Indian state of Kerala. As against the general notion that dowry is the root cause for gender discrimination this study finds that the main reason is the perception that boys belong to the family and girls belong to some other family. Chronologically the other factors that contribute son meta-preference are (i) sons take care of parents (ii) bringing up boys is easier than girls (iii) dowry (iv) son maintain family name (v) don't want to see daughter's suffering and (vi) pressure from husband's parents. The working women have less preference towards son in comparison with non-working women irrespective of the educational qualification. The main factor that supports the son preference for nonworking women is the lack of financial freedom, dowry issues, and suffering. This study thus emphasizes the need for financial earnings and a job outside the house and the abolishment of patrilocality as these factors are more important than the educational qualification.*

Keywords: Son preference, discrimination, education, employment, dowry, violence

1. Introduction

According to a poll of global experts, India is considered the world's most dangerous country for women due to the high risk of sexual violence and slave labour (The Guardian, 2018). In terms of the Gender Inequality Index, India ranked 127 out of 189 countries (UNDP's Human Development Report 2018). India's gender gap has widened in the last decade after a sharp increase in female foeticide due to son-preferences as it is evident in terms of child sex ratio (CSR) of 914 girls for every 1,000 males, as of 2011 (Chandramouli and General 2011). Out of 189 countries, China and India have the lowest female to male ratio at birth (UNDP, 2019). Scientifically, women would outnumber men if given similar care because women are hardier than men and, given similar care, survive better at all ages-including in utero (Waldron 1983). The comparison of the Census of India data, 2001 and 2011 reveals that the infant and CSR (between age 0 to 7) performed worse than the sex ratio for the older age group (7 and above). The decline in CSR is sharper than the decline in the sex ratio of the

total population. It therefore, follows that India's gender gap has widened in the last decade after a sharp increase in female foeticide due to son-preferences. Strong son preference, the availability of advanced medical technology for detection of the sex of the foetus, along with facilities for its elimination in case it is unwanted, has created disaster. The expression of son preference has become increasingly visible as fertility drops.

Indian's are now more concerned about the family size and balanced sex compositions, on average, parents want to have two children. This is an outcome of development as parents want to provide better care to their children. Among those who want two children, the majority (78%) wants one boy and a girl, so in this scenario measured son preference is biased downward (Jayachandran, 2017a). For instance, Punjab is, by most accounts, a bastion of son preference; its sex ratio is among the most skewed in India. But with the standard son preference measure, Punjab looks better than Manipur, a Northeastern state generally viewed as having low son bias in India¹.

Now that small families have become the norm, son preference is practised blatantly, resulting in a decline in the number of girls in the population (Radkar 2018). According to GOI (2018), sex-selective abortion and differential survival has led to skewed sex ratios at birth and beyond, leading to estimates of 63 million “missing” women as of 2014. Indian society appears to want fewer girls to be born thus development is not proving to be a remedy to son preference. But the largest number of daughters-only families across the three surveys comes from South India (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh). Karnataka and Tripura are recent additions to this group. The number of families having a single-girl child has increased over time especially in Tamil Nadu, a southern state in India. According to the Sex Ratio of Last Child (SRLC) index, it looks impressive because one girl child implies no son

¹ Indian states like Punjab and Haryana exhibit extremely high son preference and meta preference – the overall sex ratios are significantly above the biological benchmark, and the sex ratio of the last child is heavily male skewed, implying parents are unlikely to stop after having a daughter. North-Eastern states exhibit the weakest son preference (GOI 2018). This implies there is no direct correlation between high economic growth and gender equity.

preference. But there are mainly two reasons for this trend: (i) government policies and incentives that support the family with one-girl child and (ii) sex-selective abortions of girl child in local clinics if the second child is also a girl (Jayachandran, 2017b). In this context this study attempts to examine the son preference trend in Kerala.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 presents a summary of the literature with a focus on the evidence of son preference in India. Section 3 discusses the objectives and data of the study. Section 4 provides the results from the field survey on the basis of the questionnaire provided to the sample population. Section 5 concludes the policy implications of this study.

2. Literature review

The consequences of son preference are not a one time phenomenon its impact spread across life from birth to death. Several studies have confirmed the presence of son preference in the family decisions and linked it with the level of discrimination at various stages of life of a girl by denying the (i) *opportunity to be in the mother's womb*: Families' decision to have an additional child or use of contraception depends on the sex composition of the children already born. This may have relatively little impact on the overall sex ratio of the population since families with no sons will tend to have several daughters (Dyson and Moore 1983; Mason 1986; Malhotra et al. 1995, Arnold et al 1998; Mason and Smith 2000; Presser and Sen 2000; Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001; Pande and Astone 2007, Deshpande and Apoorva 2019) (ii) *opportunity to born*: families through sex-selective abortion won't allow the girl child to be born and thus leads to missing women (Das Gupta and Bhat 1997; Arnold et al 1998; Deshpande and Apoorva 2019); (iii) *opportunity to be an infant and child*: families through sex-selective infanticide and through neglect and other mechanisms in terms of food allocation, prevention of diseases, treatment of sick children, etc., leads to higher mortality of girls than boys during infancy and early childhood (Arnold et.al 1998; Das et.al 2003, Mishra et.al 2004) (iv) *opportunity to live a dignified life*: Due to parents' discrimination,

girls end up having less quality education and health care which affects the quality and life span of girls (Deshpande & Gupta 2019; UNDP 2019). Around 35 to 75 percent of women in India face verbal, physical, or sexual violence from their partners or other men are known to them. This type of discrimination exist all over the world in different forms and intensity. According to the World Health Organization, one in three women has been beaten, coerced into sex or abused. Gender-based violence is one of the most common human rights abuses in the world. It's also the most obvious and aggressive way men try to control women- whether its rape as a tool of war, or a husband beating his wife, or men in workplaces using sexual violence or bullying to belittle women who are getting power (Gates 2019).

There are studies that examine the reasons for son preference. In India, the main reason for the preference against girl child is the need to pay dowry payments to get a suitable husband for their daughters (Anderson, 2003; Das et.al, 2003). Jayachandran (2015)² and Dyson & Moore (1983) and the son preference at the state level in India. The son preference is found to be stronger in northern Indian states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh in comparison to southern Indian states like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu (Arnold et.al 1998; GOI 2018). Similarly, there are studies that examine who has more son preference among women and men (Husain, Ghosh, & Dutta 2013). Deshpande & Apoorva, 2019 in their study analysed the NSSO survey data and reported that strong son preference that results in Sex Selective Abortion (SSA) is more prevalent in richer, urban families than the poorer families .

According to Sen (1992) the ability to earn income through paid employment enhance the social standing of a woman. Insofar as the author of this paper are aware, no study has examined the son preference on the basis of education and employment in India. Thus this

²Jayachandran (2015) lists a number of cultural factors that causes gender inequality in developing countries such as patrilocality (women having to move to husbands' houses after marriage), patrilineality (property passing on to sons rather than daughters), dowry (which leads to extra costs of having girls), old age support from sons and rituals performed by sons.

study adds to this limited literature by examining for the first time the son preference of women on the basis of education and employment.

3. Objectives and data of the study

Even though in NFHS-3 in comparison to NFHS-2 the intensity of son preference among women declined in all subgroups of the population in India, still the missing women numbers are alarming (GOI 2018). We all know the harm son preference or meta-preference causes and to fight it, law alone won't work. Instead of just working to undo the female foeticide, we should find the source of the disfavour and try to stop it from its origin. Within India, the women in southern states enjoy relatively more freedom and social status than women in northern states (Dyson & Moore 1983). Though it is difficult to overturn deep-rooted son preference, India is making progress in terms of reversing the decline in the number of females (Sharma & Haub 2008). Among the states in India, the southern Kerala state ranked the top in Human Development Index. With respect to other indicators, Kerala has the most developed school education system in India, which dates from the early nineteenth century, with strongly supportive state policies in the "native kingdoms" of Travancore and Cochin (Sen 1992). As per the report of Niti Aayog, a government think tank, Kerala ranked first on School Education Quality Index 2019 and it has a 100 percent literacy rate. With respect to health, Kerala has the highest overall life expectancy at birth, 72 for men and 77.8 for women. The sex ratio of Kerala, a demographically advanced state, has been consistently improving since 1990. According to the Census of India 2011, the female-male ratio of the Kerala population is 1.12 which is above the world ratio or it is on par with highly developed nations. Kerala, do not seem to practice sex-selective abortions (since their sex ratios at birth are close to the biological benchmark) but indicate some skewed sex ratio of the last child (SRLC) (GOI 2018). SRLC is the indicator that potentially gets son "meta" preference. A son

“meta” preference³ – even though it does not lead to sex-selective abortion – may nevertheless be detrimental to female children because it may lead to fewer resources devoted to them (Jayachandran & Pande 2017).

In this context, this paper examines (i) the preference for son by classifying the sample population on the basis of employment and education; (ii) the reasons for preference or neutrality on the basis of classification (iii) to validate the root causes that mentioned in the literature that facilitate the son preference/meta preference for son and (iv) to understand whether education and employment helped to diminish the discrimination. The study is conducted using a pretested, semi-structured questionnaire-based survey among 300 married women aged between 22 to 55 years in the Indian state of Kerala. The study is conducted between September 2018 and June 2019 among 300 married working and nonworking women aged between 22 to 55 years from Kozhikode⁴ city, Kerala. In-depth interviews were conducted by trained female investigators among the women who were not having graduation as their educational qualification. The number of participants in various categories is given in Table 1. To the graduates and professionals, the questionnaire is distributed and instructed them to fill in isolation and to other categories, the investigators themselves filled the survey by conducting interviews. Interviews have advantages as a method in that they encourage study participants to reflect on their personal thoughts and viewpoints (Anastas 1988) and to avoid the social desirability bias.⁵

4. Estimates of son preferences

Seventy-four percent of the 300 sample size have only two children irrespective of their educational qualification and financial earnings. Only 6 percent have more than two children. Thus in Kerala couples give more importance to family size than its sex composition. This

³ Parents may choose to keep having children until they get the desired number of sons. This is called son “meta” preference (GOI 2018).

⁴ Kozhikode is a medium-sized coastal city and one of the main commercial centers of Kerala.

can be attributed to development or the attitudinal changes that happen due to changes in development as it is evident from the reasons they reported (Table 1). The main reason why they have limited to two children is that women in Kerala are conscious about their health and the age gap between children. Secondly, especially for the less educated working women, the reason is financial constraints. Even though financial constraint is more of an issue among less-educated non-working for many of them it is not an issue because their aspirations about the children are very limited. But as working women are more exposed to the opportunities and advantages of education they want to provide good education to their children. Thus they reported that financial constraint is the major reason for limiting to two children.

Table 1: Reasons for not having one more child (%)

Basic Information	Basic Education Working	Basic Education Nonworking	Graduates working	Graduates nonworking	Professionals working	Professionals nonworking
To avoid a girl baby again	0	0	2	0	0	0
To avoid a boy baby again	0	0	0	0	0	0
Already have a girl and a boy	19	44	29	30	17	50
Health issues	21	19	24	19	31	49
Financial issues	43	13	10	15	6	0
More than 2 is uncommon	11	13	20	30	4	0
Husband not allowing	0	0	0	0	4	0
Difficulty in bringing up	0	0	7	0	17	0
Other reasons	6	13	7	7	21	1
Sample size	57	45	68	40	70	20

⁵ In the case of decision making, we might expect that a woman may be more likely to report what she thinks her peers thinks about that domain.

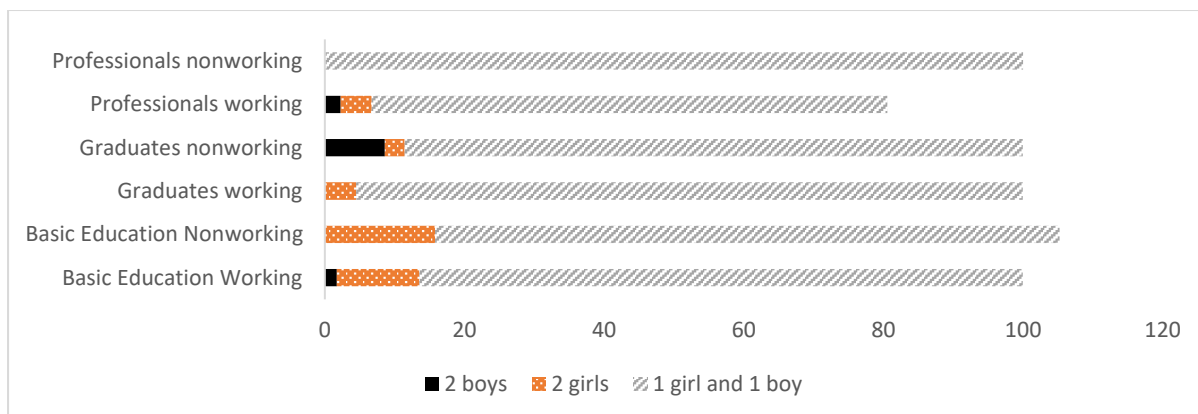


Figure 1: If the selection of gender is possible

We can infer from Figure 1 that most of the women's desired combination of children is to have a girl and a boy instead of having one gender alone. The son preference can also be indirectly counted by measuring the gender preference of the first child. The main reason for this first child preference is the fear of security both within and outside the house⁶. Also, the societal perception is that due to dowry, poor and less educated prefer boys and rich family is indifferent to girls and boys. Against expectations, less educated as less son preference than the educated. Less-educated prefer two girls instead of two boys because girls would help them in household chores and will listen to women when they are emotionally weak and stressful. But surprisingly compared to all other groups, educated nonworking prefers to have boy child as the first child and they don't want to have two girls (Figures 1 & 2) in order to have a high social status and to maintain the family wealth. Interestingly, against all others, the educated working community does not prefer to have two girls or boys and they consider both genders are equally important. This implies financial earnings is a more powerful engine to create self-esteem and less bias against girl child than the education level as such.

⁶ Even though girls are more prone to child abuse, boys are also affected because of child abuse. There is evidence that the boys which are affected by child abuse misbehave when they become adult. But parents are more concerned about girl children may be due to biological factor. This biasness towards the son to a certain extent is due to ignorance about the implications of child abuse on the affected children. Irrespective of the gender, abused children if not treated well they will be prone to behavioural issues in the future.

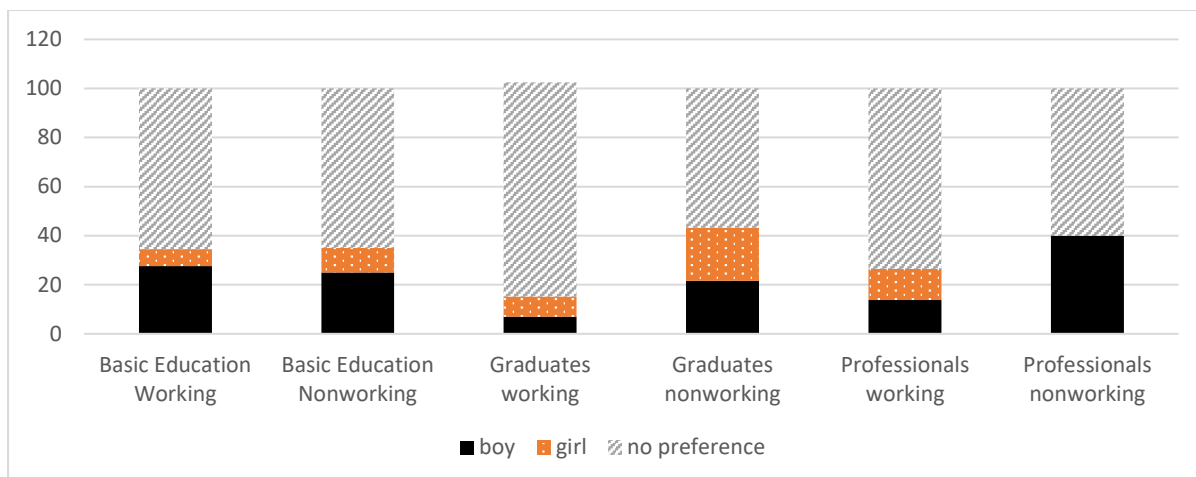


Figure 2: First child preference

5. Reasons for Son preference/Meta-preference

5.1 Working and non- working Community's perspective

Even though women are more concerned about the family size and the combination of the gender only a few women considered girls are on par with boys and there is meta preference within the family size. The reasons for this bias among different categories of women on the basis of education level and on the basis of working or not working outside the house are given below.

In Figure 3 we have classified the data on the basis of educational level among working women. Irrespective of education level, all considered boy belongs to family and sons take care of parents and thus maintain the family fame and tradition. This is because of the patrilocality mentioned in Jayachandran (2015). According to this culture, after marriage, the couples live with the husband's family and women are no more a member of her family and become a member of the husband's family. Under this system, it is natural that parents will prefer sons than daughters and they invest more in sons as they consider sons are a promising source of future security (Dyson & Moore 1983). This emphasizes the need for married couples moving out of parental home and thus eliminates the preference towards son on the basis of family traditions, fame and security. But this perceptible is more common among less-educated as the majority of them and graduates reported this as the primary

reason for son preference but less than fifty percent of the educated working women have son preference or meta-preference. The next two major factors, especially among the less educated, are (i) the difficulty in bringing up the girl child due to molestation due to lack of implementation of law and order; and (ii) they don't want to see their daughters sufferings due to physical assault mainly due to liquor consumption of men in the family. The majority of the existing studies cited dowry⁷ as one of the prime reasons for gender inequality (Rao & Rao 1980; Rao 1993a, 1993b; Anderson 2003). But this study found that dowry is not a significant reason for son preference and there is no difference in opinion on the basis of educational level. In all the groups, less than 35 percent of working women considered dowry as one among the other reason for son preference. This emphasizes the advantage of working and earning for themselves irrespective of the educational qualification.

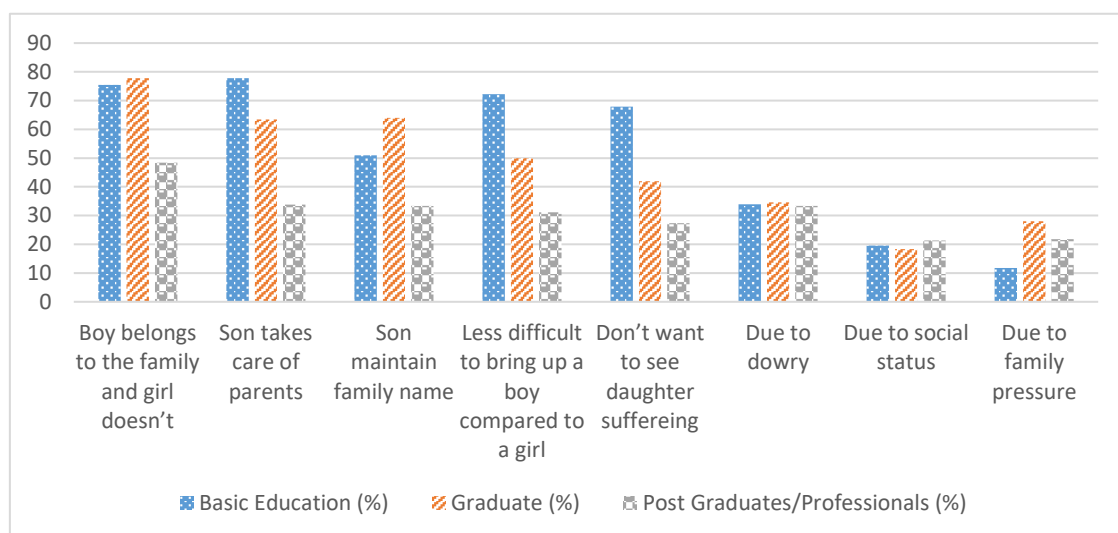


Figure 3: Working women's Perspective

Figure 4 indicates the perception of non-working women on the basis of educational qualification. Regardless of education level, more than fifty percent of the women reported that dowry burden is the main reason against the girl child. This emphasizes the importance of having financial earnings among women. But according to Botticini & Siow (2003), dowry

⁷ Dowry is the transfer of wealth from bridal families to grooms and their families at the time of marriage (Anderson, 2003; Botticini, & Siow, 2003).

payments disappear if male children are less likely to live with their parents. They posit that in patrilocal societies parents transfer dowries to daughters and bequests to sons to solve the free-riding problem. If married daughters have share in the parents' bequests, sons will not get the full benefits of their efforts to extend the family wealth and as a result, will supply too little effort. Thus in order to mitigate the dowry problem couples should move off the parental homes. Just like working women, non-working women also felt that son maintains the family fame, provides security and the difficulty in bringing up the girl child are the other reasons for son preference. In addition, more than 70 percent of the less educated non-working women reported that due to financial dependence on husband or husband's family they have to suffer physical harassment as they have no support from one's own parental family or from society as they don't have much opportunity to stay connected with the society they belong to. Therefore, they don't want to see their children undergoing the same situation and thus prefer not to have a girl child. But only 25 percent of highly educated reported this as an issue as they are aware of the human rights and legal system. Even though after marriage, education plays a significant role in having a dignified life, it has a less influential role in reducing the dowry burden.

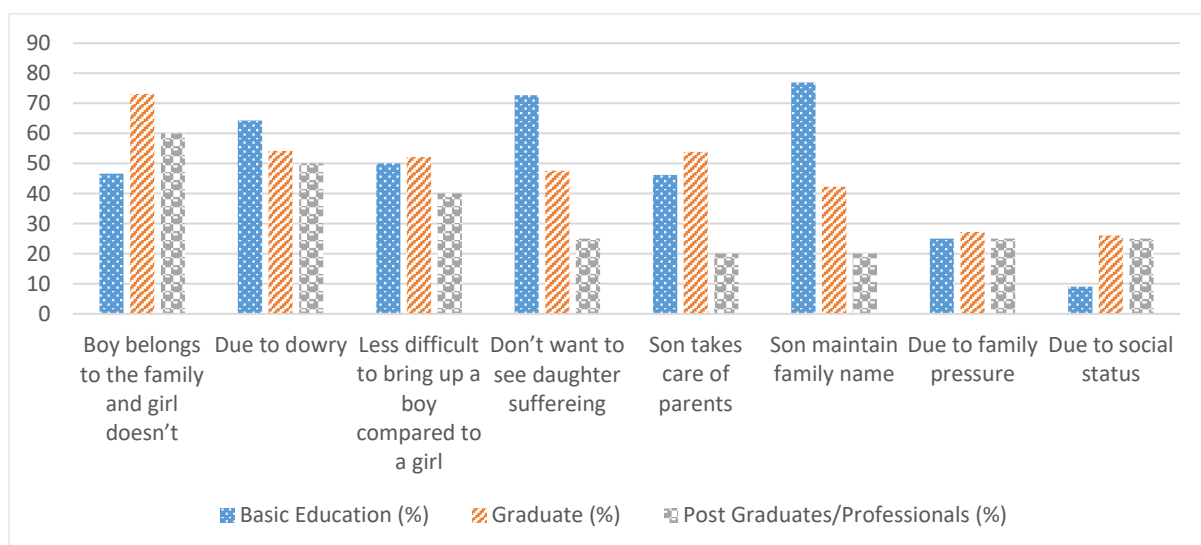


Figure 4: Non-working women's Perspective

5.2 Perspectives on the basis of Educational Qualification

There is a vast difference between working and non-working among the less educated women (Figure 5). For nonworking class dowry and suffering are the main issues. But for working women, future security is more concerned as they want to maintain the same standard of living throughout their life. This implies they have more expectations and the former non-working have fewer expectations and their only concern is their daughters should not undergo the same trauma they have undergone.

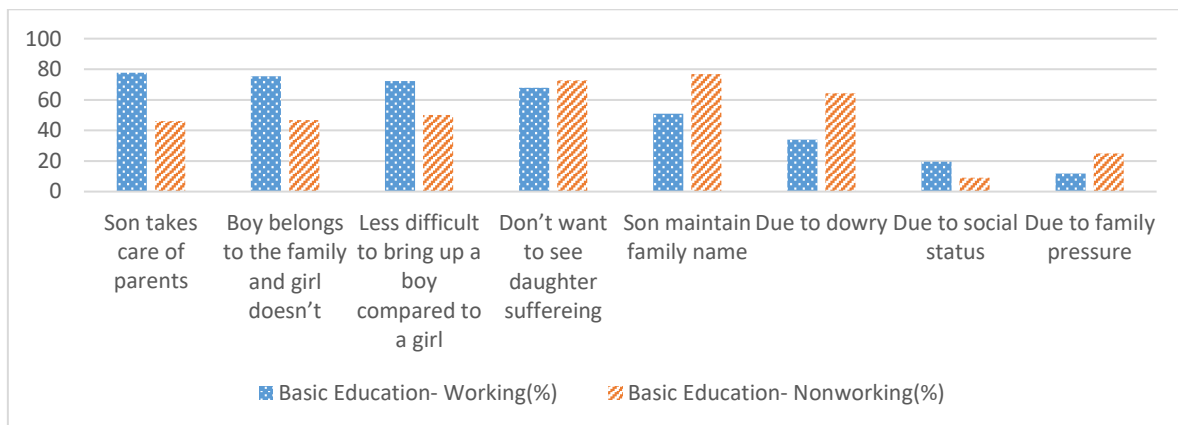


Figure 5: Less-educated women's reasons for son preference

Figure 6 represents the son preference of graduates and postgraduates. There is less difference between working and nonworking. But for non-working dowry is one main reason even if they belong to a financially strong family. This reveals the importance of financial freedom.

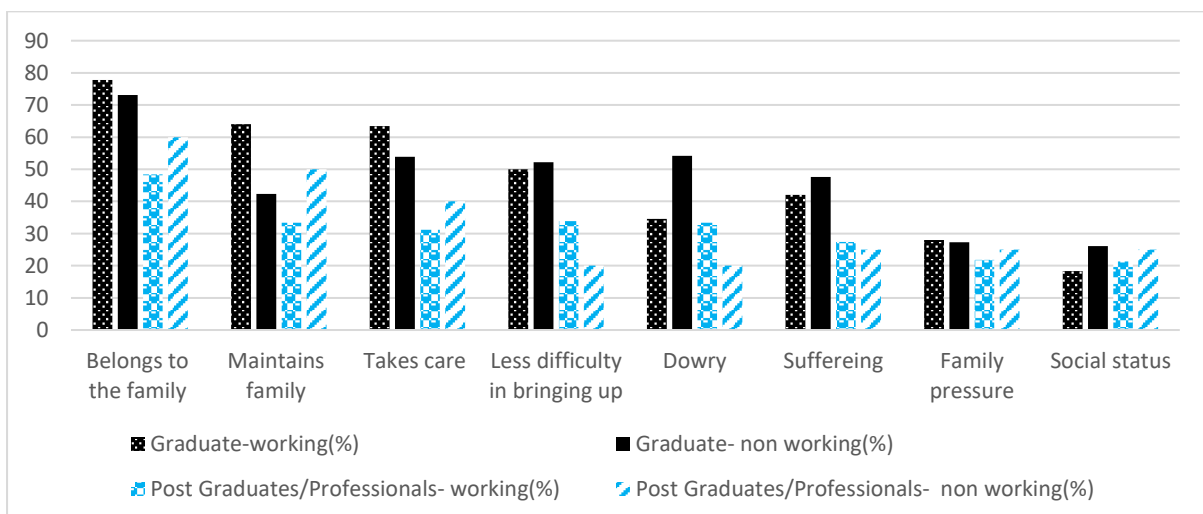


Figure 6: Educated women's reasons for son preference

Irrespective of working or nonworking, highly educated or less educated the main reason for son meta preference is the feeling that son belongs to the family and the perceived capacity to render support in old age. Even though this is the reason no one questions this tradition. When we asked them their response was “this is our society’s culture”. This is what we are supposed to do and we never thought about anything against it. We thought it is an honor to get married and move to the husband’s house. We thought it is our duty and responsibility to treat the husband’s parent’s like our own parents and take care of them. Another reason is that they don’t want to see their daughters suffering: Reasons for suffering varies between groups: for non-working and less educated the main reasons are harassment by husband and other family members especially after drinking and dowry violence. But for the educated and working women, the main suffering is due to the inequality in the home as women are having only a subordinate role. Even if women have equal pay or job in most homes, women continue to be the sole caregivers. For instance, the women have to rush back home and have to prepare the hot meal and other house chores, with little or no help from a partner or any other family member. Even in developed countries, employed women in two-parent households report that they spend an average of 17.7 hours per week caring for family members, while employed men report devoting about 9 hours (Carmen 2015).

6. Conclusion

In Kerala, compared to non-working women, the working women do not consider the girl child as a burden. Even though parents show no discrimination towards a girl once they are born women still feels that there are two major factors that attract family to have preference towards son: (i) son belongs to family and maintains the family name and (ii) son takes care of parents during their old age (iii) due to dowry and (iv) don’t want to see the daughter’s suffering. It is interesting to note that the latter two reasons are due to lack of financial freedom women has and it can be easily resolved by going for a paid job outside the home. The first two reasons exist because of the generosity of women in the form of daughters

leaving her parents and moving to the husband's family and women behaving like nurturers. Interestingly, it is not sons that take care of parents and it is the daughter-in-law that takes care of her in-laws. This happens mainly because one-fifth to a third of women around the world is still behaving like nurturers for example, for whom the home is the centre of her universe or the spouse focused tribe in which the husband is the center of her universe Pashley (2018). Thus the main recommendations of this study are (i) to end the patrilocality, and the couples should move to a separate house and thus start the married life on the principal of *equal partnership*; and (ii) to gain financial independence by having a paid job irrespective of the educational qualification. This not only helps the present generation but also future generations. To substantiate, a study conducted by McGinn et.al (2019) found that adult daughters of employed mothers are more likely to be employed and, if employed, are more likely to hold supervisory responsibility than their peers whose mothers were not employed.

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