



Mutual Reciprocity And Gender Dynamics: A Global Examination Of Exchange Marriage Practices

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Abstract:

This paper explores the practice of exchange marriage, a form of marital arrangement where two or more households mutually exchange women in marriage. Characterized by mutual reciprocity, exchange marriages have been practiced in diverse communities across the globe, though relatively rare. The paper examines the prevalence and cultural context of exchange marriages among tribes in Papua New Guinea, West Africa, and the Amazon, as well as in Asia, with a focus on regions such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India. Despite offering potential protection through reciprocity, these marriages often perpetuate cycles of mistreatment and violence, as the fate of one bride is closely tied to the treatment of another. By analyzing gender dynamics and socio-economic motivations behind exchange marriages, the paper highlights the tension between tradition and the vulnerability of women in these marriages. While some recent studies have reported the presence of exchange marriages in India and China, comprehensive research remains limited. The study calls for further exploration of the lived experiences of individuals involved in these arrangements to better understand the implications for gender roles and individual well-being.

Keywords: Kinship, Marriage Practices, Gender Relations, Patriarchy, Violence.

Introduction:

Exchange marriage is a practice in which two or more households mutually exchange women in marriage. In this arrangement, the household that gives their daughter in marriage to another household also receives a daughter-in-law from the same household. Exchange marriages have been defined as: "Exchange marriage occurs when a brother or classificatory kinsman of a woman marries the sister or classificatory kinswoman of her husband" (Palriwala, Rajni, 1994). Although observed in various communities across different times globally, this practice has been relatively rare.

Exchange marriage is distinguished by its characteristic of mutual reciprocity, setting it apart from other marriage forms. If one of the brides is mistreated by her marital

family, the other bride in the marriage alliance may also face mistreatment from her marital family. Due to this feature, Zaman M, Zakar M, Sharif A, Sabir I, Zakar R, and Arif M (2013) coined the term 'Rule of the Game' in their study of exchange marriages in Southern Pakistan.

Some communities traditionally believe that exchange marriages help ensure that the bride's family can protect their daughter by marrying her into the bride's natal family. Women from Punjab, Pakistan shared:

"...[W]e do such marriages because if we give our daughter without it, she might get harmed. We do watta satta (exchange marriage) so that our daughter remains secure." (woman from

Badeen, Sindh) (Jacoby & Mansuri, 2010, pp. 1813).

However, when deterrence fails, violence in one marriage may spill over into the counterpart marriage:

“Yes, my marriage involves a watta satta (exchange marriage) agreement...When my husband beats me, I go and tell my mother and sister. My brother feels bad about this and then he beats his wife to take revenge...There are many fights in our family because of this...I do feel that it is the women who are being beaten in both families.” (woman from Mirpurkhas, Sindh) (Jacoby & Mansuri, 2010, pp. 1813).

Regarding exchange marriages in Pakistan, various scholars have described them as ‘an abuse of two women whose marital happiness depends on actors outside their marriage’. (Khoso et al, 2011).

Due to the unique potential consequences of exchange marriage, especially concerning women’s vulnerability, it is crucial to explore the exchange marriage system.

Prevalence of Exchange Marriage:

Marriages by direct exchange have been observed on a rare scale (Schlegel and Eloui, 1988, 294, in Payton, 2020), and they were considered a lower-status form of marriage (Dzięgel 1982, 258; Ertem and Kocturk 2008; Fricke et al. 1986, 494; Jacoby and Mansuri 2007, in Payton, 2020).

Among the Gumuz people, a Koman language-speaking group on the Sudan-Ethiopia border, marriages by exchange were largely prevalent. Among 371 surveyed married couples, only 2 couples were married with bride-price, while all other couples were married by exchange (Wendy James, 1975).

In rural Pakistan, exchange marriages accounted for about a third of all marriages (Jacoby and Mansuri, 2012, p. 1804). Among the Durrani Pashtuns in Afghanistan, direct exchange marriage accounted for 20 percent. Of these, 75% were sister-exchange marriages (Tapper Nancy, 1981). Among the Brahmin community located in the mountainous region of Nepal, exchange marriages accounted for 72% of marriages sponsored by households of poor or moderate economic standing (Prindle, H., 1978, pp. 138).

In India, exchange marriages were observed on a minuscule level and were considered lower-status (Karve, 1965). In the village of Utrassu-Umanagari, rural Kashmir, 67 out of 148 unions, i.e., 45%, were formed through exchange marriages (Madan, T. N., 1975). Among the Lewa Patidar community in Gujarat, 31.7% of the 208 surveyed couples were married by exchange (Patel, 1966). In Barampur district, Uttar Pradesh, informants suggested that ‘Nirol’ marriages, i.e., the widely prevalent form of marriage without exchange, and the exchange marriages (locally known as ‘Tigadda’) were almost equal in number (Chaudhry, Shruti 2018). More studies in the past two decades have observed the occurrence of exchange marriages in Haryana (Panchal & Ajgaonkar, 2016) and Rajasthan (UNICEF, 2016, UNICEF & ICRW, 2011, TISS & AJWS, 2016), though there is a lack of knowledge on the prevalence of exchange marriages in recent times in India.

Exchange Marriages in Different Communities:

1. Exchange Marriages Amongst the Tribes in Papua New Guinea, West Africa, and the Amazon:

Among the Keraki people of Morehead District (Papua), exchange

marriage was practiced, where a man would give his sister to obtain a wife. The contract was essentially between the two local groups and was strictly honored. A deserting bride was not given refuge by her people but was sent back to her husband, and repeated desertions could result in severe penalties (Williams, F. E., 1934, pp. 110).

In Nigeria, one common method of contracting marriage was by exchange. As described, "two men agree to exchange their sisters or female cousins" (Meek, C. K., 1936, pp. 64). Among the Tiv-speaking people in Nigeria, the system of Yamshe, or direct exchange marriage, involved the exchange of sisters. "Under this system, a father was required to distribute his female children among his male children, who would then use them to exchange for wives. Through this system, each male child had a sister (called ingyor) with which he could exchange with another person for a wife" (Wayas & David-Wayas, 2020, pp. 427).

In the Makuna Indian community of the Northwestern Amazon, three forms of marriage were practiced: Gift Marriage, Direct Exchange Marriage, and Bride Capture Marriage. In gift marriages, women were given freely to another clan, with the expectation of eventual reciprocity. Bride capture, however, was a violent method of obtaining a bride without any reciprocal exchange. Direct exchange marriage involved the sister-exchange system, where two men exchanged their biological sisters as wives. This arrangement was formally agreed upon by senior men in the groups involved and followed strict reciprocity (Kaj Arhem, 1981). Exchange marriages occurred more frequently among distant allies than among close allies within the community. While the structure of these marriages has been documented, there is still little understanding of the lived experiences of women and men involved.

Among the Gumuz people on the Sudan-Ethiopia border, exchange marriage was the dominant practice. Marriage contracts between patrilineal clans often extended across generations, with clans owing and receiving women over time. Fathers exchanged their daughters to secure wives for their sons or, in some cases, for themselves. In some instances, women were borrowed from other clans, and in return, the borrowing family was expected to provide a daughter later.

Elopesments that occurred without the exchange were considered grave offenses, leading to violent consequences. If a woman eloped, she was viewed as stolen, and compensation in the form of a future woman or her daughter was expected. Exchange marriage was deeply entrenched in the community, and one account recounts how an elderly woman refused to let her daughter be exchanged because her in-laws had killed her son years earlier. Despite the son-in-law offering a large sum of money, she demanded the payment go directly to her rather than her in-laws.

2. Exchange Marriages in Asia:

In rural Pakistan, exchange marriages typically involved a brother-sister pair from two households. The Shahpur Phull community in Southern Punjab practiced endogamous exchange marriages, meaning marriages occurred between paternal or maternal cousins (Rehman and Kavesh, 2012). Four types of exchanges were identified in this community. The first was sister exchange, where grooms traded their sisters for brides. The second was daughter exchange, where two men exchanged daughters and entered into second marriages. In these cases, the daughter was often married to someone from her father's generation. The third type was daughter-sister exchange, in which one man gave his daughter and received his sister as a wife in a second marriage. Finally, there was

marriage before birth, where, in the absence of an available daughter or sister, a family would promise their first daughter to the other party (Rehman & Kavesh, 2012).

In South Punjab, Pakistan, exchange marriages were deeply rooted in the region's economic challenges and political instability. Daughters and sisters were considered both wealth and symbols of honor. Endogamous marriages provided families with social and political security, while exchange marriages helped manage inter-group rivalries (Ibid). Polygamy was supported by this system, as men could gain additional wives by offering their sisters or daughters in exchange. This allowed a man with many daughters to become "rich in wives."

Financially, exchange marriages were also advantageous, as they eliminated the need for dowries. The two parties could negotiate terms that suited both, as each party was both a wife-giver and a wife-taker. Moreover, these marriages eased tensions over property inheritance, and affinal kin often provided labor for each other's agrarian work (Rehman & Kavesh, 2012).

The exchange marriage system reinforced traditional gender roles, particularly through the "rule of the game" (Zaman et al., 2013). This rule dictated that a man's wife should be treated as well as his sister was treated by her husband, which encouraged the confinement of women to their homes (Ibid). The custom of older men marrying younger women further emphasized women's inferior status (Rehman & Kavesh, 2012). In this system, a husband's behavior toward his wife could be controlled by the "rule of the game," but when forced to choose between his wife and his sister, the man typically prioritized his sister (Zaman et al., 2013).

While this rule sometimes protected women, it could also lead to violence when reciprocation broke down. The same

mechanism that safeguarded women in some marriages caused harm in others.

This system promoted dominant masculinity. If one couple faced problems, the other couple was expected to reciprocate, and failure to do so could result in the man being labeled non-masculine. Economic dependencies also caused issues. If one man was dependent on his wife's earnings, the other family would pressure him to find work, reinforcing traditional expectations that women should remain at home (Zaman et al., 2013).

Children were particularly vulnerable in exchange marriages. When conflicts arose, children often suffered, becoming "rolling stones" in the negative cycle of reciprocity (Zaman, 2013). Little attention was given to their well-being or protection in such disputes.

Additionally, children's marriages were arranged as early as birth, or even before. Grandparents made these decisions, and children were expected to comply. Non-compliance was seen as deviant behavior (Zaman et al., 2013).

Despite these challenges, many women supported the exchange marriage system because it was deeply ingrained in tradition. It was considered improper to marry without exchange (Zaman et al., 2013). Jacoby & Mansuri (2010) argued that the system, with its threat of mutual retaliation, offered some protection to women. If a husband mistreated his wife, he could expect his brother-in-law to retaliate by mistreating his sister (Jacoby and Mansuri, 2010).

Among the Durrani Pashtuns in Afghanistan, exchange marriages primarily involved sister-exchange and included a bride-price, negotiated and provided by the fathers of both brides (Tapper, Nancy, 1981). These marriages had two key political motives. First, they were used to gain recognition or establish relationships

with previously unknown groups of equal status, functioning as an exchange not only of women but also of economic and political resources. This could be seen as an "exchange of recognition," where outsiders would offer manpower, wealth, and other resources in return for marital alliances with the Durrani.

The second motive was conflict resolution. The Durrani would only give women to those of equal standing. Outsiders, perceived as potential enemies, could only resolve disputes through the exchange of women. Internal group quarrels, which could weaken the tribe, were often settled through exchange marriages, sometimes imposed by group leaders or household heads. These marriages helped foster unity among the tribes, though the experiences of women in these alliances remain largely unexplored and warrant further investigation.

Among the Kurds in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, "Jin be Jine," literally meaning "a woman for a woman," was a marriage practice in which one girl was directly exchanged for another (Payton, 2020). Exchange marriages in Kurdistan were tied to the region's non-state political economies, where households operated as collective units for the benefit of all members. Interestingly, these marriage contracts extended beyond a woman's lifetime. If a woman died, the husband could marry her sister or demand half the bride-price to bring a second wife.

Among the Kurds, exchange marriages were also seen as a way to avoid paying bride-price, with both parties acting as both wife-givers and wife-takers. Like in South Punjab, families with more daughters benefited, as males could secure multiple wives through such exchanges. The expectation of absolute reciprocity also extended to marriage transactions: both families had to maintain equal guest numbers, identical gifts of gold jewelry, and

furniture for the marital family. This strict reciprocity meant that if one marriage failed, the other would often collapse as well.

In the Brahmin community located in the mountainous regions of Nepal, exchange marriages were similarly common. Two daughters from different households were exchanged as brides for the households' sons (Prindle, H., 1978). If the groom did not have a sister, he would arrange for a daughter or sister from another household to be exchanged in his place. In such cases, a written contract was made, ensuring the groom's household would later provide a girl for future exchanges (Ibid).

This practice was prevalent in the Brahmin community due to the small marriage market in the region and the desire to avoid bride-wealth payments. Exchange marriages were perceived as safer for daughters; if a daughter faced mistreatment, her family could retaliate against their daughter-in-law in the same way, reducing the risk of harm (Prindle, H., 1978). However, there remains a gap in knowledge about whether violence in one exchange pair influenced the other couple's marriage.

In rural China, exchange marriages involved the swapping of daughters between two or even three families (Zhang, 2000). These marriages have been re-emerging as a strategy to cope with rising marriage costs, particularly among the poorest families. While not desirable, exchange marriages became acceptable in financially constrained situations. Negotiating such marriages was challenging, as it required finding families in similar financial conditions willing to exchange daughters. However, there is a significant lack of research into the modern-day prevalence and experiences of individuals in exchange marriages in rural China.

3. Exchange Marriages in India:

Among the Pandits in rural Kashmir, exchange marriages occurred primarily due to a shortage of women in rural areas. These marriages also helped avoid the economic burden of marriage prestations (Madan T. N., 1975). However, exchange marriages were less desirable because they equalized the status of daughter-giving and wife-receiving households, breaching the norm of higher status for wife-receivers and causing role confusion between the two households (Ibid).

Among the Rajputs, Jats, and Gadris in the Chittorgarh district of Rajasthan, exchange marriages were arranged to avoid paying dowry and bride-price, while also ensuring security in case of marital breakdown (Chauhan, 1967). If one marriage failed, the family could retain their daughter or remarry her, securing the bride-price from the next husband (Ibid). In the tribal community of Rajasthan, exchange marriages involved sibling pairs marrying each other. If the elder bride was sent for cohabitation, her family would insist that the younger bride, even if too young, be sent as well (Mathur Kanchan, 2004).

In Dogra culture in Kashmir, exchange marriages among Gaddis involved a man marrying a woman in exchange for his sister. Sometimes three families were involved: A's sister married B, B's sister married C, and C's sister married A. If one family opted out, it caused problems for the other couples in the alliance (Jerath Ashok, 1998).

Among the Lewa Patidars in five villages in Northern Gujarat, four broad types of exchange marriages were identified (Patel, H. G., 1966). In the Sata-Peta type, two men exchanged daughters, each obtaining a wife for his son. Dodhh marriages connected three families in a triangular exchange. Khat marriages involved one family giving a written bond to

provide a girl for future exchange, and in the fourth type, bride-price was given in exchange for a bride (Patel, H. G., 1966). Additionally, exchange marriages occurred through the marriage of brothers' daughters, uncles' daughters, or other kin.

Over time, the Lewa Patidar community began to disfavor exchange marriages. Those in favor argued that such marriages allowed everyone, including the poor and disabled, to secure brides and avoided debts. Others opposed the practice due to poor matches, child marriages, and conflicts between families (Patel, H. G., 1966). The shift in attitude was driven by increased education, rising marriage age, and family migration for business or work.

The community gradually transitioned from direct exchanges to indirect exchanges involving three families. Instead of exchanging women directly, families began using bride-price or written promises to provide a future bride (Ibid). This change was influenced by higher education levels and increased marriage age (Ibid).

In India, exchange marriages have occurred in various communities at different times, but the practice has been minimally explored. Recent studies, however, have reported on the persistence of exchange marriages in Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh.

In Haryana, Protection and Prohibition Officers stated that exchange marriages were a significant cause of child marriages for both boys and girls (Panchal and Ajagaonkar, 2016). Under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006, if either the bride or groom was underage, the marriage could be nullified, causing the breakdown of the corresponding marriage in the exchange (Ibid). In Haryana, families only received a bride if they had a daughter to exchange (Larsen and Kaur, 2013). In the absence of a daughter, some families

adopted girls from within their extended family for exchange (Ibid).

In certain districts of Rajasthan, exchange marriages involved brother-sister pairs being married between two households (TISS & AJWS, 2016). In some cases, as many as five to six households were involved in a single exchange (UNICEF & ICRW, 2011). Studies have identified exchange marriages as a leading cause of remarriages in Rajasthan, as these unions often did not last (Pancholi and Hemadri, 2006). Girls and boys were often married off young, contributing to the issue of child marriages in the region (UNICEF, 2016).

In the Chamar community in Uttar Pradesh, exchange marriages took place between three families or villages. Direct exchanges, where A gave a bride to B and B reciprocated, were rare. Men who were unable to marry through regular means often turned to exchange marriages in both Uttar Pradesh and Haryana (Chowdhry, 2018; Panchal & Ajagaonkar, 2016).

Conclusion:

This paper has examined the practice of exchange marriage, a form of marital arrangement in which two or more households mutually exchange women in marriage. Defined as a situation where a brother or classificatory kinsman of a woman marries the sister or classificatory kinswoman of her husband (Palriwala, 1994), exchange marriage is characterized by its mutual reciprocity, which distinguishes it from other forms of marriage. This reciprocity can offer protection but also perpetuate cycles of mistreatment and violence, as the well-being of one bride is often linked to the treatment of another within the marriage alliance (Zaman et al., 2013).

The prevalence and practice of exchange marriages vary significantly

across different regions and communities. In Papua New Guinea, West Africa, and the Amazon, exchange marriages have been documented among tribes such as the Keraki, Tiv-speaking people, and the Makuna Indians, where the practice involves various forms of reciprocal exchanges. In Asia, exchange marriages are prevalent in regions such as rural Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, with practices often rooted in local economic and social contexts. In India, exchange marriages have been observed among various communities, including the Pandits in Kashmir, Rajputs in Rajasthan, and Lewa Patidars in Gujarat.

While exchange marriages are relatively rare globally, they remain a significant practice in some regions due to their economic, social, and cultural implications. The practice often reflects deep-rooted traditions and attempts to manage social relationships and economic constraints. However, it also raises concerns about women's vulnerability and the potential for perpetuating cycles of violence.

The complexities of exchange marriages highlight the need for further research into the lived experiences of individuals involved in these arrangements. Understanding the consequences of such practices on gender dynamics, and individual well-being is important. The protective aspects of mutual reciprocity and the risks of reciprocal violence are crucial to be explored further.

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