



BOOK REVIEW

Men Outnumbering Women: Concerns and Consequences

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Srinivasan, Sharada, and Li, Shuzhuo (eds.) (2018), *Scarce Women and Surplus Men in China and India: Macro Demographics versus Local Dynamics*, Springer International Publishing, Basel, pp. 164, EUR 99.99.

A sex ratio imbalance in which men outnumber women has been a matter of concern in China and India. Research engagement with this topic has been broadly two-fold: it has attempted to understand, first, the reason behind imbalanced sex ratios, and, secondly, has focused on the implications of such imbalances. The volume under review makes a contribution to the topic by viewing the problem of demographic shift in terms of individual and familial experiences of adjusting and adapting to change. An immediate implication of a scarcity of women can be forced bachelorhood among men, which can alter gender norms and definitions of masculinity (although the view that a scarcity of women gives rise to violence and insecurity is a simplistic assumption that overlooks other aspects of changing power relations between the sexes).

The volume comprises six chapters, with half the chapters discussing changes underway at the micro-level in China, and the remaining half focusing on similar changes in India. Chapter 1, by Sharada Srinivasan and Shuzhuo Li, deals with demographic imbalance, and discusses the consequences of exclusion from the marriage market as well as the redefining of masculinity in northern India. It argues that the observed “marriage squeeze,” or the imbalance between the number of men and women available to marry, is not merely due to insufficient numbers but also to socio-economic transformations.

Chapter 2 by Paro Mishra discusses features of exclusion from the marriage market and the “threats to masculinity” that arise out of a demographic imbalance between the sexes. In a continuously evolving society, the age and socio-economic

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characteristics of individuals challenge the hegemony of marriage as an institution. However, strategies of compromise are adopted in the form of cross-cultural and cross-regional marriages, along with the practice of bride price. In other cases, the stigma of bachelorhood among men is often overcome by a manifestation of ambivalence and helplessness. Poor prospects of marriage are frequent among those belonging to low-income categories. The long-term implications of this could well compromise individual well-being later in life.

A similar enquiry by Y. Li, W. D. Li, and S. Z. Li in chapter 3 highlights the impact that the division of households and intra-generational inequality could have on the marriage prospects of single men in rural China. Here, too, the marriage prospects of younger sons are bleak in comparison to those of older sons. The increase in financial costs of marriages and the tendency of potential brides to improve their economic status through marriage create further exclusion from the marriage market.

Given the stark reality of forced bachelorhood among males, it is surprising and perhaps counter-intuitive that many single men view bachelorhood as a choice rather than a compulsion. In chapter 4, Kun Zhang and Daniele Balengar explore the redefined norms of an ideal spouse and marriage from the perspective of an unmarried man. In an interview-based enquiry among single males in two rural towns in China – Baijia (Shaanxi province) and Lijia (Jiangsu province) – the authors observed that the strategy of seeking wives had shifted from the traditional patrilocal norms to uxrilocal or matrilocal norms. This change was clearly evident among some single male cohorts of marriageable age.

According to the authors, Chinese men resist the label of “forced bachelor” by contesting the necessity of marriage and terming some kinds of marriage as “undesirable.” Uxrilocal marriages, in which the groom lives with the bride’s family, have developed as an alternative in a select tribal group. On the whole, marital strategies are in a process of transformation, with prevailing norms being contested and men frequently choosing to remain unmarried in a refusal to adapt to changing norms.

Chapter 5 by Shruti Chaudhry offers a comprehensive account of the difficulties in getting married faced by men in a village in Baghpat district of Uttar Pradesh. An in-depth survey of households was complemented by semi-structured interviews of 38 key informants, comprising 19 regional brides and 19 cross-regional brides. Details of caste, religion, and lineage (“gotra”) were collected as part of the survey. Men displayed greater heterogeneity in their responses to the need for marriage as well as the constraints of marriage. Strategies adopted to overcome these constraints differed across caste and class. Marriage for sex, procreation, and “restoration of masculinity” were the guiding principles of any alternative strategy to overcome the difficulties in finding a wife.

While the demographics indicate that there is a genuine shortage of females in the marriage market, the difficulties that men face should be viewed beyond the scarcity of women, in terms of the changing political economy of the marriage market. If marriage is considered a strategy of “social production,” men and families seem to be adopting varying strategies in response to this emerging trend, strategies that are tied to ideas of caste and the necessities of livelihood. One such adaptive measure has been cross-regional brides.

In chapter 6, Lisa Eklund analyses the emerging trends among men with respect to marriage, in the context of a lack of supply of women. The chapter studies how power and notions of the self are important determinants of mate-selection behaviour, especially among those who are educated. In a situation of fewer women, men belonging to low-income categories and with low levels of education were at a further disadvantage. This has also meant that rural women have a wider choice in the marriage market. Among the factors that lead to an inability to marry among single men, a qualitative enquiry revealed that family events, divisions in the household, and resource deprivation were particularly important. Economic hardship arising out of the untimely death of either parent also influenced the prospect of marriage for single males in rural households. Further, the division of household resources among siblings made the marriage of younger male siblings less likely than that of older ones.

In chapter 7, Judith Heyer focuses on a typical south Indian kinship system and its implications for the structure of the community. The chapter examines the impact of bride shortage among the Vellala Gounder community based on a multi-year study in a village of Coimbatore district, Tamil Nadu, the transition in its occupational structure, landholding pattern, and the educational attainments of boys and girls. The study considers the changing expectations of sons and daughters. Contrary to previous traditions of inheritance, in which male members of the family would retain the land, there has been a shift towards daughters playing a more positive role in their natal families. This tendency, however, has not strengthened the position of women, though to an extent it has lessened the imbalance in sex ratio over time. This might also be an acknowledgement of the dependence of many families on daughters. The chapter offers an instance that contests the supposition that a shortage of women will enhance their status or autonomy.

The final chapter in the book, by Christophe Z. Guilmoto, presents a dialogue between demographers and anthropologists. The chapter highlights the differences between the numeric consequences of a demographic shift, and the responses and institutions that continuously evolve to the changing circumstances of such a shift. The constancy of institutions and processes often mislead demographic intuition, but demographics are meant to assess a situation rather than derive its implications. Regional demographics can grow into a wider cross-regional global discipline if they accommodate endogenous innovations from the domain of norms and practices.

The volume provides insights into the micro-realities of imbalanced sex ratios in India and China, challenges established norms, and reveals evolving gender dynamics. Case studies and in-depth qualitative enquiries examine adaptive strategies and responses to the demographic determinism of the marriage squeeze. A scarcity of women and surplus of men neither implies forced bachelorhood among men, nor greater power for women in terms of hypergamy or the choices available to them. The contributions to the volume are rich in the diversity of the contexts they discuss, and cover a range of circumstances and settings. Such scholarship is important for the discussion on imbalanced sex ratios, for it contests accepted norms. The volume marks an important contribution to the discussion around a contemporary issue. Its interdisciplinary and balanced approach deserves the appreciation of social scientists.