Signs of Change?
Sex Ratio Imbalance and Shifting Social Practices in Northern India

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Attempting to ascertain whether the skewed sex ratio in three northern districts of India has led to a change in sex-selective behaviour and related practices, this study finds that a shortage of brides is associated with willingness to compromise on rules of clan exogamy, and with a reduced demand for dowry. There is also a shift in inheritance patterns and increased societal acceptance of husbands living with their wives’ parents in uxorilocal residence. In addition, more women are likely to be aware of their legal entitlement to a share of their parents’ property, and to give less importance to the cultural construct of a son preference. It has to be seen whether all this will bring about a long-term change in patriarchal social structures.

India is one of several Asian countries whose rising sex ratio at birth (SRB) has received much attention in the last few decades. It is generally accepted today that a conjunction of three factors – continuing son preference, a decline in fertility, and the rapid spread of sex-determination technologies – is responsible for the high SRB (John et al 2008; Guilmoto 2009). While these factors can be termed the “immediate” causes of the rise, other long-term, structural factors have also been noted. Crucial among these are kinship, marriage, and property systems that devalue women, girls, and daughters in relation to men, boys, and sons (Miller 1981; Das Gupta et al 2003; John et al 2008; Larsen 2011).

Although there has been wide speculation on the consequences of the skewed sex ratio (see the introduction to this special issue), very few studies, if any, have analysed these empirically. This paper is an attempt to do so and identify ways in which the sex ratio imbalance affects important social institutions and practices in society. Based on quantitative and qualitative research in sites in three north Indian states, we document changes and ask whether the strategies adopted to cope with the consequences of the skewed sex ratio may eventually weaken patriarchal structures. In her classic article on bargaining with patriarchy, Kandiyoti argued that changes in material conditions can seriously undermine an existing normative order such as patriarchy (1988). Could the severe demographic imbalance in some north Indian states be one such material condition? The variants of the structure and agency approach (Bourdieu 2005; Giddens 1979; Kandiyoti 1988; Sewell 1992; Hays 1994) provide a useful framework to analyse and assess societal, familial, and individual responses to the conditions created by the demographic imbalance.

We attempt to ascertain whether the skewed sex ratio has led to a change in sex-selective behaviour and related practices in the affected communities. In brief, we find that a shortage of brides is associated with willingness to compromise on rules of gotra (clan) exogamy, and with a reduced demand for dowry. We find a shift in inheritance patterns with parents in “daughters only” households willing to bequeath property to daughters rather than to agnatic kin, and we find increased societal acceptance of ghar jawais (husbands who live with their wives’ parents in uxorilocal residence). In addition, women who report a bride shortage in their community are also more likely to be aware of their legal entitlement to a share of their parents’ property, to face fewer restrictions on their mobility,
and to personally provide support to either of their parents. We also find that these women give less importance to the cultural construct of “son preference”, but that does not make them less likely to sex select. Thus we find signs of change and ask whether these will be resilient and bring about long-term change in patriarchal social structures.

Setting, Data, and Methodology
We sampled households from 18 villages in the districts of Fatehgarh Sahib in Punjab, Kurukshetra in Haryana and Kangra in Himachal Pradesh in early 2010, and carried out qualitative data collection in six of the villages (two from each district) in early 2012. Both the states and the districts were selected on the basis of their long history of imbalanced sex ratios. The survey sample included 651 randomly selected ever-married women between the ages of 15 and 49 years with at least one child below 20 years of age, and a total of 1,450 children (see Appendix (p 52) for the sampling procedure). We also interviewed 83 bachelors in the selected villages in Punjab and Haryana. The data collected in these semi-structured interviews provided valuable insights from a very relevant perspective. Table 1 gives the data for the study villages.

Our sample states and districts have a long history of sex-selective behaviour, but there have been signs of improvement during the last decade. The improvements shown in the latest census of 2011 are verified in our data. Apart from Kangra district, which experienced a rapid rise in child sex ratios (below seven years) (csrs) between 1991 and 2001, the other sites had adverse csrs as early as the 1960s (Figure 1). By the time of the 2001 Census, the three districts figured among those with the lowest csrs in the country. It is therefore not surprising that many communities now face observable consequences of the skewed sex ratio.

We pursued two connected objectives in our research. On the one hand, we investigated the consequences of the skewed sex ratio. On the other, we wanted to revisit and analyse the determinants of sex selection. Even though the results of this second undertaking are presented elsewhere (Larsen, Kaur and Nanda forthcoming), we will be referring to them at various points. Our approach is exploratory, with a focus on detecting relationships and providing what we hope will be empirical grounds for further analysis and clarification. We analyse how important aspects of social life have been affected as a result of sex-selective abortions, and our emphasis is on these aspects, not on explaining specific outcomes.

We asked respondents, “Is there a shortage of brides in your community?” And the follow-up question was, “Is this a result of sex-selective abortions?” Of the 98% who answered, 46% said yes to both. Bride shortages were reported in all three districts. We analyse the effect of these two variables on five outcome variables in separate regressions and find near identical effects. Bride shortage was found to be a primary explanatory variable for all five.

The five variables we include as outcome variables measure aspects related to the demand for dowry, patriarchal control, property inheritance, parental support, and son preference – aspects that are important to the reproduction of a male-biased social structure. Although there are historical continuities in these features, the socio-economic context in which the present gender imbalance exists is different from that of the past. As this region has developed economically, social life has become increasingly modern. With education and development, many of the earlier restrictions on various activities of women are being modified, and the relationship between social status and restriction on women’s participation in the public sphere is changing. The effect of bride shortage “accompanies” these changes and we expect it to be related to better conditions for women, reflected in its effect on the five outcome variables. That women have become more educated and along with it more liberal, for example, in their attitudes towards women’s rights coupled with increased household decision-making power are profound changes on their own, and this is bound to have had an effect on the five variables. However, strong forces work against such changes, trying to preserve the old order. Alongside the effects of bride shortage we therefore also expect variables measuring such aspects to have an effect.

### Table 1: Child Sex Ratio in the Selected Villages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>N Daughters</th>
<th>Sons</th>
<th>Sex ratio</th>
<th>CSR 2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kurukshetra, Haryana</td>
<td>Gogpur</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lohar Majra</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Khanpur Kolan*</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jandheri</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Singhaur</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kangra, Himachal Pradesh</td>
<td>Thara</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ladhwar</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nather*</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harsi</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chogan</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bheth Jhikli*</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatehgarh Sahib, Punjab</td>
<td>Pwala</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pola</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Baras*</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chanarthal Khurd</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nabilpur*</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tarkhan Majra</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kapurgarh</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>651</td>
<td>669</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>117 127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Villages where both survey and ethnographic data was collected by authors. Source: CSR figures based on village level data from the 2001 Census of India.
Sex Ratio Imbalance and Bride Shortage

An expected consequence of high sex ratios is what demographers call a male marriage squeeze. The availability of fewer women in marriageable age cohorts results in bride shortages, and this is one of the most studied consequences in the several Asian countries afflicted by skewed sex ratios. According to Guilmoto (2012), the “marriage gap” in India will be 7% by 2025, with China’s being much worse at 20%. While this figure is for India as a whole, the gap in the north, where our districts lie, is worse and already at 8% due to its longstanding sex ratio imbalance (Kaur 2012).

As stated earlier, nearly half of our respondents reported a shortage of brides in their community. The experience of bride shortage, however, is not homogeneous across the region or among social groups, as complicated rules of marriage combine with diverse socio-economic factors to define the marriage market. For example, when we disaggregate figures on bride shortage by caste categories (Table 2), we find that the upper-caste group (“other castes”) experiences bride shortage the most, closely followed by Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Even in the scheduled caste (SC) and scheduled tribe (ST) category, more than a third of the respondents reported the same problem. Thus all communities in the region report bride shortages.

Table 2: Bride Shortage as Reported by Caste Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste Groups</th>
<th>SC/ST</th>
<th>OBC</th>
<th>Other Castes</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is there a shortage of brides in your community?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>85 (37.6)</td>
<td>77 (48.1)</td>
<td>131 (52.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>141 (62.4)</td>
<td>83 (51.9)</td>
<td>118 (47.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>635</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentages in parentheses. Source: Data collected by authors.

Interestingly, although consequences of the skewed sex ratio are more visible among the higher castes, caste is not a significant factor in the odds of births being sons, indicating that no caste sex-selects more than others (not reported here). This is interesting because it is a well-established fact that higher castes have historically been more prone to sex selection (Miller 1981; Chakraborty and Kim 2010). Before the technology became available, it was the higher castes that were known to practise female infanticide (Panigrahi 1972; Vishwanath 2007; Oldenburg 2002). With a rapid decline in fertility and easy availability of sex-determination technologies, there is now little difference in family-shaping behaviour between caste groups (John et al 2008; Siddhanta et al 2009).

Our survey of bachelors (above the age of 27) found that all men are not equally affected by the marriage squeeze. Of the 83 interviewed, 45 belonged to the SC category, five to the OBC category, and 30 to other castes. This may indicate that SC men have greater difficulty in finding brides. Apart from caste, several other factors reveal stratification in the male marriage market. In general, bachelors who own land, are educated, and have jobs are likely to find brides locally, and may indeed be sought after as grooms and receive substantial dowries. Men who face difficulties in getting married are those with little or no land, education, or job, or those who are physically or mentally challenged. The majority of bachelors were marginal landowners and casual landless labourers (54 out of the 83 were landless). Many of them (31) were illiterate. Bachelors in the landed castes were often the second or third brother. Thus, it is not men in general who are affected by the marriage squeeze, but men who are marginalised by particular socio-economic and personal characteristics. A not-so-surprising yet important finding was that a substantial number of bachelors were physically or mentally challenged. The need for care of such individuals poses a social challenge as families turn nuclear, leaving them without support once the parental generation passes away.

Strategies to Address Bride Shortage

In this section, we examine how families in the study area are coping with bride shortages. In the family adaptive strategies approach described by Moen and Wethington, they state,

Families are depicted as developing strategies precisely because there exist constraining economic, institutional, and social realities in the larger opportunity structure. Strategies, then, are the actions families devise for coping with, if not overcoming, the challenges of living, and for achieving their goals in the face of structural barriers (1994: 3).

Certain strategies become more widely accepted, and if strengthened by other factors, may become “new” norms, signaling change at the societal level. Others may be temporary adaptive measures, which are withdrawn once the constraining factor, in this case the sex ratio imbalance, is alleviated. The means adopted to address shortages can also be site-specific, embedded in earlier histories of dealing with the problem and dependent on whether the sex ratio imbalance has been long-standing or not. We discuss some of the strategies being currently adopted and see which of these are likely to spell long-term change.

A greater number of individuals than usual may be left unmarried when there is a demographic marriage squeeze. Such involuntary bachelorhood is rarely a deliberate choice in societies where marriage is near universal. Despite this universality, rural families often strategised to marry only one or two of several sons to ensure family reproduction and keep land undivided (Kaur 2008). But when brides are wanted, several strategies may be employed to gain them. Prominent among these in our study sites are strategies that expand the pool of eligible women by relaxing norms of gotra exogamy; finding brides from other regions, which may violate caste endogamy norms and involve forgoing dowry; allowing exchange marriages, in which brothers and sisters are exchanged as grooms and brides among the same families, a practice that is looked down on among dominant communities; and fraternal polyandry, or the bride sharing by brothers, again a socially

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disapproved practice. While some of these strategies may be dysfunctional (for example, bride sharing violates the woman’s agency), others may bring about positive social change by weakening rigid marriage rules and breaking down caste, region, and religion hierarchies.3

In our survey, 70 of the 83 bachelors felt that they would prefer to marry within their caste, indicating that caste endogamy remains a resilient norm. However, 51 of them were willing to compromise on rules of gotra exogamy, and 49 on village and territorial exogamy (by which one’s own and several surrounding villages must be excluded while seeking marriage partners), while 33 said they would be willing to marry a bride from outside their community.4 The need to relax customary norms was reiterated by many respondents. As one Jat bachelor from Haryana said,

Our gotra is Dandhiyan. You know, earlier one would exclude one’s own, mother’s, and grandmother’s gotra while seeking girls for marriage, but now we do not take grandmother’s gotra into consideration. If we get a proposal from that gotra, we go ahead. Otherwise, too many obstacles crop up in marriage. You must have read in the newspapers that there have been incidents in Rohtak, Panipat when marriages have taken place in the grandmother’s gotra and then people were upset. If people object like this, boys will not get married at all. Now we only exclude two gotras as opposed to four or three in the past.5

The relaxation in the norms of gotra exogamy may evolve into a permanent norm change as it is also buttressed by parents’ desire to match-make on the basis of modern criteria such as education, employment, and urban residence, rather than only customary kin and village-based norms (Kaur 2010).

In Haryana especially, a growing trend of exchange marriage is evident as a response to the marriage squeeze. In such marriages, a family receives a bride only if it has a daughter to give in exchange.6 In our sample of 83 bachelors, nearly 40% did not have a sister, which meant they would not be able to take this route to marriage. Under such circumstances, families sometimes adopt girls from within the extended family to give in exchange for a bride. However, such a strategy may not always work as envisaged. In one such case, a family had adopted a sister’s daughter so that they could give her in exchange for a bride for their son. But the sister took back her daughter after some time, forcing the family to bring a cross-region bride from the eastern state of West Bengal. In another instance, a cross-region marriage did not work out when the 40-year-old male Jat who had married a girl from West Bengal was dissatisfied with her because she had a dark complexion. He gave her back to the agent who returned the Rs 20,000 the man had spent on acquiring the bride.

We found evidence of cross-region marriages in all three districts, but more so in Kurukshetra and Fatehgarh Sahib than in Kangra. Cross-region brides are sought from the eastern and southern regions of the country as well as from the hill areas of the north. A member of a Muslim family in Kurukshetra said,

Many girls come from outside, many girls come here from Bangladesh. Now, take a household where the boy is getting old. They are then forced to get a girl from outside. In our village, there is a man named Amjad Khan. He was past the marriage age when he finally got married to a girl from Bangladesh. I don’t know how the marriage was arranged but I suppose some money was involved.

In such marriages, the bachelors forgo dowry and incur considerable expenditure on travel, the marriage ceremony, and paying agents who arrange the marriage (Kaur 2004).

A fourth strategy is fraternal polyandry, where several brothers cohabit with one wife. Such forced cohabiting, which is rarely welcomed by the wife whether she is local or cross-region, was reported in Kurukshetra and Fatehgarh Sahib. The practice of this strategy has been observed historically, and it rises and falls in relation to the severity of the marriage squeeze and other concomitant factors.

Effect on Dowry

Dowry has often been seen as the root cause of daughters being perceived as a burden. Bhat and Halli (1999) have argued that in India historically, it was an excess of marriageable women that led to the rise of dowry. Das Gupta et al (2003) argue that the situation changed around the 1980s with fewer women in the population. It would be logical to expect that a scarcity of brides will lead to fewer men demanding dowry. In China, the rise in bride price has been linked to the greater competition for brides, and the rise in the Chinese savings rate has been linked to parents saving more to make their sons more desirable in the marriage market (Wei and Zhang 2009).

To analyse if the skewed sex ratio has affected dowry, we included an index of dowry based on a categorial principal component analysis of 16 gifts given at a girl’s wedding and the amount given in cash. We see an expected pattern in dowry giving – upper castes give well above the average and scs well below it. However, we do not find this to be statistically related to bride shortage.7

To the question “Do you know of a family that did not demand dowry because of a shortage of suitable brides?”, close to 10% answered that they did, and our variables for shortage of brides have large positive and significant effects on it (Table 3, p 49). This indicates that demands for dowry have decreased as a result of the sex ratio imbalance. Interestingly, this variable is not related to economic and social status, as wealth, landholding and caste are insignificant. The only variable other than bride shortage with a significant effect is women’s education. We interpret this as a result of women with better education being generally more informed. Substantiating the main finding is that 43 of the 83 bachelors asserted that they would be willing to forgo dowry to get married.

A Saini caste (sc) mother with three sons and no daughter in a village in Kurukshetra said,

I do not make demands for dowry. We are not greedy. If your mouth is too wide, then flies can enter it. I just want a daughter-in-law, even if she’s from a poor family. A daughter-in-law who can cook for me and take care of me.

A Jat family in Fatehgarh Sahib with one son and two daughters stated,

We will not ask for dowry for the brother and we will bring the bride in one set of clothes. The girl should be from a good family, of lesser wealth, and lower status than ours.
We are also thinking of bringing (a bride) from outside. We want to find one in our community, but if this doesn't happen, then we will get one from outside. We may get one from Dehradun. We will go all the way, spend money; we will give food and clothes. So obviously there will be some expenditure in acquiring the bride.

Although we find no relationship between bride shortage and the level of dowry given, we find signs of demands for dowry having been lowered because of bride shortages. At the same time, we do not find dowry to be a determinant of the odds of births being sons (not reported here). This finding complicates the intuitively assumed relationship between dowry burden and daughter aversion, indicating that the relationship is more complex. A single daughter may not be considered burdensome, while several daughters may be seen as such. Giving dowry also fulfills important social goals such as enhancing a family's social status and networks and ensuring the daughter's well-being in her conjugal home. There is some indication that a dowry is seen as a pre-mortem inheritance for daughters among propertied groups. Dowry giving remains common in Fatehgarh Sahib and Kurukshetra, even though dowry receiving is on the decline among some communities and among men who face the marriage squeeze in Kangra, the tradition of dowry is weaker although people admit that parents want to give whatever they can at a daughter's wedding.

Patriarchal Control and Restrictions on Women's Mobility

In this part of India, historical norms of female seclusion such as ghunghat (face veil) and purdah are strong even today as women still suffer from restrictions on their physical mobility (Desai et al 2010). One strong indication of restricted mobility is that most women need permission to go to places in their vicinity (to the local health centre, to the homes of relatives or friends in the village, or to the local grocery shop). Restricting a woman's mobility is an attempt to isolate her from outside influences, and the variable measures the extent to which a household attempts to conserve the traditional as opposed to embracing the new. The most common situation is that a respondent needs to ask for permission to go to all three locations, as this is the case for 74% of the respondents. Bride shortage is strongly related to facing fewer restrictions.

**Table 3: Regression Models with Bride Shortage Predictors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanatory variables</th>
<th>Logistic Regression on No Demand for Dowry</th>
<th>GEE on Restrictions on Women's Mobility</th>
<th>Logistic Regression on Awareness of Legal Right to Parental Property</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model A</td>
<td>Model B</td>
<td>Model A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coefficients</td>
<td>Coefficients</td>
<td>Coefficients</td>
<td>Coefficients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman's age</td>
<td>0.076**</td>
<td>0.074**</td>
<td>-0.049**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household decision-making power</td>
<td>0.038*</td>
<td>-0.036*</td>
<td>-0.037***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes towards women's equal rights</td>
<td>0.466**</td>
<td>0.436**</td>
<td>0.828**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior HH members' household decision-making power</td>
<td>0.441***</td>
<td>0.422***</td>
<td>0.812**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealth index (CATPCA of assets)</td>
<td>0.307**</td>
<td>0.299**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caste categories (ref = other caste)</td>
<td>SC/ST</td>
<td>0.073**</td>
<td>0.072**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBC</td>
<td>-0.470*</td>
<td>-0.432</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District dummies (ref = Kurukshetra)</td>
<td>Kangra</td>
<td>-0.811**</td>
<td>-0.892**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatehgarh Sahib</td>
<td>-0.306</td>
<td>-0.278</td>
<td>0.067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bride shortage as a result of sex selection</td>
<td>1.866***</td>
<td>-0.560**</td>
<td>0.566**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bride shortage</td>
<td>2.144**</td>
<td>-0.665**</td>
<td>0.826***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>635</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.
Outcome variable for the first set of logistic regressions is response to the question "Do you know of a family that did not demand dowry because of a shortage of suitable brides?" (Yes = 1, No = 0, mean 0.10, SD 0.301). Outcome variable for the set of GEE regressions measures whether a respondent needs to ask for permission from either her husband, senior males in her household, senior females, or others in her household to go to the local health centre, to the homes of relatives or friends in the village, and to the vegetable shop. The three dichotomous questions form a reliable scale (Cronbach's Alpha .82). The score for the variable is calculated by summing the three variables and it takes on the values 0, 1, 2 and 3 (mean 2.5, SD 0.958). We model this outcome variable as a single scalar rather than as three separate responses. We get the same results whether treated as repeated measures with three separate responses or as a single item. We therefore treat the separate places as independent and because we thus measure it as a count of places for which a woman needs permission out of three trials we use a binomial model (Hilbe 2011) even though the items are moderately correlated. We use an unstructured covariance structure to fit the correlations between responses separately. Outcome variable for the second set of logistic regressions is response to the question "Do you know that you can legally have a share in your parental property?" (Yes = 1, No = 0, mean 0.67, SD 0.44).
Our measure of restrictions on women’s mobility directly concerns aspects of intra-household intergenerational control in a patriarchal social structure. This is seen in the results shown in Table 3, where there are more restrictions when senior household members have more say in household decision-making. That women face more restrictions the more liberal their attitudes toward women’s equal rights are, illustrates how restricting women’s mobility is a reactionary response to the modernisation that is continually taking place. Proving that there is a generational dimension in action, older women are much less likely to face restrictions. Socio-economic status in terms of wealth, landholding, or caste has no significant effect on restrictions on women. There is also no significant difference between districts.

At the same time, the more restrictions a woman faces, the more likely are her children to be sons (not reported here). This indicates that women face fewer restrictions where there are bride shortages, and that the patriarchal control that lies behind the disempowerment of women and sex selection has been affected. Against this background, it is interesting that educated women face fewer restrictions.

Changing Attitudes towards Inheritance Rights

Another interesting finding is that women who report bride shortage are more likely to be aware of their legal right to a share of the parental property (Table 4, p. 49). This awareness, however, has not yet translated into daughters inheriting property on any significant scale. This is evident from our qualitative data in which both men and women felt that daughters should not inherit natal family property. A daughter’s demand for parental property is seen as tantamount to a willingness to break off relations with her natal family, especially with her brothers. A Jat from Fatehgarh Sahib asserted, “This law is not good. If a girl has a brother, she should not demand her share in property.” A couple from Kangra said, “We think that only disabled girls or those who are unmarried or have major financial problems in their husband’s family should ask for their share (in property).”

Our ethnographic investigations revealed that families with only daughters bequeathed or were planning to bequeath their property to their daughters (in contrast to the past when an agnatic male member of the extended family would have had the right to landed property). This could also be attributed to the growing trend of rights and obligations being increasingly confined to the nuclear family unit rather than extending to the larger agnatic unit. A Gaddi family with one daughter in Kangra told us, “We do not have a son and will give our property to our daughter only. For us, our daughter is our son.”

Another OBC respondent in Kangra said, “According to us, it is okay if girls ask parents for a share in the property as it is a government-mandated law.”

Kangra also had many more voices where people felt women should have the right to parental property and this is reflected in the quantitative findings. In contrast, Fatehgarh Sahib had cases where the demand for property by daughters resulted in acrimony within the family and animosity towards them. With the increasing value of land, women’s in-laws were egging them on to demand their share of parental property.

As expected, being aware of a legal right to parental property is also related to being more educated, having more household decision-making power, having more liberal attitudes towards women’s rights, and to being from a wealthier household – all aspects of a progressive social change. It is also more common among upper-caste women. Significantly, bequeathing property to girls opens up the possibility of society viewing daughters as “inheritors” and taking on a support role, undermining two important bases of patriarchy.

Daughters and Support of Elderly Parents

Inheritance in the male line is linked directly to expectations of support from sons in old age. However, support is provided not only by sons, but also by wives to parents-in-law (Caldwell 1978; Kandiyoti 1988; Das Gupta 1995). These wives are daughters who due to post-marital patrilocal residence are structurally hindered from contributing to or supporting their natal families (Dyson and Moore 1983; Das Gupta et al. 2004). It is therefore interesting that women who report bride shortages are more likely to personally support either of their parents (Table 4). Of our respondents, 20.6% personally support their parents. With a shortage of brides comes a shortage of daughters-in-law, and in their absence, natal daughters appear to be taking over as support-givers.

Support by daughters is also highlighted by the growing acceptance of the practice of uxorilocal residence in which the son-in-law (ghar jawai) stays with his wife’s family, looking after the land, and providing old age support to her parents. In several cases documented in the qualitative fieldwork, parents without sons had either negotiated with one of the daughters to stay with them in old age or had already brought a married daughter and her husband to stay with them. In a Jat family with four daughters in Fatehgarh Sahib, a son had been born but had died. The mother of the girls said that the four daughters would decide among themselves which one of them would stay with the parents in their old age.

We found evidence that the traditional opprobrium towards the ghar jawai was being whittled down. In a village of 330 households in Kangra, an informant reported 23 ghar jawais, a substantial number by any count. A Jat male from Fatehgarh Sahib said, “If someone has no sons and only daughters, then they think of keeping a ghar jawai sometimes. One of my friend’s fathers is a ghar jawai. His life has been pretty smooth and everything is managed well.” A Kangra household with an adopted daughter reported, “We have only one daughter and we got her with a lot of difficulty. We consider her as our son. We will pass on our property to her and she will take care of us in our old age.”

Another strategy was for the son-in-law to share time between his own and his wife’s family. Adoption was yet another strategy employed by families with no sons to ensure
care in old age. A family in Kurukshetra with four daughters had adopted a son from within their extended family, while a Gujar family in Kangra had exchanged a daughter for a son within the family – both traditional solutions resorted to by families with no sons.

Property, inheritance, and parental support remain linked and several strategies, as seen above, may be adopted to ensure transmission of property and care in old age. While many of these strategies are not new, their greater occurrence, especially bequeathing property to daughters and accepting support from married daughters, may weaken “son-necessity” (Larsen 2011).

Change in Sex Selection and Son Preference
It is well understood that a central factor in explaining sex-selective behaviour is a preference for sons. This is also the case in our data. Along with the question of whether sex-selective behaviour has been influenced, a further important question to ask is whether people’s preference for sons has been influenced by the skewed sex ratio. Three scenarios are possible – that behaviour has been influenced, in which case it has also been accompanied by changes in preferences; that behaviour has not been influenced but preferences have; or that change is visible in neither.

Simply including variables for bride shortage in regression models with the odds of births being sons as an outcome is complicated since the shortage of brides should be expected to be a result of high odds of births being sons. However, if the consequences of sex selection are severe enough, it is feasible that people may have started changing their behaviour. This should be visible in a negative effect of a bride shortage on the odds of births being sons. However, contrary to our suspicion, bride shortage has no significant effect in predicting the odds of births being sons and we see no signs that people have started changing their behaviour as a consequence of the skewed sex ratio.

But is bride shortage related to lower son preference? When measured in the conventional way, that is, as ideal number of sons minus ideal number of daughters divided by ideal number of children, we find no relationship with bride shortage. However, in an attempt to also measure son preference along the lines of a felt necessity to have a son, we included a scale based on six Likert-type items that represent what we have found to be the most important reasons behind such a felt need in previous ethnographic work (Larsen 2011; see notes to Table 4). The scale measures the degree to which respondents agree that a son is necessary based on culturally transmitted reasons. Our alternative measure therefore accounts for the importance given to the cultural construct of son preference. We find that respondents who report a bride shortage also report lower son preference as measured with our scale (Table 4). Respondents’ level of education and attitudes towards women’s rights are related to lower levels of the measure of son preference. Also of interest is that women who face more restrictions on their mobility place a greater importance on the cultural construct of son preference. The finding that respondents of the SC and ST communities score higher on our measure of son preference echoes the finding of a convergence in sex ratios between higher and lower caste groups. Land-holding is related to greater son preference, whereas wealth is unrelated. However, this alternative measure of son preference is not a significant predictor of the odds of births being sons.

Thus, although we find no relationship between bride shortage and preference for more sons than daughters – which the conventional measures of son preference record – we detect a tendency to place less importance on the cultural construct of son preference as a consequence of bride shortage. The first step towards understanding that there is a problem may have been reached, even though corrective behaviour has not followed. In Haryana, compared to even five years ago, people are now willing to admit that men are unable to find brides due to a shortage of girls. Earlier, the discourse was one of denial and the claim was that if a boy had a job he would be able to find a bride. When elders in Jandheri village in Haryana were asked why the boys there were unable to find a match, they responded, “How is one to get married if there are no girls in the village?” This was a very prominent topic of discussion in the village. A sign of change may be found in the truthfully ambivalent statement of an OBC mother of three daughters in Kangra, “We consider girls to be good. But we think that one should have at least one son as sons take the family name forward and take care of the last rites. However, daughters help those who do not have sons. Therefore girls are also good. Earlier people would be scared of having a daughter, but now both girls and boys are considered equal.”

Conclusion: Adaptation and Shifts
Based on our findings, we argue that some of the consequences of the skewed sex ratio such as the bride shortage are affecting marriage and dowry practices positively. While we did not find that respondents from communities with a shortage of suitable brides are less likely to sex select than others, we do see signs of a change in the perception of sons as “necessary” and a tendency to place less importance on the cultural construct of son preference. Further, entrenched practices that are structural causes of the gender imbalance – stringent marriage norms, patrilineral inheritance and patrilocal residence, old-age support of parents by sons, and lack of autonomy of women – are being reshaped as a consequence of the skewed sex ratio. Each of these aspects represents important elements of what we commonly call patriarchy. Whether the changes we document will endure or whether old practices will be revived remains unanswered. But they are part of and accompany a larger process of social change, which suggests that the effects may indeed be long term. Our general conclusion is that as a consequence of the skewed sex ratio, the modes of reproduction of son preference are being affected in ways that may point to an improved sex ratio and greater gender equality in the future.
Although we are looking at the above strategies as a response to the demographic imbalance, we do not argue that other socio-economic factors are not contributing to enabling or constraining individuals and families from choosing these strategies.

About half the bachelors interviewed admitted that they visited prostitutes, while the other half denied doing so.

Marriages that violate gotra norms have faced punitive sanctions from communities in Haryana, while inter-caste marriages have led to “honour killings” (Kaur 2010).

The landowning B community in Kurukshetra, Haryana, relies on exchange marriage and families without daughters find themselves in a difficult position.

We also found no relationship between this index and the ratio of annual income and bride shortage, or the amount given in cash as a ratio of annual income and bride shortage.

The new Hindu Succession Act entitles women to a share in ancestral property.

Chowdhry (2012) discusses growing claims by families without daughters in a share in ancestral property.


Larsen, Mattias, Ravinder Kaur and Aswini Kumar Nanda (forthcoming): Sex-Selective Abortion in North India: Patriarchy and Women’s Education.


