

CANADA RESEARCH CHAIRS

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CHANGING LIVES  
IMPROVING LIFE

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# CHANGING TRADITION FOR THE BETTER

Daughter deficit and its effect on marriage in India



# Scarcity of daughters affects culture and community

*Prof. Sharada Srinivasan (second from right) is pictured with local research assistants near a field site in Kerala.*

Researchers are discovering how imbalanced population ratios in India are causing some men to venture outside of the social norm to find a marriage partner.

The caste system, a social hierarchy ingrained into Indian society, plays an important role in determining who marries whom.

Prof. Sharada Srinivasan, Canada Research Chair in Gender, Justice and Development, and her team surveyed couples from the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala in southern India. There, Tamil men have begun to marry women who originate from a different state, Kerala—and sometimes a different social rank—because of a daughter elimination induced bride shortage in their own community.

“This arrangement may be good news for breaking down barriers in traditional arranged marriages,” says Srinivasan.

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This gap between populations of men and women has been caused by sex-selective abortion, infanticide and the neglect of girls.

Srinivasan investigates how the scarcity of women has affected families, communities and the cultural practice of arranged marriage in India.

In China, about 35 to 45 million unmarried men are considered “forced” bachelors because of the shortage of women. That number is predicted to grow to 55 million by 2020. India’s statistics are less clear, but Srinivasan hopes to discover how widespread the issue is.

Marriage is an essential life event in India, and arranged marriages, where parents determine a suitable match for their son or daughter, are common.

Kerala is one of the few states in India where women outnumber men. Kerala women are perceived as nurturing and caring, popularized by the fact that many women from Kerala are in the nursing occupation in India and abroad.

While adapting to a new environment can be difficult, these women are able to move from economically poor areas into a wealthier state. Kerala brides also reported having more autonomy in Tamil Nadu, and that their husbands understand their need to communicate with their families back home.

Another positive outcome of these cross-regional marriages is that they seldom involve dowries (payments from the bride’s family to the couple) and may improve child sex ratios, as most of the couples surveyed did not display a preference for sons.

While popular media tend to portray a narrow view of these cross-region marriages, Srinivasan hopes to give the public the full scope of these women’s stories and situations.

“Few studies highlight that there may be something more than exploitation and violence when it comes to cross-regional arranged marriages,” says Srinivasan. “The quality of life for these women is more complex than we think and relies on the context of the society they come from as well as the ones they are married into.”

Studies so far have looked at cross-region brides where they settle after marriage. Srinivasan will examine these marriages from the source region perspective, by interacting with women and their families to understand why and how such marriages are arranged and how women fare in them.

“Women are making important gains in education, health and employment,” says Srinivasan. “We want to know if these gains will benefit daughters and if daughter preference will increase as a result.”

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*This profile was written by Alaina Osborne, Students Promoting Awareness of Research Knowledge (SPARK)*

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