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Intergenerational power dynamics of women in extended households in India over two decades

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intergenerational power dynamics between co-residing mothers-in-law (MILs) and daughters-in-law (DILs) in patrilocal families and investigates how these dynamics have evolved over time. While research on women's agency in the Global South often focuses on an individual woman's power relative to her husband, this study addresses the critical gap concerning the influence and mechanisms of MIL-DIL power relations. Analysing a sample of 5501 extended households (MIL-DIL pairs) from the India National Family Health Survey (1998–2015), we test the association of women's education, work, and men's migration with intergenerational power dynamics. The findings from multinomial logit models reveal a nuanced and delayed shift towards egalitarianism. Specifically, a DIL's higher education and work decrease the likelihood of being in a traditional MIL-dominant dynamics, but this effect is significant only in the most recent survey years. Men's absence consistently increases the chance of a traditional dynamics and does not facilitate egalitarian arrangements. Together, the paper demonstrates the persistence of hierarchical intergenerational relationships alongside a complex, time-dependent erosion of patriarchal familial norms.

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Intergenerational relations; women's decision-making; extended household; family structure; gender; India

1. Introduction

Intrahousehold decision-making has been widely used in the literature as a gauge for women's agency in the Global South (Desai et al., 2022; Donald et al., 2020). In measuring women's decision-making power within households, the previous literature tended to focus on married women's position relative to their husbands, but a growing body of research has emphasized the need to consider the effects of other members in the family including the influence of their mothers-in-law on daughters-in-law's empowerment (Cheng, 2019; Ganle et al., 2015; Gram et al., 2018; Guérin et al., 2013; Gupta et al., 2021; Simkhada et al., 2010). This is particularly relevant to contexts of many low-

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and-middle income countries in Asia in which most young women still reside in patrilocal extended families as the typical form of household structure (Allendorf, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2019; Ruggles & Heggeness, 2008). Despite the overarching trend towards nuclear families and shrinking household sizes across Asia, South Asian countries like India continue to exhibit persistent intergenerational family structures, including the stem family (Fang et al., 2025), the domestic power relationship within which would inevitably affect women's everyday decision-making.

In traditional patriarchal societies, the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law has often been portrayed negatively and perceived as notoriously fraught with conflicts. Much research has focused on the overriding authority and influence that a mother-in-law commonly has over her daughter-in-law in an extended family, stemming from the persistent patriarchal traditions (e.g. Anukriti et al., 2020; Debnath, 2015; Gram et al., 2018; Gupta et al., 2021; Srivastava, 2020). On the other hand, other researchers have called for caution in claiming the entirely negative effects of the extended family structure on younger women, focusing on the positive aspects of co-residence with mothers-in-law for daughters-in-law (Allendorf, 2013, 2017; Khanna & Pandey, 2020; Pradhan & Mondal, 2023; Simkhada et al., 2010; Varghese & Roy, 2019). Although these studies suggested the varied forms of relationships between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law across families, little empirical work has been done on investigating women's decision-making power dynamics between the two generations and their changes comprehensively.

Our study examines India, a patriarchal society with deeply entrenched gender norms, where extended families are still dominant today. Whereas some research has studied young women's positions in patrilocal households in India and whether they are better off living with or without their husband's family (Anukriti et al., 2020; Dhanaraj & Mahambare, 2019; Khalil & Mookerjee, 2019; Pradhan & Mondal, 2023), far less is known about the relative positions of women residing in the same extended households. We argue that this is an underexplored area of research that needs further empirical investigations. There are two primary justifications for focusing on the power dynamics between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law within patrilocal households. First, because power is structurally scarce for women in these settings, shifts in relative power among women are analytically significant in ways that traditional male-female dynamics often fail to capture; and second, the shared responsibilities of domestic labour and childcare create a distinctive terrain of contestation. These internal dynamics are not static, as they constantly interact with evolving social norms and environmental changes over time. Particularly in a society where a mother-in-law often acts as a 'deputy patriarch' within the traditional patrilocal family household, the extent of her power constraints over the daughter-in-law is important for younger women's agency. In this regard, whether the power relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law has become more egalitarian or not can tell us much about the status of patriarchy and gender norms in India. Introducing India's context also allows us to examine how the socioeconomic changes that the country has recently experienced have influenced (or not) the patriarchal norms within family life and to what extent. Does the expansion of education bring more power to the daughter-in-law relative to the mother-in-law? How has the power dynamics between women of two generations in patrilocal families changed over time and through what mechanisms?

In this paper, rather than solely focusing on individual women's decision-making power across households and treating it as independent, we look at the decision-making power of the co-residing women jointly, using nationally representative data from the Demographic and Health Survey of India (National Family Health Survey: NFHS) from the years 1998–99, 2005–06, and 2015–16. Although India has witnessed increased educational attainments for women, there is a notable trend of a declining rate of female labour force participation (Chatterjee et al., 2018; Desai & Joshi, 2019; Klasen & Pieters, 2015). Under the specific context, we explore whether mother-in-law and daughter-in-law's joint decision-making responds to their work and education over time, controlling for household characteristics. Additionally, we examine how men's migration, a common strategy for families' livelihood in India (Lei & Desai, 2021), affects the within-gender power dynamics in extended families over time. Our analyses at the household level will help us to assess what factors affect intergenerational power dynamics in patrilocal families, and whether trajectories toward more egalitarian intergenerational power dynamics and the loosening of patriarchy have occurred in India, and if so, in what ways.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Power dynamics between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in extended households*

Research on women's status and household structure has tended to focus on the relative positioning of women in extended family households compared with those residing in nuclear family settings. In countries of South East Asia, when compared with those who live separately from their parents-in-law, young women in patrilocal families have been reported to have decreased decision-making power (Debnath, 2015), lower autonomy in household decisions (Mishra, 2014), reduced ability to access and use maternal health services (Ganle et al., 2015), more constrained mobility and access to social networks (Anukriti et al., 2020), lower chance of participating in economic and health-care decisions (Khalil & Mookerjee, 2019), more exposure to domestic abuse and violence (Turaeva & Becker, 2022) and less likelihood to participate in non-agricultural employment (Dhanaraj & Mahambare, 2019).

Other research focused solely on extended households supports this idea of conflict between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, a struggle which has been overwhelmingly perceived as being detrimental for younger women (Gram et al., 2018; Gupta et al., 2021; Srivastava, 2020). A study in rural India based on an experiment, for example, found that young married women residing in extended households lacked the power to assert their preferences, resulting in the reduced overall efficiency of the household (Gupta et al., 2021). Similarly, the more power that the older generation of in-laws has in extended rural households in Nepal affected younger generations' decision-making patterns, which resulted in younger wives and husbands forging secret alliances to gain financial autonomy (Gram et al., 2018). These studies demonstrated the typical circumstance of intergenerational conflicts and power imbalance within such families and the complex domestic politics that extended beyond the often-assumed wife-husband power discrepancy.

While less common, studies have shown that co-residence with their mother-in-law brought benefits for the daughter-in-law, including better health, influence of contraceptive use, as well as sharing the burden of domestic, care and market work (Allendorf, 2013; Khanna & Pandey, 2020; Pradhan & Mondal, 2023; Varghese & Roy, 2019). Other research, mostly qualitative studies, have also highlighted that the influence of a mother-in-law can be not only negative but also positive and affectionate towards a daughter-in-law in patrilocal extended households (Allendorf, 2017; Simkhada et al., 2010). As such, the power dynamics between the two generations of women could potentially be cooperative, and household decisions are jointly made (Chen, 2004). Yet, it is less clear whether the advantages extend to the sharing of decision-making power.

Despite the existing literature that usefully demonstrated varied and complex intergenerational power dynamics in extended households, empirical research has not fully explored what the intergenerational power dynamics look like across households, how they change over time, and what factors or characteristics influence the variation at the household level. The paucity of research using representative data has limited our understanding of this important family dynamic that has considerable implications for women's agency and empowerment.

2.2. Individual and household factors behind intergenerational power dynamics

Some individual factors supposedly influence women's decision-making power, although most research is limited in focusing on nuclear family settings. In patrilocal families, measuring the effects of these individual factors is more complicated due to the nature of power dynamics and the division of labour involving other family members. For instance, a younger woman's decision-making power in the same extended household is determined not only by her own individual factors, but also by those of co-residing older woman, men, and their respective resources (at the absolute and relative levels) that they can exercise for bargaining power, varying throughout their life course trajectories (Banerji & Deshpande, 2021). Furthermore, intragenerational power dynamics are also shaped by the degree of gender norms and patriarchal practices in specific familial circumstances influenced by wider societal changes.

2.2.1. Education and work

Education is undoubtedly one of the main mechanisms through which women can potentially achieve their decision-making power within households, through having resources and egalitarian attitudes. In patrilocal households, however, the positive effects of younger women's education on their decision-making power can be diminished by the influence of mother-in-law. While some feminist scholars, such as Caldwell (1984), argue that young women's education can lead to their higher bargaining power over mother-in-law, empirical research that tested the effects of education on the division of labour shows more support for the contrary: the positive effects of younger women's increased education are prevented by the gender norms, maintaining the unequal relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in extended households (Srivastava, 2020). Similarly, in a study that compared the nuclear family and extended family settings in China, while women's education increases their decision-making power in nuclear families, it was not the case in patrilocal households (Cheng, 2019). This

specific study concluded that husband's parents might undermine the effects of education on daughter-in-law's decision-making power in extended family settings (Cheng, 2019).

Women's involvement in work could also potentially increase their household decision-making power. Mishra (2014) finds that relative income improves women's household decision-making power in India, but the analysis does not distinguish between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. In extended household settings, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law's work might have different effects on their respective power, determined also through the division of housework and childcare responsibilities (Khanna & Pandey, 2024). Despite the paucity of research on household-level analyses, however, we could reasonably predict that younger women's work outside the home in patrilocal households might have limited effects on their domestic decision-making power, if conditioned upon the mother-in-law taking over the domestic work and continuing to exercise authority. Both women working, if equally translated into more decision-making power for both, again, might not significantly change the existing dynamics of the mother-in-law having more power. On the other hand, when the mother-in-law works, and the daughter-in-law does not, a likely case when they have young children to care for, the resources and authority of the older women could further undermine the younger women's power. For both women's education and work, the relative difference between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law might affect the intergenerational power dynamics, although the specificity of these associations is difficult to predict.

2. 2. 2. Husband's migration

In India's patrilocal family structure, the elevated position that a mother-in-law is granted is understood to be derived from patriarchal cultural norms where sons are considered more valuable than daughters (Rew et al., 2013). The research findings on the effects of men's migration on women's empowerment have shown mixed outcomes: both positive and negative outcomes for left-behind women (Fakir & Abedin, 2021; Saha et al., 2018) or no significant effects on women's empowerment (Sinha et al., 2012). This divergence, however, could be due to the different family structures examined.

To this point, research that has explicitly considered the potential role of family structure has found more consistent evidence that men's migration affects increased power of mother-in-law over daughter-in-law. For instance, a recent study in Nepal demonstrated that whereas wives in nuclear households had more power and control over household decisions if their husband migrated, daughters-in-law in extended family settings were less likely to be empowered when their husbands were migrants (Doss et al., 2022). They argued that this was because in patrilocal extended households, a daughter-in-law's husband (the son) mediated the influence of his family and mother-in-law (Doss et al., 2022). This is consistent with studies demonstrating that women in nuclear families increased their autonomy in the absence of a husband, whereas women (younger women) in extended households did not experience such increased freedoms (Desai & Banerji, 2008; Lei & Desai, 2021). Yet, there is limited knowledge on whether migration of father-in-law and that of husband have similar effects on the power dynamics between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

2. 3. Changes in intergenerational power dynamics over time in India

India has gone through a tremendous change over the last few decades in various areas, including rapid economic growth, the expansion of education, and declining fertility, to name a few (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008; Drèze & Murthi, 2001; Yeung et al., 2018). However, whether these social transformations directly translate into women's decision-making power is ambiguous. Some argued that, with the increased legal reforms and transformation of cultural norms, younger women's participation in decision-making had overall improved at the expense of older members of the households (Mookerjee, 2019). Lien et al. (2018), on the other hand, asserted that a more complicated, uneven process was at work, where the younger generation is often trapped between their desire for higher decision-making power and the everyday reality of culturally entrenched patriarchal norms still at work.

In other countries like China, we can observe signs of younger women's increased position within the family through more educational and economic opportunity, contributing to a more cooperative relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (Chen, 2004). Yet, there are reasons to believe that the situation might not be as positive for younger women in India. Arranged marriages are in decline but still dominate, and parents and older generations, through rigid kinship norms, continue to maintain substantial power over younger generations on many decisions in India (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016; Rammohan & Vu, 2018; Yeung et al., 2018). In a rare study that examined within-gender power dynamics in intergenerational households, Srivastava (2020), for example, showed that a daughter-in-law's higher bargaining power through increased education was found to be offset by ingrained gender norms preventing a more egalitarian division of household work in India.

Among the notable changes in India is an expansion of education and particularly younger women's increased educational levels (Siddiqui & Goswami, 2024). The difference in educational levels between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law, if translated into the situation where the daughter-in-law has more say in decisions, can shift the intrahousehold power dynamics, but little is known about the trend over time. Women's chances of work have not improved much in India, but depending on who goes to work, it can result in different forms of intergenerational power dynamics. We intend to test whether changes in factors such as women's education and work bring more decision-making power to younger women at the household level over time, leading to more egalitarian power dynamics between two generations of women.

3. Research questions

Based on the previous literature discussed above, apart from the more consistent evidence showing that husbands' migration has negative effects on younger women's decision-making power within patrilocal families, hardly any empirical research has considered education and work for both mother-in-law (MIL) and daughter-in-law (DIL) and their influence on their decision-making power dynamics at the level of the extended household. Would the absolute level of each of their educational levels matter, or is it the relative difference in their level of education that affects their joint decision-making patterns? How does the work status difference between MIL and DIL affect their decision-making power? Would work increase their decision-making power equally for

older and younger women, or would it have different effects depending on who works and who doesn't?

Our analytical approaches are organised in the following way. The first step is a descriptive analysis where we look at trends within households over time, by education and work, two markers of potential resources for women's decision-making power (a). Second, we examine whether, controlling for household characteristics, intergenerational decision-making power dynamics respond to women's education and work (b). Here we test whether intergenerational power dynamics are rooted within the absolute increase of education level/participation in work (the more education and working status would increase one's decision-making power), or rather from the difference in education and work status between the in-laws (whether one has more education, or one works whereas the other doesn't, would increase one's decision-making power). We also look at another prominent trend in India, that of male solo migration. We hypothesise that the households where men (either father-in-law or son) are absent would have less equal decision-making power between female in-laws, with the mother-in-law having more power than the daughter-in-law. This is predicted by the previous research that suggested the common scenario where the mother-in-law often takes over the position of patriarchal authority in case of the absence of men in extended family settings.

Finally, we examine whether time moderates the effects of work, education and men's migration (c). We expect that the intergenerational power dynamics between female in-laws could be conditioned by the changing wider social context, although the pattern and the extent of the relationship may not be easy to predict. We hypothesise that the effects of our correlates (women's education, work, and men's migration) on intergenerational power dynamics would vary over time. It is our intention to disentangle how MIL and DIL's education, work, and men's absence respond separately to the different dynamics and how they vary by year.

4. Method

4. 1. Sample

We test our hypotheses using the three sets of the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) India, also known as the India National Family Health Survey, during 1998–99 (NFHS-2), 2005–06 (NFHS-3), and 2015–16 (NFHS-4). In this paper, we refer to the data year as 1998, 2005, and 2015 for brevity hereafter. Conducted by the International Institute for Population Sciences, the DHS (or NFHS) are nationally representative household surveys that include several indicators of women's household decision-making power, education, work, as well as a series of household characteristics. The chosen data are from the individual-level datasets collected from ever-married women who are aged from 15 to 49 at the time of survey for 1998 and 2005, and from all women aged 15–49 in the case of 2015 data. Using extracts from IPUMS DHS (Boyle et al., 2020), we pooled the data of 1998, 2005, and 2015 and weighted them before our analyses.

We first limited our sample to currently married women who live with two or more women in the households as regular residents ($N = 235,515$). We needed to restrict our sample to women in the household whose other female residents also responded to the survey to obtain both women's information, which significantly reduced the

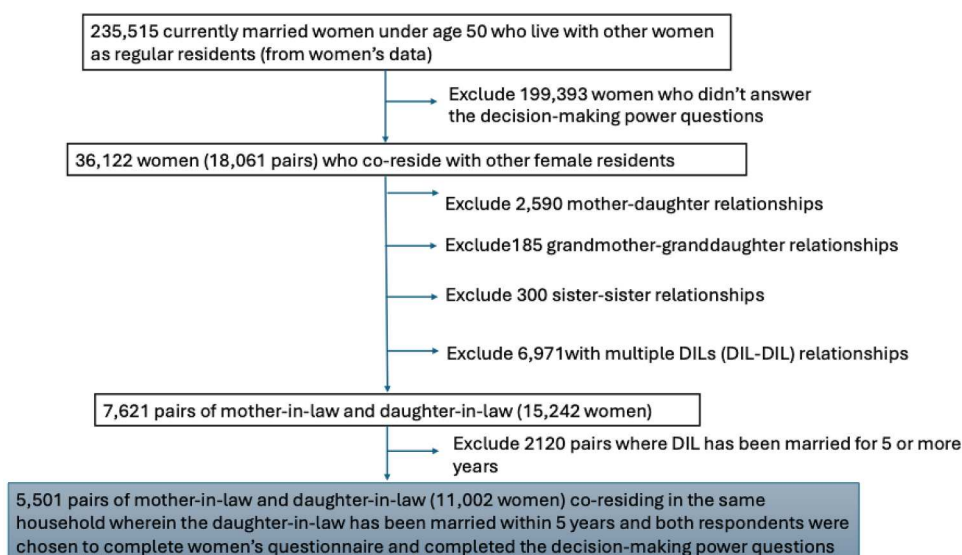


Figure 1. Flow chart of the sample selection process.

Notes: DIL (daughter-in-law); MIL (mother-in-law)

sample size to 36,122 respondents. We then deleted the household cases that did not consist of respondents of a mother-in-law (MIL) and a daughter-in-law (DIL) relationship, using the variable that shows women's relationship to the household head. This includes household cases with mother and daughter relations (2590), grandmother and granddaughter (185), sisters (300), multiple DILs (6971), and other cases such as those with multiple wives and those of grandmother and granddaughter-in-law relationship (394). Such cases would add an extra layer of complexity to the intergenerational power dynamics that we intend to examine, which is that between MIL and DIL living in the single patrilocal household. Of 7621 households, we also narrow down our sample to the households where DIL has been married within the last five years, to make a clear comparison across time, as there will be no overlaps in this targeted population across the three survey waves that we examined. The final sample consists of 5501 households where we have key information for both MIL and DIL (11,002 women, including 5501 MIL and 5501 DIL). Figure 1 displays our sample selection process.

Since the survey data we analysed (from the women's questionnaires) only asked women aged up to 49, our sample is disproportionately young and excludes households with older-mothers-in-law. To assess the validity of our analytical sample, we examined the household roster and identified the characteristics of the nearly ideal target population of MIL-DIL households, including mothers-in-law aged 50 and over. We found that except for the average age of MILs and DILs, their household characteristics are largely comparable (See Appendix).

4. 2. Dependent variables

To categorise forms of different power dynamics between MIL and DIL within households, we created a decision-making power index for all women of the selected samples (both

MIL and DIL). These are based on the following questions that concern the power these women feel they have relative to several decisions. 'Who usually makes decisions about making major household purchases; visits to your family or relatives; and healthcare for yourself: *mainly you, mainly your husband, you and your husband jointly, or someone else?*'. Among the decision-making questions available, these three (major household purchases; visits to your family or relatives; healthcare for yourself) are the ones that were commonly asked across the three datasets. As the household purchases are defined as 'major' rather than 'routine expenditures', we argue that it serves as a robust proxy for autonomy in high-stakes financial negotiation. Women who responded that mainly they themselves or together with their husbands made each of these decisions were counted as having decision-making power. MILs tended to have higher proportions of women with household decision-making power across all three areas than DILs in our sample. The proportions were similar across the three areas of decision.

We then created dummy variables for the three decision-making questions (1 = *mainly women or women and husband jointly*, 0 = *husband or someone else*) to create an index score that ranged from 0 to 3. For example, women who responded to have final say (either alone or jointly) in all three decision-making power questions would have the index score of 3, whereas those who have no say in all would have the score of 0. Table 1 shows a crosstabulation of MIL and DIL decision-making index scores, with 16 cells. We simplified the 16 categories into a four-category dependent variable to reflect relative decision-making patterns of the two generations of women.

Table 1 represents a breakdown of the four types of intergenerational power dynamics. In creating the four types, we considered that the group of women having 0–2 index scores (lacking decision-making power in one or more dimensions) should be conceptually separated from those having an index score of 3 (having say across all three dimensions). We acknowledge that our categorisation obscures certain intra-group variations. For instance, a dyad where MIL scores 2 and DIL scores 0 is classified identically to a case where MIL scores 3 and DIL scores 1 or 2 under the category of 'MIL having more power than DIL'. Nevertheless, we opted for a more parsimonious framework to emphasise relative power differentials and ensure the models remain conceptually digestible.

Figure 2 displays the distribution of the intergenerational decision-making index across three separate years. Here we clearly see the changes in the intergenerational power dynamics over time. The proportion where both have no power decreased by more

Table 1. The crosstabulation of decision-making powers (index score) between DIL (daughter-in-law) and MIL (mother-in-law) in the same household from the pooled sample (cell percentage in parentheses).

		DIL index				Total
		0	1	2	3	
MIL index	0	639 (11.62)	127 (2.31)	179 (3.25)	143 (2.60)	1088
	1	306 (5.56)	190 (3.45)	166 (3.02)	98 (1.78)	760
	2	336 (6.11)	196 (3.56)	267 (4.85)	151 (2.74)	950
	3	713 (12.96)	358 (6.51)	481 (8.74)	1151 (20.92)	2703
Total		1994	871	1093	1543	5501

Notes: (1) Both MIL/DIL having *low power* (Yellow: Both MIL/DIL having the index score of 0, 1 or 2 and the score difference is 1 or less); (2) MIL having *more power* than DIL (Green: MIL index score 2 or 3 when DIL is 0, MIL is 3 when DIL scores 1 or 2); (3) MIL having *less power* than MIL (Orange: DIL 2 or 3 when MIL scores 0, DIL is 3 when MIL scores 1 or 2); (4) Both MIL and DIL having *high* decision-making power (Blue: Both MIL/DIL having the index score of 3).

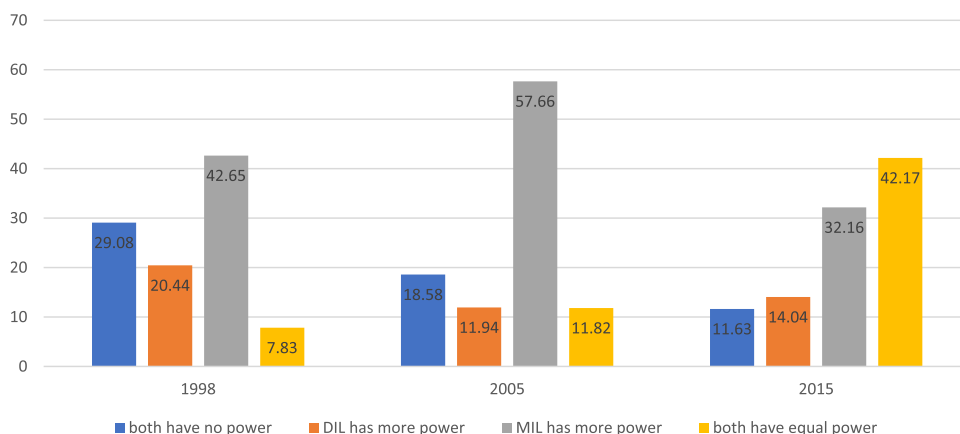


Figure 2. The distribution of Intergenerational power dynamics within the household (difference in decision-making power between MIL (mother-in-law) and DIL (daughter-in-law) living in the same household) over time.

than half, from 29 per cent in 1998 to 12 per cent in 2015; The proportion where both have high decision-making power increased five to six times, from 8 per cent to 42 per cent. The other two categories decreased in their share over time, but what is consistent is that MILs were still considerably more likely to hold more power than DILs within each period examined, and particularly large in 2005. Even in 2015, the percentage of MILs having more power than DILs was 32 per cent as opposed to 14 per cent of the households with DILs having more power. Taken together, there is the continuing hierarchy of MIL over DIL, but simultaneously a gradual, albeit fluctuating, movement towards more egalitarian intergenerational power dynamics observed across patrilocal households in India.

4. 3. Explanatory variables

Our main predictors for the intergenerational power dynamics included both the individual characteristics of MILs and DILs and various household characteristics: (1) the relative difference in MIL and DIL in their education and work; and (2) men's (son and father-in-law) migration status (their absence in the household). The education levels for individuals were categorised as no education, primary education, secondary education, and tertiary education. The difference in education between MIL and DIL as household characteristics was categorised as either no difference, MIL having higher education, or DIL having higher education. Work status is measured as to whether women work outside of housework. We categorised women as working if they are engaged in any work (agricultural or non-agricultural, small business, etc.) outside the domestic duties and paid either in cash or kind. We then included work status at the household level: MIL works but DIL not working, DIL works but MIL not working, neither is working, both are working. For men's migration, we used a variable that showed whether a woman's current husband lived in the household or not. As we only included currently married women in our sample, women who are widowed, divorced, or separated were excluded from the analyses. Although the reason for the husband's absence was not specified, given the prevalence

Table 2. Household characteristics for the full sample (pooled).

Variable		Mean	Std.
Urban residency (1 = urban)		0.27	0.44
Having a young child (under 5) at home (1 = yes)		0.57	0.49
Household wealth index in quantiles	Poorest	0.15	0.35
	Poorer	0.20	0.40
	Middle	0.21	0.41
	Richer	0.22	0.42
	Richest	0.22	0.42
Age difference between MIL (mother-in-law) and DIL (daughter-in-law)		23.3	4.09
DIL (daughter-in-law)'s age		20.29	2.89
Geography	North	0.35	0.48
	Central	0.15	0.36
	East	0.18	0.38
	Northeast	0.09	0.29
	West	0.11	0.31
	South	0.12	0.33
<i>N</i>		5501	

of male solo migration in India, we believe this is a reasonable assumption. Men's migration (absence) at a household level included no migration (both men living in the household), father-in-law (FIL) is away, son is away, and both are away.

4. 4. Control variables

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of household characteristics that were included as control variables in our analyses. As each MIL and DIL pair came from the same household, the household characteristics remained the same for the pair. 27 per cent of the households lived in urban areas, and more than half (57 per cent) of them had at least one young child (under 5) at home. The age difference between MIL and DIL was 23.3 on average, with the average of DIL being 20.29 years old. We also controlled for the DIL's age, the age gap between the MIL and DIL, the husbands' educational attainment, and the difference in their education (between the father-in-law and the son). The DIL's age was included to account for the heightened vulnerability of younger, newly married women in patrilocal households. Similarly, the husband's education level was incorporated to reflect their roles in patriarchal attitudes and economic capacity.

5. Results

(a) Descriptive analysis

Next is our descriptive analysis, where we looked at the trends over time within households, relative to our main explanatory variables. Figure 3 represents changes in educational difference at the household level. The proportion of households where the DIL has more education than the MIL has increased drastically from 45.7 per cent in 1998 to 72.17 per cent in 2015. This demonstrates that most patrilocal households now consist of a DIL with a higher education than a MIL.

Figure 4 displays the work status changes over time within households. It suggests that both women not working increased, whereas both working decreased: the higher

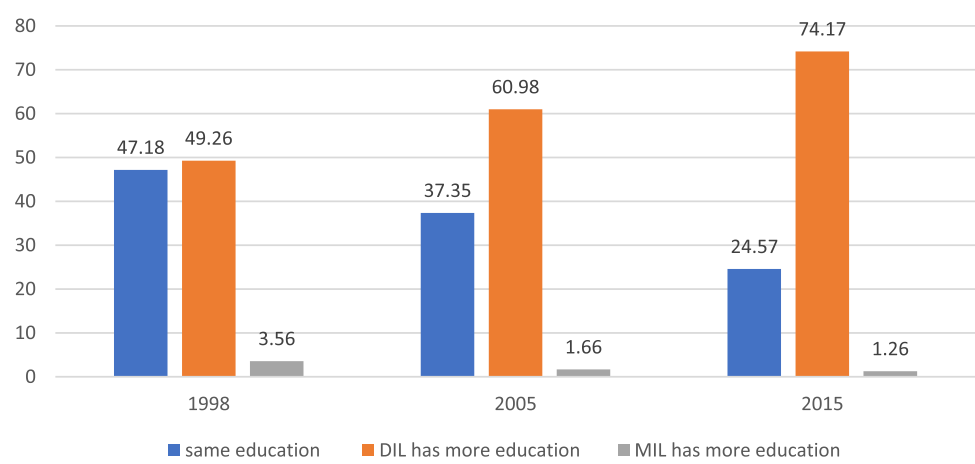


Figure 3. Change in educational difference between MIL (mother-in-law) and DIL (daughter-in-law) *within household* over time (%).

proportion of households consisted of neither MIL nor DIL working in 2015 than in 1998, and the lower proportion of households with both women working in more recent years than earlier. There were more households with a MIL working and DIL not working than the households where the DIL worked and MIL did not work, and this pattern has not changed over time. The proportion of only MIL working (and not DIL) was roughly five times as high as only the DIL working (and not MIL), similarly shown across the years.

Figure 5 is the distribution of households by men’s physical presence. In 1998, only approximately 7 per cent of households consisted of either son or FIL as away or both away, and this has increased steadily to reach nearly double figures (13–14 per cent) in 2015. The solo male migration in India, a trend that was certainly not insignificant in numbers in the early 2000s (Desai & Banerji, 2008), showed a clear upward trend.

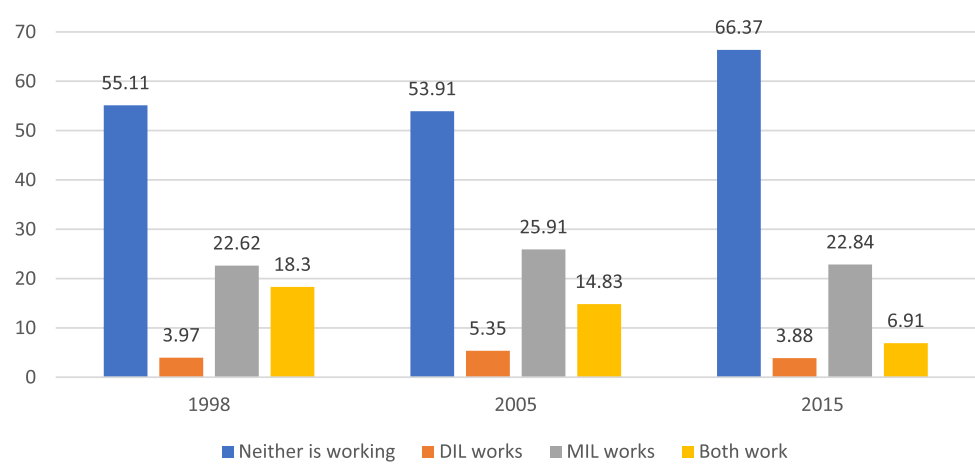


Figure 4. Work status difference between MIL (mother-in-law) and DIL (daughter-in-law) *within household* over time (%).

(b) Analysis of intergenerational power dynamics by women’s work, education and men’s migration

We examined whether joint decision-making between mother-in-law (MIL) and daughter-in-law (DIL) was associated with women’s characteristics (work and education) and the absence of men from the household, controlling for household characteristics. We also focused on how these effects varied by year. We first conducted a series of multinomial logistic regression analyses to separate the different effects. We built the models sequentially, including first education variables for both MIL and DIL, and work variables of MIL and DIL, then both work and education, and migration status (results not shown), and finally with all the control variables.

Table 3 presents the results of our full models including all the control variables. To facilitate a more intuitive interpretation, we report the Average Marginal Effects (AMEs) for each of the four categories of our dependent variable: (1) neither has power; (2) DIL has more power; (3) MIL has more power; and (4) both have power, instead of raw coefficients from our multinomial logistic regression models. AMEs capture the overall effect of a variable across the entire sample, demonstrating the change in the outcome probability when an input changes. The first column of Table 3 shows the AMEs from the pooled sample, and the next three columns present results for each survey year.

5. 1. Pooled sample findings

In the pooled sample analysis, we identified several effects of women’s education and work on intergenerational decision-making power dynamics. First, in terms of education, it shows that a MIL with secondary education is less likely to be in a household where neither has power, or DIL has more power than MIL, but more likely to be in a household

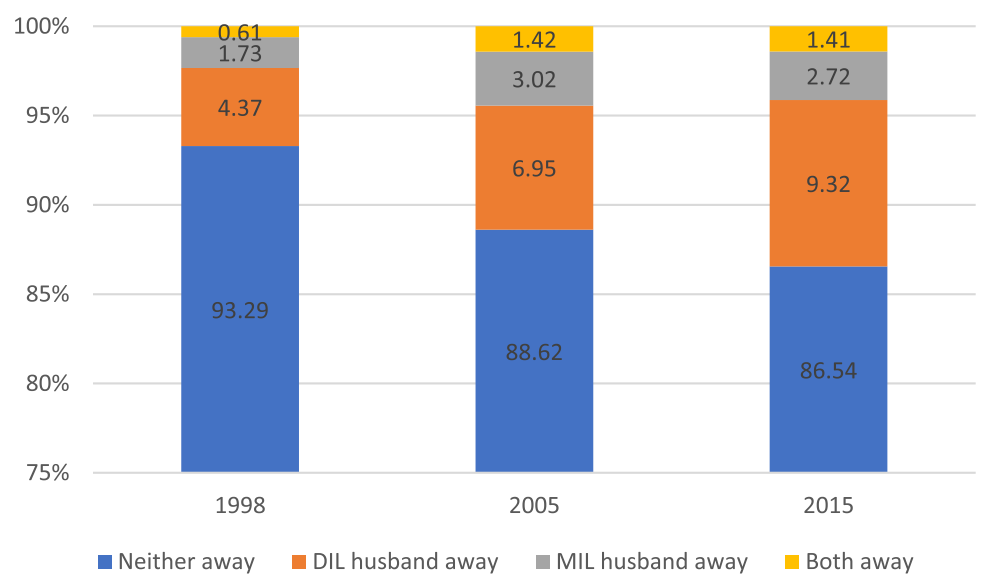


Figure 5. Change in the distribution of households having either daughter-in-law’s husband (son) or mother-in-law’s husband (father-in-law) being migrated over time (%).

Table 3. Multinomial logistic regression model: Average Marginal Effects (AMEs) of the pooled sample and by year.

		Pooled				Wave 1 (1998)				Wave 2 (2005)				Wave 3 (2015)			
		Neither power	DIL power	MIL power	Both power	Neither power	DIL power	MIL power	Both power	Neither power	DIL power	MIL power	Both power	Neither power	DIL power	MIL power	Both power
MIL educ (ref: no education)	Primary	−0.01 (0.03)	−0.00 (0.02)	−0.02 (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)	−0.02 (0.05)	0.02 (0.03)	−0.00 (0.05)	−0.00 (0.02)	0.03 (0.05)	0.00 (0.03)	−0.08 (0.05)	0.04 (0.03)	−0.04 (0.03)	−0.03 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.04)	0.09* (0.03)
	Secondary	−0.08* (0.04)	−0.06* (0.03)	0.04 (0.05)	0.09* (0.04)	−0.07 (0.07)	0.04 (0.07)	0.03 (0.08)	−0.00 (0.03)	−0.06 (0.08)	−0.07 (0.04)	−0.06 (0.12)	0.18 (0.11)	−0.05 (0.05)	−0.09** (0.03)	0.07 (0.08)	0.07 (0.08)
	Tertiary	−0.1 (0.08)	−0.01 (0.07)	0.04 (0.12)	0.07 (0.10)	−0.18* (0.09)	0.14 (0.15)	0.05 (0.17)	0 (0.06)	0.05 (0.27)	−0.09 (0.06)	−0.27 (0.21)	0.31 (0.31)	−0.1 (0.05)	−0.03 (0.12)	−0.2 (0.13)	0.32 (0.18)
DIL educ (ref: no education)	Primary	0.08 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)	−0.11* (0.05)	0.02 (0.03)	0.08 (0.07)	−0.06 (0.06)	−0.02 (0.07)	0 (0.03)	0.12 (0.07)	0.07 (0.05)	−0.12 (0.09)	−0.07 (0.06)	−0.01 (0.07)	0.06 (0.04)	−0.15 (0.1)	0.11 (0.09)
	Secondary	0.01 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	−0.15** (0.05)	0.12** (0.03)	0.06 (0.08)	−0.02 (0.07)	−0.04 (0.09)	0.01 (0.03)	0.09 (0.08)	0.05 (0.05)	−0.1 (0.1)	−0.05 (0.09)	−0.03 (0.07)	0.09* (0.04)	−0.18 (0.1)	0.12 (0.09)
	Tertiary	0.03 (0.07)	0.06 (0.06)	−0.21** (0.07)	0.12* (0.06)	0.16 (0.12)	−0.04 (0.09)	−0.11 (0.11)	0.00 (0.05)	0.06 (0.13)	0.1 (0.1)	−0.06 (0.15)	−0.1 (0.09)	−0.04 (0.09)	0.14* (0.07)	−0.27* (0.12)	0.17 (0.13)
Educational Difference (ref: same education)	DIL has more	−0.08 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.03)	0.05 (0.05)	0.03 (0.03)	−0.06 (0.07)	0.06 (0.06)	−0.22 (0.08)	0.03 (0.03)	−0.07 (0.08)	−0.01 (0.06)	0.01 (0.09)	0.08 (0.05)	−0.03 (0.06)	−0.05 (0.06)	0.13 (0.07)	−0.05 (0.09)
	MIL has more	−0.05 (0.05)	0.08 (0.06)	−0.06 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)	−0.03 (0.08)	0.05 (0.07)	−0.1 (0.08)	0.08 (0.06)	−0.09 (0.10)	0.06 (0.11)	0.06 (0.12)	−0.04 (0.03)	0.01 (0.13)	−0.06 (0.11)	0.1 (0.14)	−0.05 (0.16)
Work status (ref: neither works)	DIL works	0.03 (0.04)	0.01 (0.03)	−0.04 (0.04)	0 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.06)	−0.03 (0.05)	0.03 (0.06)	0.01 (0.03)	0.11 (0.07)	0.05 (0.05)	−0.13* (0.06)	−0.03 (0.03)	−0.03 (0.04)	0.04 (0.06)	−0.13* (0.06)	0.12 (0.08)
	MIL works	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.02 (0.01)	0.08*** (0.02)	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.05 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.03)	0.06 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.03 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.08* (0.04)	−0.04* (0.02)	−0.02 (0.02)	−0.04 (0.02)	0.06 (0.04)	−0.00 (0.04)
	Both work	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.00 (0.02)	0.07* (0.03)	−0.06** (0.02)	−0.03 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.04)	0.07 (0.02)	−0.03 (0.04)	0 (0.04)	0.01 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.05)	−0.01 (0.03)	−0.04 (0.03)	0.02 (0.04)	0.03 (0.06)	−0.00 (0.06)
Husband's migration (ref: no one away)	Son away	−0.00 (0.03)	−0.05* (0.02)	0.09* (0.04)	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.05)	−0.13*** (0.03)	0.14* (0.07)	0.00 (0.03)	0.06 (0.06)	−0.06 (0.04)	0.08 (0.06)	−0.08*** (0.02)	0 (0.03)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.05)	−0.08 (0.05)
	FIL away	−0.12*** (0.03)	−0.08* (0.03)	0.12* (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)	−0.03 (0.09)	−0.13* (0.05)	0.17 (0.1)	−0.02 (0.03)	−0.18*** (0.28)	−0.09** (0.03)	0.19** (0.07)	0.08 (0.06)	−0.07* (0.03)	0.02 (0.07)	0.01 (0.09)	0.04 (0.09)
	Both away	−0.02 (0.07)	−0.14*** (0.01)	0.21** (0.07)	−0.04 (0.04)	−0.27*** (0.02)	−0.16** (0.05)	0.50*** (0.05)	−0.07*** (0.01)	−0.03 (0.09)	−0.13*** (0.01)	0.19* (0.1)	−0.03 (0.06)	0.15 (0.11)	−0.1** (0.03)	−0.01 (0.11)	−0.05 (0.11)
N		5501				1967				1625				1909			
AIC		2.565				2.579				2.34				2.601			
BIC		−31666.315				−8789.189				−6988.311				−8369.717			

Notes: MIL = mother-in-law; DIL = daughter-in-law; FIL = father-in-law; standard errors of means are presented in parentheses. All models control for household wealth, urban residence, having young children, DIL's age, age difference between MIL and DIL, the husbands' educational levels, the difference in their education (between father-in-law and son), and geographical areas (Central, East, North, Northeast, West, and South). * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed test).

where both MIL and DIL have power. Conversely, a DIL with higher education is less likely to be in a household where MIL has more power and more likely to be in a household with equal domestic power dynamics (both have power). The effects of DIL education are stronger than those of MIL education. Also, as DIL education level increases, her likelihood of being in MIL-dominant power dynamics goes down, and the likelihood of being in an egalitarian household increases more significantly. For instance, when DIL has primary education compared with no education (reference), she is less likely to be in a MIL dominant household by 0.11 percentage point. Yet, DIL's tertiary education decrease their chance of being in such an unequal household by 0.21 percentage point. The relative difference in education, however, does not significantly affect the intergenerational power dynamics between MIL and DIL.

Second, the results from the pooled sample indicate that women's work status, particularly the MIL's work, increases the chance of her having more decision-making power. When MIL works but DIL does not, or both MIL and DIL work, women are more likely to be in the household structure reflecting traditional patriarchal dynamics where MIL has more power than DIL. When both MIL and DIL work, they are less likely to be in the more egalitarian household (both have power).

Third, the absence of men (son, father-in-law or both) affects the relative decision-making power between MIL and DIL. When one or both men are absent, women are more likely to be in a household where MIL has more power than DIL, and less likely to be in a household where DIL has more power than MIL, or neither has power. For instance, when the son is away, the chance of them being in an MIL-dominant household increases by 0.09 percentage point, 0.12 percentage point in the case of FIL being away, and 0.21 percentage point when both the son and FIL are away compared to when none of the men is away. Men's education, included as our control variable, however, consistently showed no effects on changes in MIL-DIL power dynamics (results not shown). Notably, men's migration does not increase or decrease the probability of women being in the more egalitarian household where both MIL and DIL have high decision-making power. This is consistent with the previous literature suggesting an increased likelihood of the MIL having more decision-making power and no or negative effects of men's migration for younger women in extended family settings.

(c) Analysis of intergenerational power dynamics over time

5. 2. Effects separated by year (time variation)

Examining the effects separately by year reveals how time moderates the impact of the factors (women's education, work, and men's migration) on intergenerational power dynamics. Some effects of women's education found in the pooled sample disappeared in the year-specific analyses, implying significant temporal variation. Especially in 2005, we found no significant effects of either MIL's or DIL's education on intergenerational power dynamics. In 1998, only the MIL's tertiary education decreased the probability of the women being in the 'neither has power' category, suggesting the limited effects that education had on intergenerational power dynamics in these earlier years. More recently in 2015, however, the effects became more noticeable. A MIL with primary

education is more likely to be in the ‘both having decision-making power’ category compared to those with no education. It is also found that a MIL with secondary education is less likely to be in a household where DIL has more power than themselves.

The effects of DIL’s education are more pronounced and consistent in 2015. The DIL with secondary or tertiary education is more likely to be in a household where the DIL has more power than the MIL. Furthermore, a DIL with tertiary education is substantially less likely to be in the traditional household where the MIL has more power than the DIL. This suggests that the DIL’s increased education, while having limited impact in the earlier years (1998 and 2005), has significant effects more recently, enabling her to have more say in asserting their power over MIL and a better chance of avoiding traditionally unequal power dynamics within patrilocal families.

When both MIL and DIL are working, or neither is employed (no relative difference in terms of their work stats), their power dynamics are not significantly affected. However, the dynamics shift if only one of them works. The MIL’s work increased the likelihood of being in a household with more traditional patrilocal power dynamics in 2005. When the DIL works while the MIL does not, they are less likely to be in a household where the MIL has more power than the DIL. This finding is observed in more recent years (2005 and 2015) but not in 1998. Collectively, the findings of work status parallel those of education variables: the DIL’s work shows effects on her improved power and the intrahousehold power dynamics in more recent time than in earlier periods, similar to the positive effects of DIL’s education found in more recent years.

Men’s migration consistently affects intrahousehold dynamics of the two women, though with slightly varying degrees by the year. When the son or father-in-law is absent, women are more likely to be in a household where the MIL has more power than the DIL, and less likely to be in a household where the DIL has more power than the MIL. The increased chance of MIL-dominant power dynamics in the case of men’s migration is especially substantial in 1998, with the likelihood increasing by 0.50 percentage point when both son and FIL are away. Interestingly, across the years, men’s migration does not increase the chance of women being in the egalitarian ‘both having power’ households. In fact, in 2005, men’s migration even decreased the chance of more egalitarian household dynamics. This suggests that in the case of men’s absence, patrilocal families tend to be organised so that the MIL assumes the patriarchal power over the DIL, rather than the two women sharing power equally.

6. Conclusion

This paper has investigated the intergenerational power dynamics between mothers-in-law (MILs) and daughters-in-law (DILs) in patrilocal families by analysing both women’s levels of decision-making power simultaneously. The analysis is conducted over nearly two decades (1998–2015), using representative data from the India National Family Health Survey. Our unique household-level analysis aimed to provide a rigorous evaluation of how shifts in women’s education, work, and men’s migration impact intergenerational power dynamics over time, and offer a reasonable evaluation of the persistence of patriarchal familial norms and its implications.

Our analysis reveals that intergenerational power dynamics between women within Indian extended households are following a bumpy and mixed path towards equality.

Clearly, there has been an increased proportion of egalitarian households where both women share equally high power and a decreased proportion of households where neither woman has power in more recent years. This suggests a general improvement in women's autonomy, as well as a shift towards more egalitarian intergenerational power dynamics in patrilocal families. Yet crucially, the traditional MIL-dominant dynamics remains persistent, with its prevalence even rising between 1998 and 2005, confirming that a significant proportion of extended households continue to adhere to unequal intergenerational power arrangements, which negatively impacts younger women's autonomy.

The multinomial logistic regression results highlight a complex and nuanced interplay between key factors and intergenerational power dynamics. Contrary to simple assumptions, the positive effects of women's education on relative decision-making power were largely absent in earlier survey years (1998 and 2005). It was only in 2015 that higher education, particularly for the DIL, showed strong, significant effects, increasing her chance of having more power than the MIL and decreasing the likelihood of being in a MIL-dominant household. This suggests a delayed positive effect of education on DIL's power, indicating that the rapid expansion of education for younger women took time to be translated into improved bargaining power capable of challenging the seemingly robust norms of the patrilocal family. Despite the fact that younger women's education continued to rapidly increase since 1998, it is around 2015 when their educational attainment may have finally reached a tipping point where it facilitates a shift towards more equal power-sharing arrangements and the dynamics where DIL has even more power than MIL.

Importantly, we note that the significant effects of increased education on power dynamics did not emerge until 2015, whereas the effects of paid work were already evident by 2005. This divergence suggests that in India, where rising educational attainment has paradoxically coincided with declining female labour force participation, education and employment offer distinct pathways towards decision-making power. This stands in contrast to the consistently significant positive effect of women's age (a control variable, results not shown) on the likelihood of residing in a more egalitarian household rather than a MIL-dominant one. One possible interpretation is that education primarily reflects attitudes and aspirations, while paid work generates immediate bargaining leverage through direct access to economic resources.

Despite some evidence of DILs' education and work positively affecting their decision-making power within patrilocal families, the MIL's work status is generally associated with the maintenance of traditional, MIL-dominant dynamics, especially when the DIL is not working. Given that DILs in these households often assume primary childcare responsibilities, the MIL's work and potential earnings appear to preserve her authority rather than redistribute domestic decision-making power. Furthermore, men's physical absence due to migration consistently facilitates traditional power dynamics, increasing the chance of MIL's power over DIL but never leading to a shared/egalitarian power arrangement. This outcome underscores the MIL's positional authority within the patrilocal structure, particularly pronounced when the patriarchal head is away.

Finally, we acknowledge that our analysis is restricted to patrilocal families, thereby excluding women in nuclear family structures. This exclusion likely misses a selective group of women who might be characterised by more egalitarian attitudes, greater

individual resources, and stronger bargaining power. Substantial regional differences in Indian residential arrangements shaped by demographic and socioeconomic factors as well as cultural preferences (Breton, 2021) further suggest that a focus on patrilocal family structure is not representative of the national trend. While extended households remain the predominant family structure in India (Allendorf 2013), approximately 46 per cent of the women in our sample who married within the last five years reside in nuclear settings. Therefore, our assessment of shifts in women's decision-making power, particularly those of younger generations, may be overly conservative, potentially underestimating the broader social changes occurring over time. These results thus should be interpreted with caution and viewed as specifically applicable to MIL-DIL dynamics within patrilocal households.

In conclusion, this research confirms the continuing resilience of patriarchal norms within Indian patrilocal families, while simultaneously revealing directional, albeit delayed and uneven, change towards egalitarianism. By scrutinising the power dynamics simultaneously between two generations of women residing in the same household, we have offered insights into how changes in women's education, work, and absence of patriarchal power (through men's migration) interact with entrenched social structures over time. The positive effects of education and work of DIL on intergenerational power dynamics show a significant time lag – emerging strongly only in the most recent survey year – which provides a vital counterpoint to research that measures only individual empowerment at a single point in time. It indicates that the mechanisms of social change are often subject to a tipping point effect, where material conditions must accumulate to a certain threshold before they can visibly disrupt deep-seated familial norms. On the other hand, as the consistent effects of men's migration on the unequal power dynamics between MIL and DIL indicate, changing living arrangements and labour market conditions continue to create MIL-dominant patriarchal dynamics, opposing the possible change to more egalitarianism within patrilocal families. Future research should leverage longitudinal and qualitative methods to further disentangle the processes by which individual and familial factors interact with broader shifts in social structure and cultural norms to shape women's status and empowerment within the complex dynamics of the extended family.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Sojin Yu:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Feinian Chen:** Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Appendix. Comparison of household characteristics between our sample and the wider sample obtained from the household roster.

Variable	Sample		Household roster	
	Mean	Std.	Mean	Std.
Mother-in-law's age	43.61	4.14	59.29	11.06
Daughter-in-law's age	20.29	2.89	29.17	8.27
Urban residency (1 = urban)	0.27	0.44	0.27	0.45
Having a young child (under 5) at home (1 = yes)	0.57	0.49	0.54	0.5
Household wealth index in quantiles	Poorest	0.15	0.35	0.16
	Poorer	0.2	0.4	0.2
	Middle	0.21	0.41	0.2
	Richer	0.22	0.42	0.21
	Richest	0.22	0.42	0.23
Geography	North	0.35	0.48	0.36
	Central	0.15	0.36	0.12
	East	0.18	0.38	0.18
	Northeast	0.09	0.29	0.1
	West	0.11	0.31	0.11
	South	0.12	0.33	0.14
N		5501		179,489