

## **Strangers as Spouses: Marriage Implications of India's Skewed sex Ratio**

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The continuing gender imbalance and the recent steep declines in the child sex ratio raise questions about current development models, which emphasize economic growth but have had little effect on gender inequalities. Improvements such as higher literacy, lowered fertility and greater workforce participation of women do not seem to be translating into a higher value for girl children. Indeed, it is the more prosperous North and North-Western states in the country that continue to show dismal and declining child sex ratios.

One significant social consequence of the prevailing skewed sex ratios in some regions is a shortage of marriageable women. My research shows that there is a new turn to resolving bridal shortages, i.e., the 'import' of brides from poorer regions of India. In the Northern state of Haryana, which has one of the lowest female to male sex ratios, substantial numbers of men have acquired poor women as brides from Southern and Eastern regions of India. Given the regionally diverse culture of India, the couples uniting in such marriages are *real* strangers – with different languages, food habits, kinship, and marriage norms. In these arranged marriages the couples and especially the women face formidable challenges of adjustment and acceptance in the host society. They further raise concerns about the treatment and autonomy of women who end up far away from home with non-existent support structures. Yet, as the research points out, women often independently make the choice to migrate in full awareness of the difficulties they will face. The kinds of marital bargains they are able to negotiate vary depending on their educational and work status or their family and personal characteristics. On the flip side, men in the female-deficit areas who are left out of the local marriage market and are then forced to seek 'strangers' as brides, are seen as rejecting the involuntary bachelorhood thrust upon them by the structural conditions of adverse sex ratios. My work explores how seeking one's own spouse is impacting intra and intergenerational family equations and contracts.

This presentation is based on extensive fieldwork consisting of interviews with cross-region couples in the state of Haryana with additional evidence from Uttar Pradesh. Some fieldwork-based evidence has been obtained from the bride-sending states of West Bengal and Kerala. An interesting finding and a hopeful sign is the positive sex ratio of the offspring of such marriages.