



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

**Education**

**CHILD SEX RATIO IMBALANCE AND CROSS REGIONAL BRIDES: A GENDERED PARADOX IN HARYANA AND UTTAR PRADESH**

**KEY WORDS:** sex ratio imbalance, son preference, migrant brides, violence against women

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**ABSTRACT**

A deeply rooted cultural preference for sons has led to scarcity of girls in states such as Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. Gender-based violence, sex-selective abortions, discriminatory practices against girls and expensive dowries are common in these areas. The gender biases have deprived women of their basic rights to education, mobility, choice of partner, employment, ownership of property/land and so on. This limits their overall development and growth. Advancement in new reproductive technology has exacerbated the issue of gender biased sex selection or sex selective abortion, thus resulting in a significantly skewed sex ratio. A skewed ratio of women to men has led to brides being 'purchased' from economically marginalized states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and West Bengal. As a result, these migrant brides are forced to negotiate with 'new' cultural and social situations. The paper attempts to understand the struggle, exploitation, and abuse experienced by these 'migrant brides' residing in three villages, namely Pipli village in Kharkhoda Tehsil of Sonapat District, Deroli Ahir village in Narnaul Tehsil of Mahendragarh District and Gurana village in Baraut Tehsil of Bahgatpat district.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Discriminatory practices and gender-based violence find legitimacy in northern states like Haryana, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh due to deeply rooted patriarchal beliefs. A strong desire for sons is attributed to the kinship family systems existing in these societies. It is estimated that 63 million women are currently missing in our country (Economic Survey, 2017-18). Factors such as need for old age support, rising demand for dowry, gender-based violence, desire for smaller families and inheritance rights has further fuelled the disparity in the sex ratio. With the advent of ultrasound machines in the 1980s, prenatal determination of sex became easily accessible to families preferring male child. A shift from female infanticide to gender biased sex selection resulted in more girls eliminated from the population. Amartya Sen developed the concept of 'missing women' and estimated that close to 100 million women were missing in the regions suffering from excess female mortality. (1990, 1992).

Highly patriarchal states like Haryana and Uttar Pradesh confer an unequal and subordinate status to women. The overall sex ratio at birth (females per 1000 boys) for Haryana increased from 762 in NFHS-3 to 836 in NFHS-4 but remains far lower than the national average of 909 (2011-2013). During the same period, Uttar Pradesh saw a decrease from 922 in NFHS-3 to 903 in NFHS-4. A common pattern visible in the rural areas where low fertility is a norm is that if the first two children are girls then couples will definitely opt for a sex determination test in order to ensure that the next born child is a boy. This has resulted in a severe shortage of marriageable age women in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. Findings from a field study conducted by an NGO in 2013 covering 10,000 households in 92 villages across 5 districts revealed that over 9000 women were sold as brides from states outside of Haryana. Ravinder Kaur (2010) examines that skewed child-sex ratio in the north combined with poverty, family survival strategies and high costs of dowry in eastern and north eastern states are pushing families to marry their daughters to older and economically unstable men from North. Most of these women are denied their basic human rights; treated as slaves; abused, violated and remain in a perpetual state of vulnerability. Sonali Mukherjee discusses the phenomenon of cross regional marriages in Haryana and deliberates on the resistance in Haryana societies in acknowledging that lesser availability of marriageable women is a fall out of the skewed sex ratio (Mukherjee 2013). Reena Kukreja and Paritosh Kumar have

focussed on Haryana and Rajasthan as 'receiving regions' of these brides and emphasize on how these brides are subjected to heightened surveillance which varies from total confinement to restrictions of their movements within the village (Kukreja and Kumar 2013).

Caste plays an important role in the social standing of a family in states like Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. *Jats, Ahirs, and Yadavs* represent 49% of the total population in Haryana with *Jats* constituting the single largest and most prosperous ethnic group (25%). Muslims (19.26%) and Scheduled Caste (20.5%) constitute majority of Uttar Pradesh's population while *Yadav* comprises of 8% and *Jats* (1.7%) of the population. Predominantly landowners, these caste groups assert a strong socio-economic and political stature within the state. Majority of these caste-transgressive, long-distance marriages are sought by dominant-peasant sub-castes of *Jats, Yadavs, and Ahirs*. An increasing trend of brides bought from eastern and north eastern parts of India to fill the inadequate supply of marriageable age women is the ramification of the rampant practice of sex-selective abortion in the two states.

Increase in crimes against women, no right over one's fertility choices, mobility restrictions, sexual exploitation are some of the consequences of gender-based sex selection visible in these regions. NCRB's 2016 data estimates that Haryana recorded 191 cases of gang-rape, the highest by any Indian state in terms of crime rate. Data released by Haryana Crimes Against Women (CAW) cell for the period of 11 months in 2017 suggests 1,238 cases of rape, an average of 3.69 rapes per day. A total of 9,523 cases of crimes against women were reported in the same period. Similarly, in Uttar Pradesh, 44,936 cases of crimes against women were recorded in the period between 1.4.2017 to 31.1.2018, a 33% increase compared to the previous year, while cases of sexual harassment doubled from 485 to 987.

This paper emerges from an ICSSR (Indian Council of Social Science and Research) supported Research project: 'Decline in Child Sex ratio and Violence against Women: Understanding Girl Child Discrimination in India' with the study based in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. Through our extensive field work, this paper encapsulates the paradoxical situation of sex ratio imbalance and migrant brides in Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh by highlighting the narrative of these women in the larger social context.

Submitted : 20<sup>th</sup> July 2019

Accepted : 18<sup>th</sup> September 2019

Publication : 15<sup>th</sup> October, 2019

Haryana and Uttar Pradesh together have a combined population of 2,25,163,816 and account for 18.59% of India's total population. Table 1 demonstrates some key

demographic indicators provided by NFHS 3 and 4 for both states.

**Table 1**

Selected indicators from the National Family and Health Survey (NFHS 4) 2015-2016	Haryana (2015-16)	Haryana (2005-06)	Uttar Pradesh (2015-16)	Uttar Pradesh (2005-06)
Sex ratio (females per 1,000 males)	876	897	995	987
Sex ratio at birth (females per 1,000 males over last five years)	836	762	903	922
Women age 20-24 years married before age 18 years	19.4%	41.2%	21.1%	58.6%
Total fertility rate (children per woman)	2.1	2.7	2.7	3.8
Women age 15-19 years who are already mothers or pregnant at the time of the survey	5.8%	12.1%	3.8%	14.3%
Currently married women who usually participate in household decisions	76.7%	83.8%	81.7%	75.9%
Ever-married women who have ever experienced spousal violence	32%	27.3%	36.7%	42.3%

A few of the socio-demographic indicators for the two states shows an improvement when compared to the NFHS-3 data. In Haryana, 19.4% women in the age of 20-24 years got married before the legal minimum age of 18 years, down from 41.2% in NFHS-3. While in Uttar Pradesh it reduced from 58.6% in NFHS-3 to 21.1% (one-fifth) in NFHS-4. The total fertility rate (children per woman) in both states witnessed a decline. In Haryana, the state reached the replacement level fertility of 2.1 while in Uttar Pradesh in dropped to 2.7 from 3.8 in NFHS-3 but still one of the highest among all the Indian states. In Uttar Pradesh, according to NFHS-4 data, 36.7% of ever-married women experienced physical or sexual violence, a decrease from 42.3% in NFHS-3. Haryana, however, continues to record an increase, from 27.3% in NFHS-3 to 32% in NFHS-4. Unfortunately, over one-third of women continue to suffer from domestic violence in both states.

Panchayat and other decision-making authorities and local men from villages were also interviewed.

**Skewed Child Sex Ratio and Reproductive Rights of Women The scale of the problem**

Our research findings revealed that the influx of migrant brides is conspicuous in certain dominant caste groups. Marriage within the same *gotra* (caste endogamy) is forbidden in Haryana and the *Jat* belt of Uttar Pradesh. Each year, several incidents of honour-based crimes are reported in these states wherein young couples marrying against their family's approval are murdered to restore the lost honour of the community. The rules are more stringent for women who are considered repositories of culture and family honour. From 28 cases registered in 2014 to 251 in 2015, honour killing related crimes witnessed an increase of 796% in just one year with Uttar Pradesh being the highest (131) in 2015. If there is such a high intolerance for those transgressing customary rules then why is there an alarmingly high number of inter-state brides in the past few years? Lower educational status, less or no landholding, addiction to alcohol, poverty and unemployment are a few reasons why men find it increasingly difficult to secure brides locally.

**Table 2. Child Sex Ratio (0-6 years)**

Village	2011	District	2011	2001
Pipli	834	Sonipat	798	787
Gurana	807	Baghpat	841	850
Deroli Ahir	773	Mahendragarh	775	817

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

The impact of the declining number of girls and women in society not only results in greater discrimination and violence against them in local population, but has a cross-regional impact. Although the women may not have been trafficked for marriage, they remain at a disadvantaged position from local women at several stages. While Haryana and UP do have certain practices of fraternal polyandry, coerced polyandry has also emerged in the context of women.

The methodology adopted for this research was qualitative in nature based on Focussed Group Discussions (FGDs), semi-structured interviews and narratives to obtain a more nuanced understanding on the lives and predicament of migrant brides. A semi structured questionnaire was prepared and fieldwork was conducted in the select villages of Pipli village in Sonipat, Deroli Ahir village in Mahendragarh and Gurana village in Baghpat district between September 2018 to March 2019. The villages selected for this research are based on their long history of imbalanced sex ratios. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 migrant brides, mother-in-laws, and ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers from these villages. Through their narratives, we will explore their status within their marital family, their experience of violence, voice, choice, and agency, son preference, among others. The ASHA accompanied and introduced us to the respondents and also facilitated in building rapport with the brides' parents' in-laws and husbands. Before beginning the interview, we shared a brief overview of our study, stated our purpose, obtained consent from each respondent and requested families to allow us privacy so that the respondents are able to participate with ease. Key position holders in the

**Negotiating and Bargaining with Patriarchy**

That skewed child sex ratio in a male marriage squeeze has not led to any impact on lessening intense son preference in the communities. Complex nexus of inheritance rights, customary rights and practices and other patrilineal practices / customs continue to remain at the root of such discrimination. The complex understanding of reproductive rights of women has not found any favour with the community. The Government flagship scheme Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) has resulted in creating awareness around education of the girl child but has not been able make necessary linkages with reproductive rights of women. The institution of marriages emphasises on procreation but does not provide space for women's choices around reproduction. While the status of women within marriage continues to be devoid of any awareness around reproduction, the seeking of brides from far off regions outside caste and class boundaries, results in much less bargaining power for these women. While our research reveals not all of these women were forced into these marriages, their negotiating powers remain diminished because of their location.

*'Yes, there is violence against us, however it is the 'migrant brides' who suffer the most. They have no one to go back to while we can be in touch with our natal families. They have been 'bought' with money since their parents were too poor to marry them off'. Saroj, 40 years, A woman stating her rationale for the difference in the degree of violence against women in her village.*

*Local girls from large landowning families look for educated*

and employed men for marriage. Most men in this village are rejected because they are less educated and poorly qualified for employment. These men then procure brides from states like Assam, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh.' Reena, 23 years from Deroli Ahir village

Despite the skewed sex ratio of girls within these communities, son preference continues because of the patriarchal family systems and low female autonomy. Due to the rising cost of child rearing, couples have started opting for smaller families with strong desire for sons.

*"In our village, imbalance in the sex ratio is not because of female foeticide. Small families are slowly becoming a norm but desire for a son continues. If the first child in a family is a boy then couples do not want a second child. They feel their family is complete. But if the first child is a girl then they will definitely go for second child in the hope of a boy."* Asha worker from Gurana village

Son preference influences fertility behaviour within families leaving women with little or no right over their body. Reproductive right includes various rights of women such as – right to abortion, right to make her own decision regarding her body and her reproductive life, right to safe sex, right to procreation and to have family among others. Fewer women are able to negotiate with their conjugal families on matters related to fertility especially if they have no son.

*"I have three daughters and i don't see any difference between a son and a daughter. After the birth of my third daughter, I told my husband that I do not want to have any more children. With a supportive husband, she hopes to convince her in laws and family."* Madhu, 25 years, Deroli Ahir village

Not many are as lucky as Madhu. Eight out of twenty respondents were underage marriages. Most of these women are brought from economically backward families which have many mouths to feed and high dowries to pay. To avoid being a burden on their family, many women get married before the age of 18. The data obtained from NFHS-4 (2015-2016) reveals, in Haryana 19.4% women in the age group of 20-24 years married before 18 years of age and 21.1% in Uttar Pradesh.

### Agency

Marriage continues to be a significant indicator of women's status. Prevalence of child marriage and domestic violence had an impact on women and children. Marriage before 18 is a reality for young women thereby impacting their agency, autonomy and access to resources. In cross-regional marriages, this adverse impact is even stronger. It is important to make a distinction between trafficking for marriage and other forms of marriages. Violence against women is understood to be more for women in such forced marriages or in arranged marriages.

Of all cross regional marriages are not through trafficking. There are different ways in which cross regional 'migrant' brides are found that ranges from trafficking and mediation to 'choice' of women. While the customary marriage rules are rigidly practised and any stepping out of line through active agency which include falling in love or eloping have led to dangerous consequences. Many instances of khap panchayats coming down heavily against inter-caste marriages especially 'lower' caste and same -gotra marriages leading to honor killing have been reported. However, when it comes to procuring brides from cross-regions, these cultural and community rigidities are forgotten due to various reasons.

*"The unemployed men are at the lowest end of spectrum. Parents of educated girls from our community want employed men for their daughters. In these cases , the cross region or the*

*migrant bride is most preferred. There are fewer women due to the skewed sex ratio in our district and they are not interested to settle for these women."*

*Village men, Mahendragarh District, Haryana.*

The agency of women therefore has been understood as that which derives its strength from linkages with education, caste and community linkages. The preference for brides who have relatively less bargaining power and can be 'controlled' by the 'lesser men' of the society has paradoxically led to the increase in the trend of seeking brides from other regions.

*"While, some of the women from our community have become quarrelsome and do not respect her husband and in-laws, the cross-region brides are docile and hard-working. They are 'good wives'". Jagat, 50 yrs, Panchayat member.*

Trafficking of women for 'forced marriages' is another common phenomenon in areas with low sex ratio. Statistics from NCRB show that nearly 25,000 girls and women ages 15 to 30 were kidnapped and sold into marriage across the country in 2013. These women are sold without their consent and thus end up as a permanent slave and bonded labourers at the sympathy of the conjugal family. The fear of being ostracized from their community prevents them from accepting that they have been bought or trafficked.

Deepti belongs to a small village near Nagpur in Maharashtra. She was purchased for Rs 50,000 and married at 13 to a man much older than her from Ahir community. *"I did not know anything about sex and was so scared. I got pregnant within 2 months of my marriage."*

*"My parents were promised Rs 30,000 in exchange for me but they never received it. I was brought to Haryana on the pretext of a job but got cheated and was forced to marry a man thrice my age. I tried to resist and fought but no one came to help me. When my daughter was born my mother-in-law tried to kill her. Is it her fault that she was born a girl?"* Hariya, 22 years is from Bokaro, Jharkhand. Her daughter was born when she was barely 17.

55% of our respondents already had their first child before they were 20. Lack of adequate information on sex education, high levels of sexual violence and poor access to fertility choices, are some of the key drivers of early pregnancy. It is a significant contributor to poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes for adolescent girls and the well-being of their children.

While cross -regional marriages are practices that emerge from declining child sex ratio and the male marriage squeeze discriminatory cultural practices around marriage for local women also continue unabated.

Levirate marriage or *chadar odhna* as commonly mentioned in Hindi is practised mostly among jats especially among land/ property owning feudal families. Besides providing the wife of the deceased man a supposed security, one of the most important factors for the prevalence of this practise was to safeguard the land or property owned by the deceased husband. Jaya's husband has three more brothers and one sister. The eldest brother expired a few years ago leaving his wife and 3 sons behind. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and the youngest brothers are *randwas*. (in local parlance it means a widower and in Uttar Pradesh it is this identity is given to men who have crossed the marriageable age). She shared that in a ceremony held in the village, after the death of her husband, Jaya's brother in law, (*randwa*) covered his *bhabhi's* head with a cloth and that was considered as being married. He now takes cares of her and the three children.

**We encountered another similar story in Gurana, Lata , 35 years, is the Sarpanch of Gurana village:**

She completed her BA in Hindi Honours from Shyam Lal

College, Delhi University. She and her 11-year-old son are presently residing with her sister, brother in law and their son. When enquired about her husband she mentioned that her husband was in the army and died on duty a few years ago. Soon after his death a panchayat was called and without her consent, they decided to perform the Chadar Odhna ceremony. Now a second wife to her sister's husband, Lata has no legal rights over her husband since the marriage is not registered as per the Hindu Law and therefore no property rights as well. When asked about she feel addressing her brother in law as her husband, she says, *"It pains me every single day but what can I do. Sometimes I vent out the anger and other times I don't"*.

Despite being the Sarpanch, Lata is not allowed to talk to any men or lock her mobile. 5 months after the interview, we received a SOS call from Lata informing us that her husband has thrown her out of the house and she wasn't being allowed to meet her son. Desperately looking for a shelter, we reached out to her with a shelter home in Delhi. Unfortunately, she compromised with the situation and decided to living with her husband.

During our interviews in Gurana, many male members and elders of the community acknowledged the prevalence of polyandry also known as *draupadi* system where brothers of one family share a wife among them to avoid splitting of the land and other assets amongst heirs. Such deplorable practises put women on the margins, thus leaving them extremely susceptible to violence and other forms of exploitation.

**Access:**

The other disquieting finding related to cross-regional brides is that their agency and autonomy are not only diminished by their dislocation from their native place but also an isolation based on food habits, language and other cultural practices. Their access to resources remains lowest due to their relatively limited bargaining positions, their productive labor is under the control of the marital family and they have no access/ control over resources. Their exclusion therefore becomes 'absolute'. There is also social ostracism and rejection based on their outside status and these factors together create multiple layers of discrimination and vulnerabilities to violence.

Many respondents whose natal families reside in states far from Haryana and Uttar Pradesh have no choice but to suffer silently especially due to the circumstances under which they are brought, as noted previously.

As Preeti, a local woman remarked, "While we too face issue but when it comes to violence, you should talk to women being brought from outside because the violence faced by them is far greater."

*"How can women ever get justice, if on one hand, men from a single community (jat) dominate 72% government jobs including police, judiciary and bureaucracy and on the other hand, 90% perpetrators of crimes against women also belong to the same community."* Community worker, accompanying us to the field in Sonipat.

Forced to have sex with her husband, Hariya is constantly abused and beaten by him and in-laws. She has thought of escaping several times but succumbs every time she looks at her children.

*"I want to file a police complaint but I know no one will help me because my husband's brother is in Haryana police. I don't know what to do. I miss my parents and my life in Bokaro. My only hope is to be free from the violence someday and to lead a dignified life with my children."*

60% of the women interviewed have experienced some or the other form of abuse. Sheena, 28 years, from Gurana village is beaten and abused by her in-laws and husband almost daily. Emaciated, the double burden of farm work and domestic chores has taken a toll on her health. Manifestations of violence against women reflects upon the structural and social inequalities existing in our society.

Their impoverished background makes it even difficult to seek support from their natal family in case they want to leave the marriage. Maya from Deroli Ahir is one such example. Unable to bear the prolonged abuse inflicted by her in-laws and alcoholic husband, Maya ran away with her three children last year to her natal village in Chhattisgarh. Despite her brother's repeated request to divorce her husband, Maya returned to deroli after her husband apologized and promised her that he will stop consuming alcohol.

When asked the reason for her return, she said, *"For how long do I stay at my parent's house, people start talking. I am scared to divorce my husband because they will take away my children. Sometimes I feel I should have married a man from my village, I would have at least been able to sleep peacefully at night."*

Gayatri weighs only 33 kgs and the abuse has left her mentally disturbed with frequent bouts of headaches, dizziness and poor eyesight. Poor redressal mechanism, unsupportive justice system, coupled with a distrustful atmosphere has left these women far more vulnerable than their local counterparts. Their lack of agency in negotiating with their husband's family is a huge deterrent in them leading a life free from violence. Many respondents were excited to share stories about their natal family life because as 'outsiders', they experience a disconnection with their conjugal family members. Feeling of loneliness and isolation over an extended period of time has an adverse effect on the mental and psychological health of these women.

**Autonomy:**

Thousands of kilometres away from their natal home, assimilating into an alien and antagonistic environment can be extremely daunting as the onus of adjusting in their matrimonial home lies entirely on the brides. These adjustments are manifold for migrant brides when compared to their local counterparts. All respondents confessed that language was their biggest barrier. Deepti, despite being married for 7 years, still struggles to fully comprehend the conversations in *Haryanvi* between her husband and in-laws. There is still a practice of *Purdah* in the villages and is more rigid in certain communities. Married women particularly, need to cover their faces in the presence of male members within the house and outside. A constant fear of abandonment and the social pressure of acceptance has resulted in quicker adaption of these women to local cultural practises and way of living.

Haryana is typically wheat consuming state as *Jats* and *Ahirs* follow a vegetarian diet. While states like Assam, Bengal, and Odisha are mostly fish and rice eaters.

*"Back in our village, we eat only rice and here everyone eats only roti. They do not get rice at home because no one eats except me. It took me a few years to adjust but now I am used to eating roti."* Maya, Deroli Ahir village

During some of our interviews, we observed the mother in laws, female relatives and in one case even the ASHA worker very patronizingly teaching these women the 'appropriate ways' of displaying social grace and feminine behaviour. They were constantly referred to as *'baahar se aaye hui ladkiyaan'* (girls procured from outside).

An ASHA worker in Deroli Ahir told us, *"It is difficult to trust these women because there have been instances where they*

have stolen expensive household items and ran away.” The internalization of this dominant discourse further marginalizes these women leading to social isolation.

*“What is my identity? Who am I? I myself don't know. I don't know what kind of world exists beyond these walls and feel caged.”*  
Sujata, Pipli village

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION:**

Based on our extensive field work and examples discussed in the paper, following are some of our key recommendations:

- To ensure that the stakeholders are sensitive to the needs and concerns of migrant brides and support them by providing special services such as legal advocacy, psychosocial care, skill building programs and employment opportunities.
- Need to strengthen monitoring mechanisms for effective implementation of laws pertaining to sex-selective abortion, dowry and sexual harassment, domestic violence, rape and early marriage and property rights.
- The holistic linkages between reproductive rights and women's health and choice.
- Giving women greater control over access to resources, control over assets and opportunities of employment thereby enhancing their agency and autonomy.
- Implementation of necessary legislative provisions to ensure migrant brides their right to land and property be same as their local counterparts.
- Training of ASHA workers – Reproductive and sexual health information and services should be available to everyone.

The empirical narratives corroborate the prevalence of son preference, bride trafficking, violence and discriminatory practices on migrant brides in these areas. It is imperative for the state to take adequate steps in addressing the issue while dealing with the demographic differentials. Crimes against women are rarely reported to the police because most of these women are married in communities that have a strong political and judicial support. With barely any support from their natal family and as an 'outsider', their access to an agency is nearly impossible. In the absence of women's right to land and entitlement and the lack of decision-making ability over their fertility choices increases their socioeconomic dependency thus leaving them vulnerable.

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4. Names of all respondent's has been changed to protect their identity.