

OVERSEAS MARRIAGES AND THE NEW WAVE OF ABANDONMENT: A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The aspiration to settle abroad in countries like the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand has made marriage one of the most sought-after pathways for migration. Overseas marriages, particularly those involving Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and foreign nationals, have long been viewed as a means to secure better opportunities and permanent residency. However, beneath the promise of a stable future, these marriages often entail complex challenges and unforeseen complications, making them far less ideal than they initially appear. Traditionally, these marriages were associated with the abandonment of wives by their NRI husbands. However, a new trend has emerged, women, after migrating through marriage, are now abandoning their husbands. This shift in dynamics raises critical questions about the intersection of marriage, migration, and personal agency. The present research paper examines the evolving patterns of abandonment in overseas marriages, highlighting the socio-legal challenges faced by both men and women. While legal protections exist, the transnational nature of marital abandonment often leaves individuals vulnerable, complicating avenues for justice and redress. Drawing on reports from national and international organizations, case studies, and statistical analyses, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the shifting gendered experiences in overseas marriages and the broader socio-legal implications of abandonment.

Keywords: Overseas Marriage; Victimization; Social Institution; Gender Dynamics; Structural Changes; NRI's; Patriarchy; Socio-Legal Aspect.

Introduction

Unlike other religions, marriage, for Hindus or Indians, is a religious sacrament even though they are living in India or any other country. In Indian culture, marriage is regarded as a sacrosanct institution with immense cultural and religious significance, often perceived as a lifelong commitment. Although one can find a wide range of marriage laws in India, personal rules that stem from an individual's religion fundamentally provide the legal basis for marriage. However, rules for Indians residing abroad differ as per the legal system of the country in which they are living. Many Indians living overseas chooses to have their marriages formally as per the laws of the nation they are in, on the other hand, others may opt to have traditional customary marriage in respect of their culture or religion. Albeit, in the context of globalization and migration, marriage has also become a strategic pathway for securing better opportunities and permanent residency in countries like the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the like.

In general, an “**Overseas Marriage**” is characterized by the union of individuals who live in different countries from each other, involving at least one citizen of the country different from the one where the marriage ceremony is held. These forms of unions involving nationals of different nations are also referred to as ‘Transnational Marriages’ and NRI (Non-Resident Indian) marriages also come under the same category. Cross-border marriages have become more common due to several factors, such as global mobility, chances for education, work opportunities abroad, technical advancements that make it feasible to interact online, cultural exchange programs, changing societal attitudes, cultural or personal preferences, fascination to have a destination wedding, and sometimes there might be some legal considerations.

Despite the term being gender-neutral, ‘NRI marriages’, often involve an Indian woman from India and an Indian man residing in another country. NRI (Non-Resident Indian), as per FEMA (**Foreign Exchange Management Act, 1999**), is deemed to be a citizen of India if they come to or stay in India for

any reason during the previous financial year and spend more than 182 days there (**FEMA,1999**). Nonetheless, as of late, The Punjab Compulsory Registration of Marriages Act 2012, has defined NRI as a person of Indian descent who is settled outside of India, either permanently or temporarily, for the purpose of business, employment, vocation, or any other purpose indicating an uncertain or determined period of overseas stay (**Punjab Compulsory Registration of Marriages Act 2012**). The scenario of NRI marriages often begins wherein an NRI, desiring a partner with traditional Indian values, embarks on a quest for a life companion, which often involves a trip to India or the posting of a matrimonial ad for Indian partners. Wanting their daughter to get settled abroad, Indian families usually view this as a chance for a better life for the entire family and an improvement in their social and economic status. In this eagerness, families overlook the crucial details, such as the groom's employment status in a foreign land, family history, and so on, which are usually crucial in traditional matchmaking. However, these marriages are hastily arranged due to the desire to seize the chance for a better life overseas, but unfortunately, the figures show that up to two out of ten cases of these nuptial alliances turn out to be fraudulent. The distressing phenomena of wives abandoned by their NRI husbands unfold in three distinct patterns, each illustrating the challenges and vulnerability faced by women involved in overseas marriage:

- a) A woman residing in a foreign land with her husband (after the marriage) abruptly finds herself abandoned by her husband in a precarious situation, dealing with uncertainties and usually lacking the essential support network.
- b) In the second scenario, a woman has been living overseas with her husband. The husband, out of the blue, makes a plan vacation to visit India to trick his wife or sometimes coercively force her to return to India, leaving her without her passport, visa, and money. As a result, she is unable to sustain herself independently and return to her husband, while her husband returns and withdraws her visa.
- c) The third and most common pattern unfolds in cases where the woman is married to an NRI man before he migrates to a foreign land. She is told that she would be sponsored for a visa to accompany her spouse, but the paperwork never shows up. Such scenarios periodically occur in the context of rushed marriages, usually when men visit India for a short period.

In these cases, women who are abandoned in their homeland are known by several names in India, including 'Honeymoon Brides', 'Holiday Brides', 'Brides of cheat weddings or fraud marriages', and 'brides of passport weddings' (**Bajpai, 2013**).

A report supported by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) shows that India, with a substantial population of 17.9 million, has currently boasts the world's largest diaspora living abroad (**Infographic, 2023**). Although the diaspora represents the Indian community's global reach and impact, it also highlights other issues, most notably the rise in the cases of abandoned wives. As of 2024, the Indian diaspora remained the largest in the world, with over 35 million Indians residing across various countries. Among them, more than 15 million were Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), while the remaining population comprised Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) (**Rathore, 2025**). Due to the large number of Indians who have dispersed over the globe, there is a complicated dynamic that might result in cases of desertion from overseas marriages.

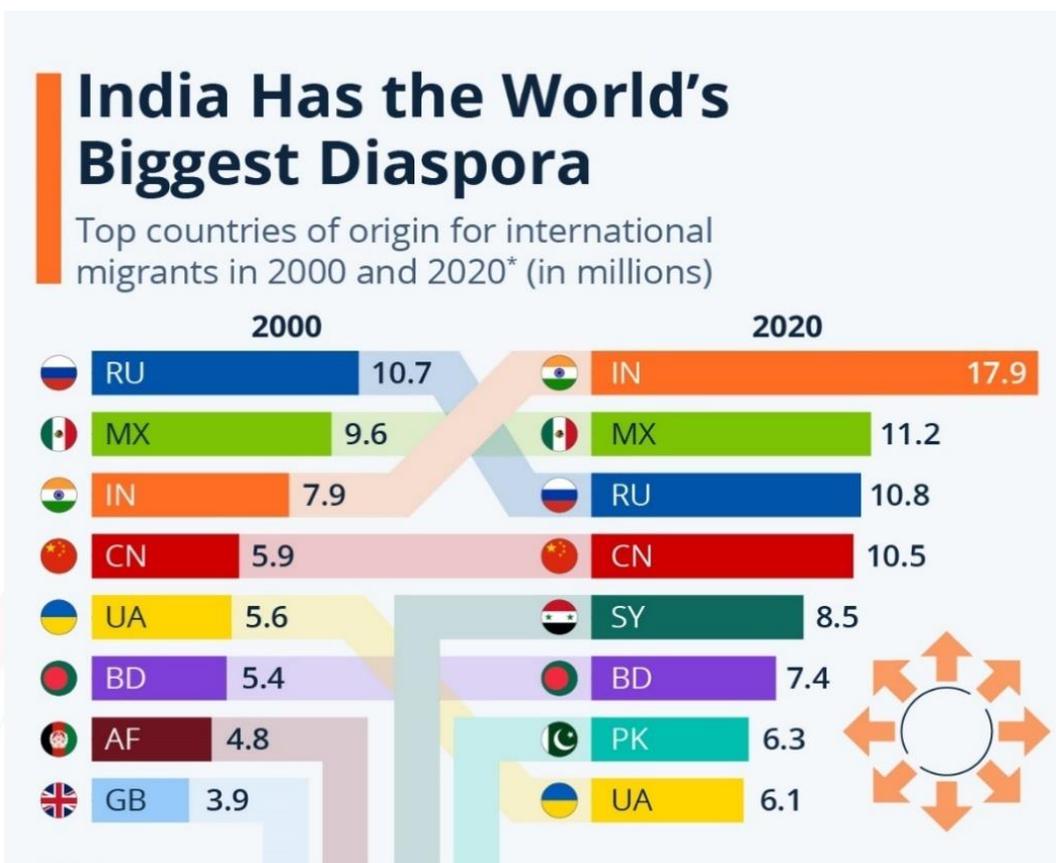


Figure 1 Mid-Year, Top Countries of Origin for International Migrants in 2000 and 2020 (Report by UNDESA, Population Division)

For over ten years, there has been a subtle increase in the number of abandoned wives by their Non-Resident husbands. Women who have been deserted by NRIs live in countries such as the USA, Canada, the UK, and other European and Middle Eastern countries have more cases (John, 2010). While cases of deserted wives can be observed across various Indian states, reports indicate a notable increase in such cases in Punjab. As per the report by the Ministry of External Affairs, Punjab alone accounts for more than 14 percent of the cases (QUESTION NO.688 COMPLAINTS OF NRI BRIDES, 2019). Recent data highlights the alarming issue of marital abandonment in overseas marriages, with 1,617 NRI brides reportedly deserted by their husbands over the past five years. This growing concern underscores the vulnerabilities faced by women in transnational marriages, where legal complexities and jurisdictional challenges often leave them with limited recourse for justice (QUESTION NO- 3100 ABANDONED INDIAN WOMEN, 2025).

State	State-wise number of NRI Marriage Grievances
Punjab	763
Uttar Pradesh	501
Maharashtra	468
NCR Delhi	436
Rajasthan	371
Karnataka	341
Tamil Nadu	321

Kerala	289
Haryana	288
Madhya Pradesh	249
Gujrat	208
West Bengal	196
Andhra Pradesh	177
Telangana	145
Chhattisgarh	86
Bihar	75
Himachal Pradesh	74
Jharkhand	74
Odisha	63
Uttarakhand	61
Jammu & Kashmir	41
Goa	18
Assam	15
Arunachal Pradesh	5
Puducherry	4
Meghalaya	1
Tripura	1

Table 1 NRI Marriage Grievances (State-wise) Source: Ministry of External Affairs

Though the issue of abandoned brides is widespread in many Indian states, such as Gujarat, UP, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Delhi, but it is particularly severe in Punjab, in the country's north, where there has historically been a high demand for migration to western nations (John, 2010). The decision of Punjabi women to marry and migrate abroad is largely motivated by various 'push' and 'pull' factors rooted in the state, community, and family dynamics. Factors pushing women toward international marriage include challenges in accessing professional education, limited employment opportunities, diminishing returns from agricultural activities, the influence of successful emigration within their social circles, and the pervasive promotion of emigration by influential advocates. On the contrary, the promise of a higher standard of living, better opportunities for their children's health, education, and employment, the assurance of social security in old age, and the substantial influence of remittances are among the alluring factors attracting women towards overseas marriage and migration (**Dasgupta, 2010**).

Turning the Tables: The Rising Trend of Wives Leaving Husbands in Overseas Marriages

We live in a society where the aspiration to attain Non-Resident Indian (NRI) status is so deeply ingrained that individuals are willing to go to great lengths, even manipulate relationships, to secure

foreign citizenship. The conventional narrative of marriages with Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) has long portrayed women as the primary victims of NRI marriage fraud, where brides were often deceived through family-orchestrated frauds. Promised a prosperous life abroad, many women entered these marriages with high hopes, only to face abandonment, exploitation, or betrayal. However, contemporary shifts challenge these stereotypes, unveiling a more complex and evolving reality. A significant emerging trend, particularly in Punjab and other migration-driven regions of India, highlights a reverse pattern—men aspiring to settle abroad are now falling victim to deception by their NRI wives. Unlike the traditional scenario where brides were misled and deserted, these cases reveal how women, too, are now leveraging legal, financial, and social loopholes to secure residency and independence in foreign countries, often at the expense of their spouses. This evolving dynamic underscores the shifting gender roles within transnational marriages, suggesting that marriage fraud is no longer confined to one gender but is instead becoming a tool manipulated by both men and women in pursuit of migration goals.

The Indian young men, notably in Punjab, who struggle academically to qualify the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) exam, with hopes of pursuing chances overseas, take an unconventional approach by getting married to women who have excellent IELTS scores. The strategy involves significant financial investment in their wives' education, ultimately paving the way for the wives to get settled abroad. Although, beneath the surface of these overseas marriages lies a complicated story with unintended repercussions. In order to ensure their own migration to distant countries, these men invest in their wives' education and rely on her spouses' qualification to support his visa application once she has made their way overseas. The wives, upon reaching foreign shores and being exposed to the liberating and opportunistic land, undergo a transformative shift. Empowered by the newfound freedom and limitless possibilities, some of them gradually distance themselves from their husbands. Instances of ignoring calls, and more drastically, filing for ex-parte divorces, which was earlier prominent way of NRI men while deserting their wives, have become increasingly prevalent.

Later, men who have been dumped by their spouses caught in a web of social shame, suffering from extreme humiliation and criticism from society. Some of these people driven to the verge of despair as they struggle with the severe emotional consequences, and the story takes a troubling turn. Not only do they feel as though they are failing in their marriages, but the pressure of society's expectations also weighs heavily. Especially when the woman is perceived as the primary breadwinner or initiator of the separation, this adds an extra layer of complexity to their plight. In the face of this societal judgment, some men experience sense of isolation and shame, leading to mental struggles. Regrettably, the upsetting effects of these circumstances may sometimes get out of control; there have been tales of men attempting suicide because they were unable to handle the social aftermath from being abandoned. One terrible illustration of the upsetting effects of such desertion is the case of Lovepreet Singh 'Ladi' in Barnala. The 24-year-old young man consumed fertilizer as his wife, after reaching Canada on a study visa, stops to answer his calls and this profound absence of communication, coupled with the emotional turmoil of being left unanswered, drove him to this devastating act (Misra, 2022). Although, due to shame and embarrassment, men do not speak up about being abandoned but after the horrific death of Loverpreet Singh, many of them came together to demand justice. As per a recent news article, about 30 men have approached the non-governmental organization ABBNHI (Abandoned Brides by NRI Husbands International) seeking assistance with a special request: to assist in the suspension of their wives' passports, which were initially obtained through study visas sponsored by their husbands, and also help them to dissolve their marriages. A significant shift can be noticed in the organization's purpose because it was before focused on promoting justice for abandoned wives (Voice for Men India, 2021).



Figure 2 & 3 (Left) Late. Lovepreet Singh with his wife (who abandoned him) & (Rights) Jaswinder Singh holding his wedding album. Source: The Print (Misra, 2022)

The head of the ABBNHI NGO stressed that grooms had spent a substantial amount, ranging from 17 to 35 lakhs, in helping their wives to migrate overseas, hoping and eagerly waiting for receiving the approval for visas. However, what they receive is ignorance. Even after being abandoned, the victims have filled complaint against their wives but the local police find themselves unable to initiate actions due to different legal frameworks of involves nations. The remark emphasizes a crucial point about possible gender biases in Indian laws, which sometimes disregard the difficulties that male experiences in term of overseas marriages (**Voice for Men India, 2021**).

In response to the rising prevalence of such cases, a Punjabi song titled 'Tera Door Nhi Canada'/' *Your Canada is not far*' has been released by a Punjabi singer, serving as an expression of emotions experiences by a husband who has been left by his NRI wife.

The Reversal of Power Dynamics in NRI Marriages:

Traditionally, it was men who, after securing a life abroad, exploited their foreign residency to abandon their wives; either leaving them behind in India or deserting them in an unfamiliar foreign land. Women, in such cases, endured the most of this abandonment, struggling for their marital rights, custody of their children, and even facing domestic violence, either at the hands of their husbands abroad or their in-laws in India. The legal and social battles for justice were long and arduous, often leaving them trapped in a cycle of helplessness. However, in recent years, the dynamics have begun to shift. With increasing migration opportunities for women, cases have emerged where wives, too, are abandoning their husbands, sometimes for personal aspirations, extramarital relationships, or legal loopholes that work in their favour. Men, who once exercised unchecked power in such situations, now find themselves at the receiving end of emotional, financial, and legal struggles. This reversal highlights a significant shift in gender roles within NRI marriages, challenging conventional narratives of victimhood and raising urgent questions about legal protection for both genders.

After making significant financial investments and placing immense trust in their spouses, many husbands send their wives abroad, hoping for mutual support and a shared future. However, the transition to a new cultural environment, particularly one that offers financial independence and personal freedom, often sparks a profound shift in identity. Once in a foreign land, some women, influenced by the cultural norms of independence and self-prioritization, begin to distance themselves from their husbands. The responsibilities and commitments that once defined their marital bond start to erode as their exposure to a new way of life reshapes their aspirations and perspectives. This sudden transformation, often perceived

as an assertion of newfound autonomy, leaves husbands in a state of emotional and financial distress, struggling to reconcile their expectations with the stark reality of abandonment.

This shift not only challenges the traditional dynamics of NRI marriages but also raises critical questions about the impact of cultural assimilation on relationships. As identity evolves, so do priorities, sometimes at the cost of the very relationships that once served as a foundation for these cross-border aspirations.

The Legal Barriers:

When it comes to cross-nation marriages, especially in a multicultural nation such as India, people face an array of challenges that are made worse by lack of uniform civil laws and the prevalence of conflicting personal laws dictated by different religious communities. The complexities intensify when such cases transcend national borders, involving diverse legal systems. When a bride or groom seeks legal action while filing a complaint or obtaining divorce in India, they often encounter formidable obstacles. The complexity stems from the fact that the other partner, who lives abroad, is facing a completely new set of legal processes. The legal issues faced by abandoned victims in the context of transnational marriages extend beyond the complexities of cross-border legal systems. Here are some legal challenges:

- Many times, husbands take advantage of the lenient grounds found in other judicial systems to secretly file for ex-parte divorces from their spouses. Divorce decreed in a foreign nation has two implications. First of all, the deserted spouses are kept in the dark and kept out of the divorce process, which denies them the chance to voice their concerns. Second, these women in India may not get maintenance, which has legal repercussions. Indian judicial systems frequently find it difficult to uphold maintenance claims since the marriage has been dissolved in a different jurisdiction, putting the abandoned women in a precarious situation without the possible financial support.
- Concern regarding the rights to ancestral or other possessions of Indian women who have been abandoned in marriages abroad is becoming more and more prevalent. Indian courts frequently encounter difficult issues while deciding the inheritance rights of NRI spouses who desert their spouses. Despite of devoting a lot of emotional energy and money (by their parents), they often face denial of their legitimate rights to ancestral home or other possessions possessed by their Indian in-laws. The legal complexities associated with international marriages add to the complexity of the situation, as Indian courts struggle to balance the technicalities of foreign legal decisions with the country's legal system.
- The custody of child is another serious challenge in transnational marriage for abandoned women. One of the important parts of this problem is when one parent, usually the deserted mother who act as legal representative, fails the court appearances. Under such circumstances, NRI husbands by default get complete legal custody of their children, yet this problem is made worse by forcing their spouses to return home, which make it difficult to mother to defend their case in court. After gaining the legal custody, NRI men may occasionally accuse their wives for kidnapping their children by filing abduction cases against them leads to the imposition of legal bans on the mothers by foreign legal system.
- While much attention has been given to abandoned wives in NRI marriages, the legal challenges faced by abandoned husbands remain largely overlooked. There are limited legal provisions to address their grievances, leaving many men without recourse when their spouses leave them in foreign lands or misuse legal frameworks against them. The social construct of hegemonic masculinity further discourages men from speaking out, as admitting victimhood is often seen as a

blow to their masculinity. Many suffer in silence, fearing social stigma and the lack of institutional support. For those who do muster the courage to seek justice, the legal process remains just as arduous as it is for abandoned wives. Bureaucratic delays, jurisdictional complexities, and the absence of clear legal mechanisms prolong their struggles. Cases of false accusations, financial exploitation, or emotional distress often go unheard, reinforcing the notion that legal redress in NRI marriages is not only gendered but also highly inadequate. This gap in legal frameworks highlights the urgent need for gender-inclusive policies that recognize and address the vulnerabilities of both abandoned husbands and wives in transnational marriages.

Conclusion

Abandoned spouses in India, both men and women, continue to face immense challenges despite the existence of legislative frameworks governing overseas marriages. The complexity arises from the lack of a universal legal code, as marriage laws vary across jurisdictions, making justice difficult to attain. The Foreign Marriage Act, though addressing the legal dimensions of such unions, primarily derives its essence from the Hindu Marriage Act and the Special Marriage Act. However, the deeply rooted cultural and religious nature of marriages in India often results in legal provisions being overlooked or underutilized. Moreover, while abandoned wives have long been recognized as victims of this issue, the growing cases of abandoned husbands reveal another dimension—one where hegemonic masculinity often prevents men from speaking up, and even when they do, legal recourse remains just as arduous. Recognizing these gaps, the Ministry of External Affairs has taken proactive steps by issuing guidelines in the form of booklets to educate individuals on their legal rights and options. By fostering awareness and ensuring accessible legal knowledge for both men and women, these initiatives aim to empower individuals and create a more informed and just society.

To bridge these gaps, there is an urgent need for stronger legal frameworks that ensure justice across borders, regardless of gender. Bilateral agreements between India and foreign nations must be reinforced to expedite legal action in cases of abandonment. Additionally, establishing fast-track courts for NRI marriage disputes and providing accessible legal aid can help mitigate the delays in justice. Beyond legal solutions, social support systems must also be strengthened. Financial assistance, shelters, and counselling services should be made available to all abandoned spouses to help them reintegrate into society. Furthermore, public awareness campaigns and mandatory pre-marital counselling can serve as preventive measures, ensuring individuals understand their rights before entering overseas marriages. Ultimately, addressing NRI marriage abandonment requires a multifaceted approach, one that combines legal reforms, social support, and a cultural shift toward gender-neutral victim recognition. By fostering awareness, advocating for policy changes, and challenging societal stigmas, we can create a more just and equitable system where no spouse, irrespective of gender, is left behind.

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