Who are the power brokers in Indian households?

By Aditi Dimri

Contrary to the stereotype of the domineering mother-in-law in multi-generational homes, the households' key decision makers are men. The findings suggest that policymakers should re-think health and childcare interventions that exclusively target women.

THE WORLD'S MOST COMMON living arrangement is one in which a married daughter moves to join the family of her husband, who remains with his parents. Some 69 percent of the world's societies follow a form of this "patrilocality." In India, nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of couples live with the husband's family after marriage, a nationally representative survey from 2012 shows.

In trying to understand the dynamics of household decision making, economists have long focused on the bargaining that takes place between the husband and wife. But in developing societies, where patrilocality and extended families are common, senior men and women in the household often have important voices in household decisions.

Understanding how such decisions are made in the presence of multiple adults and multiple generations is important because this kind of knowledge can enhance policy making. For example, which members of the family should policies target to make child health programs more effective?

Most policies target a child's mother. And, the common wisdom that mothers-in-law influence daughters-in-law has led some interventions target the older woman, or both generations of women. However, my recent work in India challenges such targeting by shedding new light on the power hierarchy within households. My recent research suggests that the males in the household hold such decision-making power that they may be the more logical targets of policy outreach.

The household structure that I study, shown in the accompanying figure, consists of the older generation couple, their eldest married son, and his wife. The household may include other siblings and children, but the main decision makers are these four adults. I ask the question: how is power distributed amongst these members in such a household compared to households without the husband's father or mother?

Simply examining the situation in households with different living arrangements does not provide a perfect comparison. For example, comparing households with all four members to those with only three, might raise questions about why families chose one type of living arrangement over another, and if these unknown reasons, rather than the arrangements themselves, might then explain any differences in power.

The ideal experiment would compare households randomly assigned to experience different living arrangements. To get as close as possible to this randomised ideal, I examine the dynamics in the wake of the death of an older member of the household. This leads to a change in the composition of the adults, and thus offers a way to compare power relationships. The analysis compares families that experienced the death of a father or mother over a period from 2005 to 2012 with families that did not experience this dramatic change. ▶

"The household structure that I study, shown in the accompanying figure, (right) consists of the older generation couple, their eldest married son, and his wife."

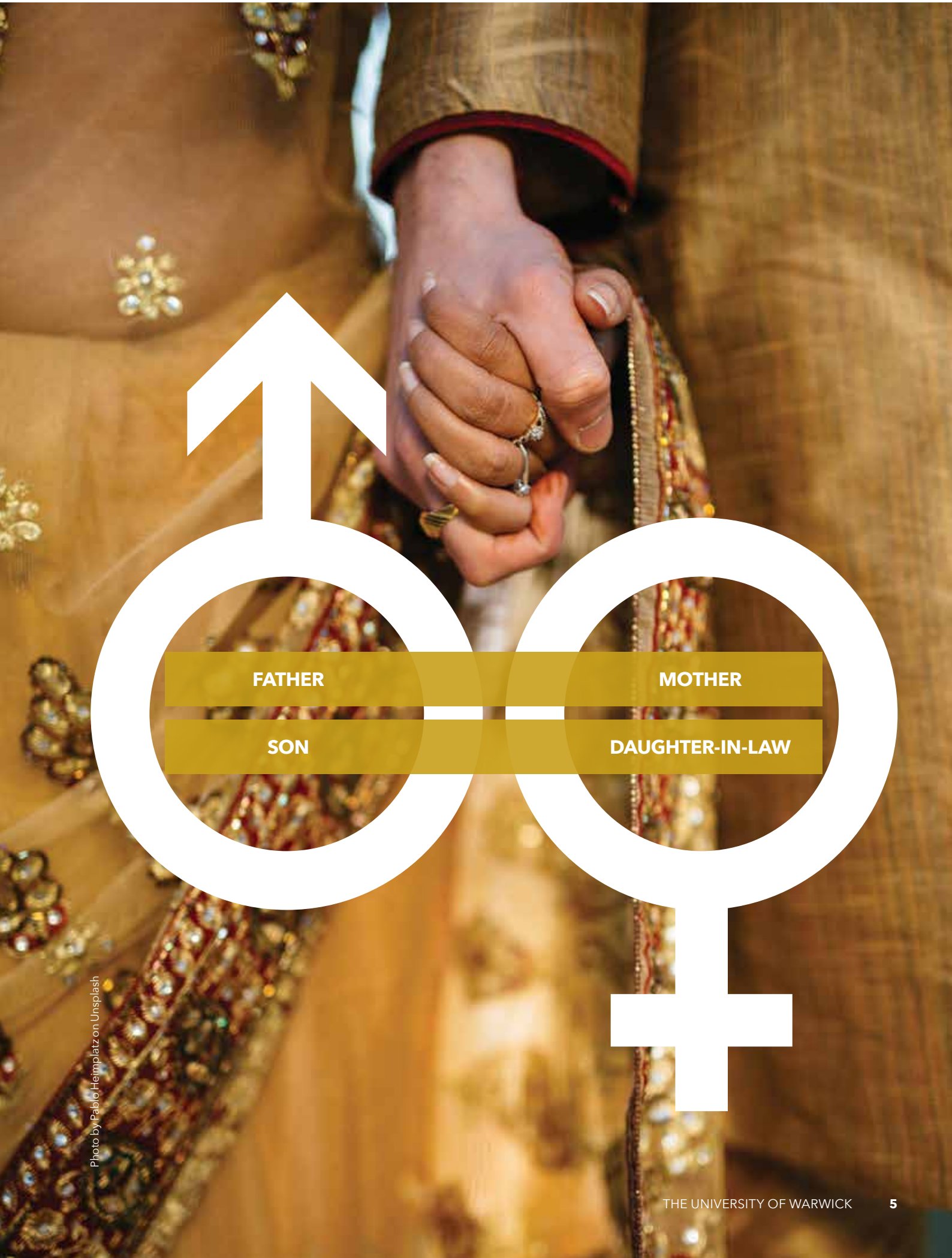


Photo by Pablo Heimplatz on Unsplash

To measure the distribution of power in the household, I rely on the decision-making "say" questions that are widely used in economics surveys. For example, the question, posed to the daughter-in-law in the households studied in my research, asks, "Who has the most say in five decisions of the household?" The response can be one of the four people – her father-in-law, her mother-in-law, her husband, or the daughter-in-law herself. This question has been interpreted to serve as an indicator of which family member has greater authority on household decision making.

I propose a framework of household power that highlights three key dimensions of power distribution: Gender, Generation, and Couple.

Evidence has shown decision-making to be very gender specific, with most economic and community decisions made by men, and household task-related decisions made by women. The accompanying figure illustrates the strong patterns that surface in my research. Among the five decisions, only cooking lies with the women. For the two big family decisions regarding marriage and expenditures, it may come as no surprise that the two men, who are often the primary earners, have the most say. However, child health and fertility are decisions often assumed to be in the domestic sphere, and, hence, one might expect the women to have the most say in making these decisions. Nevertheless, I find a clear dominance of the husband in these decisions.

I also find that the older generation participates in decisions that relate specifically to the younger couple, such as what to do when their child is sick, or what partner will be chosen for the child's eventual marriage. Such a generational division of power is typical in extended households with the power shifting to the younger generation with age. But the death of the mother or father causes a sharp reallocation in who has the most say between the remaining members.

Given the power distribution in 2005, one would expect that after the death of the father the most say would transfer to the son, and after the death of the mother, no significant redistribution would occur. Looking at the index of the five decisions, we find that with the death of the father the son's "most say" increases by around 15 percent This confirms the strong male inter-generational power in this context. However, we find that the mother's "most say" also increases, indicating that the older generation continues to keep power in some households, and in others, the power passes to the son.

Does any redistribution of power take place after the death of the mother? Perhaps surprisingly, I find that in nearly all households, the death of the older woman leads her husband to transfer his say to the son. Hence, on average, the son's "most say" increases by 25 percent.

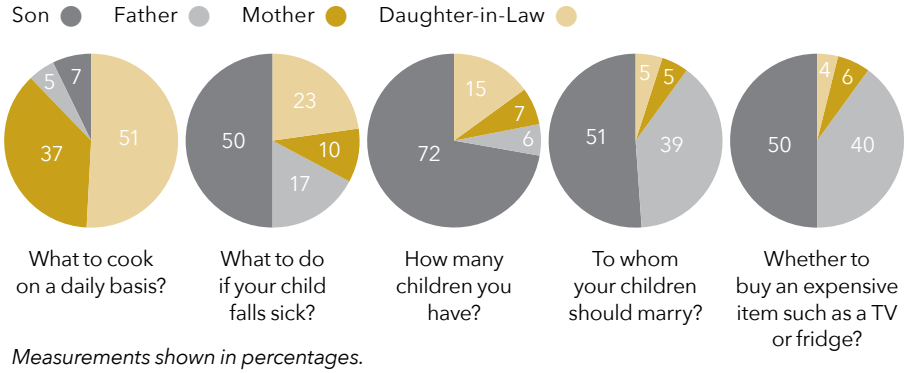
What about the daughter-in-law? As predicted by the gender spheres, she only sees an increase in her say regarding cooking decision after the death of her mother-in-law. I find no effects on her say in her own fertility or in child- outcome decisions.

The findings challenge conventional wisdom that the mother-in-law is the sole and strongest authority over the daughter-in-law. Instead I find that such a household structure places the daughter-in-law at the bottom of the gender, generation hierarchy, and with the mother-in-law in a position subservient to both generations of men.

These findings have implications for policymakers:

- While the results reinforce the fact that the nuclear family bargaining (i.e., dynamics between husbands and wives) is key to household behaviour, the role of the older generation cannot be ignored and could be key for major family decisions such as marriage. Hence, it makes sense to have campaigns at the community level to address issues such as child marriage.
- Policies and programmes should take into account the role of household decision makers. For example, numerous cash and information programs are targeted at the young mother (the daughter-in-law). We find that she is the member with the "least say" in decisions. This means that targeting her may not be as effective as targeting the men who have more say.
- Governments should try to involve men in various health and fertility programs to see whether this leads to better outcomes. Some programmes try to involve mothers-in-law along with their daughters-in-law, yet, while this is commendable, husbands remain households' main decision makers. ◀

Who has the most say in the decision



Measurements shown in percentages.

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