

### Life and Times of Unborn Kamla

K.K. Varma. 2013. New Delhi: Palimpsest Publishers, 131 pages, Kindle Edition: £1.87; Paperback £1.87/₹275

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“Men cannot do without women. They need a mother to feed them, a sister to play with, in their youth they seek a ladylove for romance, a wife to have a family with.... But they don't want a daughter born to them! These double standards and ingrained hypocrisy have made the girl child more vulnerable – demographically and culturally as well.”

This appalling excerpt from the book portrays that even in the 21st Century, a girl child in India continues to be the victim of grotesque gender inequality—the increasing levels of female foeticide has given rise to the trades of trafficking and bride buying. These inequalities are the result of several cascading factors: cultural values, patriarchy, poverty, illiteracy and unemployment.

Based on real-life stories, the narrative of the book begins with the life of Kammo. Raised in a poverty-stricken family of seven siblings, close to the Nepal border, Kammo, was ‘sold as a bride’ at a meagre amount to a groom, who originally hailed from Punjab but settled in Himachal Pradesh near Shimla. Cajoled by false promises of a happy married and secured life, Kammo's life landed in scourge of miseries—she first became a victim of brutal sexual and domestic exploitation (Bhattacharyya, 2009; 2013a, 2013b, 2014) by her husband and her in-laws, coerced to kill Kamla in her womb, and then pushed into prostitution for failing to deliver a baby boy. The story narrates her escape from prostitution and subsequent challenge to get her life back on track and importantly, to build her own identity as the owner of a small tea stall in Shimla.

The practice of bride buying followed in some states of India: Haryana, Punjab, etc. stems from a skewed gender ratio. According to the Census of India, 2011, Haryana and Daman and Diu, among all the States and Union Territories, count for the lowest sex ratios, 877 and 618 women respectively per 1000 men. In the said context, Dasgupta (2014) argues that though census data reveals that the overall sex ratio of India is improving, however, the child sex ratio is on the decline. That is, between 1991 and 2011, female-male sex ratio, though rose from 927:1,000 to 940:1,000, its child sex ratio declined from 945:1,000 to 914: 1,000 (please see, Children In India, 2012-A Statistical Appraisal). Seemingly, Varma argues that in India, female foeticide remains rampant—every 12 seconds a baby girl is aborted, which means 700,000 girls are killed every year. Ironically, sex selective abortion has grown into a ₹100 million-industry. This is despite the Government of India's Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act, 1994 that meant to prevent and ban female foeticides. Nevertheless, the asymmetrical sex ratio has paved the way to high levels of trafficking of young women and girls. Evidently, human trafficking is the third largest profitable industry in the world. Varma laments that across India; approximately 200 young women are being forced into prostitution every day. He further bemoans that an estimated 200,000 girls from Nepal are forced to cater to the customers in Mumbai brothels.

Indeed, the struggle for unborn Kamla, a national shame, remains a long-fought battle. Notwithstanding, a silent eco-friendly gender revolution has begun in the Piplantri village of Rajasthan—each time a girl child is born, the villagers welcome the birth of the child by planting 111 trees, thereby, trying to build connection between the environment and gender activism (Singh, 2013). Nonetheless, the grim reality of missing girls continues.

Priced competitively, this comprehensive and interesting read pulls together the unique

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insights and challenges of 'bride famine' in India. The book has tremendous potential to accrue benefit to the available literatures on women's studies and gender and development.

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## About the Author: Professor K.K. Varma

Prof. K.K. Varma began his career in demographic research at Patna University, India; an alumnus and ex-member of faculty of the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, India. He also has been ex-State Representative of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in India. Professor Varma has spent long years in the social sector-working for research and consultancy organisation, Government of India, international NGOs and the United Nations. He currently holds a key position in Childreach International India.