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# Social Norms, Gender Roles and Time Use: Multigenerational Households in India

*Aseem Hasnain and Abhilasha Srivastava*

Unlike Hollywood stories, marriage is not just the beginning of the happily ever after, but also the starting point for a number of hard questions. Who will go out to work? Who will do household chores? Who will look after the kids and elderly? And so on. According to the Nobel laureate economist, Gary Becker, the answer to these questions comes from an unlikely but dependable source: division of labor. His idea that rational calculations may underpin romantic relationships goes back to the 1970s when Becker first proposed an economic model of marriage, arguing that marriage was based on the principle of division of labor, and that gains from marriage were determined by how efficient this division was. The one with comparative advantage at earning wages would go out and work; and the other person would do the chores and stay at home.

However, this model was contested by feminist, institutional, and social economists who claimed that the couple negotiated division of labor under the influence of social norms, institutions, biases, and power relations. This article uses time use data from India to show how household division of labor is not simply a rational or objective decision based on individual's capacities to earn wages in the market, but a complex function of social norms and notions about expected gender roles.

Over time, household division of labor and its implications for individual well-being became an important area of study for economists and sociologists alike who were interested in studying work-life balance, resource allocation, and bargaining within the family.

Time use data, which was collected by national statistical survey organizations based in individual countries since the early 1980's, came in handy for this purpose. This data revealed how much time individuals devote to activities such as paid work, unpaid work including household chores and childcare, leisure, and self-care activities. This data helped researchers in improving their understanding about how people made decisions about time and how it affected their well-being. Surprisingly, time use data also revealed a *global* reality: despite an increase in married women's labor force participation, they did disproportionately more unpaid work than men. This anomaly was starker in the Global South where a large number of women never entered

the formal workforce, or quit jobs to take care of children and the elderly in multigenerational households. However, scholarship on household division of labor has tended to focus on married couples in nuclear families only, the dominant household structure in advanced industrialized nations.

In developing economies, multigenerational households are common. These households accommodate three to four generations and make joint decisions about consumption and division of labor. Further, gender norms governing the multigenerational family differ substantially from a nuclear family, as there are multiple actors, both male and female, with varying roles and expectations living as one unit. In such living arrangements, women undertake a disproportionately heavy load of unpaid care work as there are almost no market substitutes for such work; there is poor infrastructure; and food security is an ongoing concern. In India, the multigenerational, patriarchal, patrilineal household is the prevalent form of family, and about 312 million people live in such an arrangement. A typical multigenerational household includes the husband's parents—father-in-law, mother-in-law, the husband (son), his wife (daughter-in-law), and their children. Usually, the father-in-law makes unilateral decisions about consumption expenditures and distribution of public goods within the household, while the mother-in-law makes decisions about division of labor. She passes on most of the household work to the daughter-in-law, according to traditionally established gender roles. The son (husband) is usually the primary breadwinner, and his wife (daughter-in-law) is subordinate to her husband as well as to her parents-in-law.

In India, the multigenerational household creates the greatest restraint on the daughter-in-law's freedom. The typical Indian bride enters a patriarchal family through an arranged marriage, where she is expected to become obedient to

him and his parents. Along with her husband, her mother-in-law also monitors her access to material resources and external contacts. Consequently, co-residence with in-laws is associated with stricter gender norms and, in turn, lower scores on measures of the daughter-in-law's autonomy. The mother-in-law plays a major role in encouraging daughters-in-law to adhere to norms such as 'housework is the ideal wifely duty.' Thus in a multigeneration patriarchal household, the private sphere of housework is negotiated and contested between the two women, but under an unequal power relation.

We use data from the only available, nationally representative Indian time use survey (1998–99) to show such a division of labor in multigenerational families.

Graph 1 shows time-allocation in mean hours of work for all members of the household. Activities are divided into paid work (work done for wages outside the house), unpaid housework (cooking, cleaning, laundry and household repair and maintenance), unpaid care work (care of children, sick and elderly), and total work (total of paid and unpaid work). Results point to a

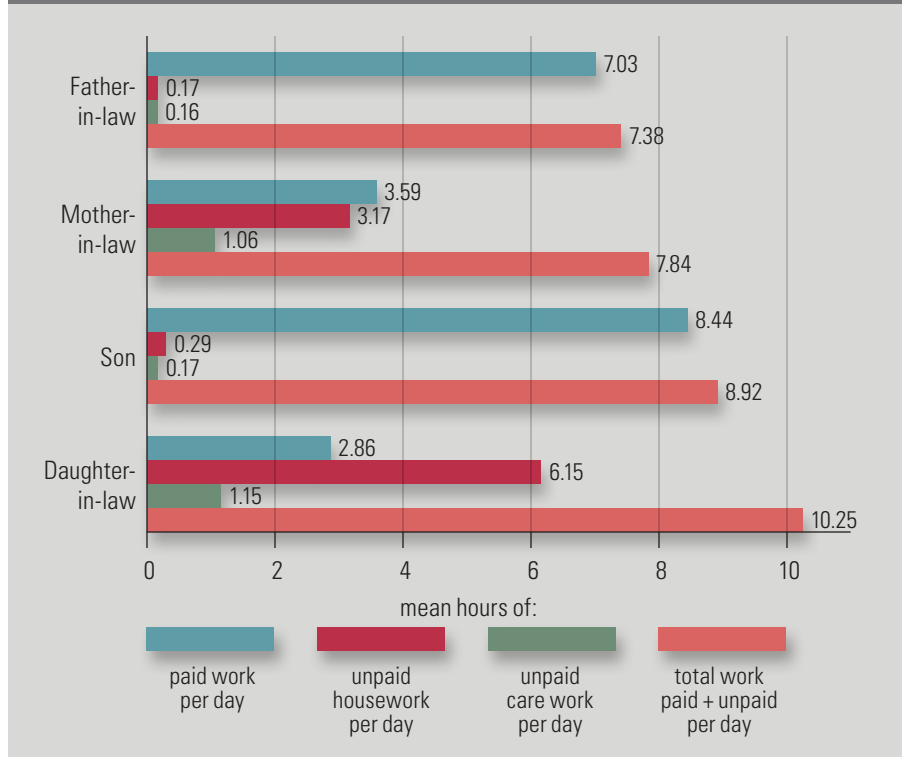


*Multi-tasking lady* (Photo Credit: Zulfiqar Sheth, 2012).

strict division of household labor along gender lines where men do most of the work in the paid labor market and women do all the unpaid work in the household. Results also point to differences in housework allocation within the same gender, with the daughters-in-law doing twice the amount of unpaid work than their mothers-in-law. Data shows that a daughter-in-law is the most time-poor individual in the multigenerational household as she undertakes significantly more total work, compared to all other members in the household. Male members are almost completely absent from day-to-day tasks within the house and the division of labor in the household is only between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, with the daughters-in-law shouldering a disproportionately high burden of household chores (known as reproductive work among field specialists) in the household, as much as 8 hours of unpaid work per day and around 10.5 hours of total work on average. The main takeaway from this simple analysis is that males do not do any unpaid work in their own households, and the mother-in-law and

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**GRAPH 1: Time spent on different work activities (paid & unpaid) by all members of the household in hours per day.**



daughter-in-law do all unpaid work with the latter doing disproportionately more work.

Data reveals surprising facts about the effect of education on the division of labor in the household. In his pioneering work on India, demographer John Caldwell (1984) showed that universal education or mass schooling changed the cultural superstructure of society. He argued that educated women see themselves as part of a larger world and education acts to reduce “the hold of the patriarch,” prepares children of both genders to work in a market economy, and informs girls of their economic options outside the home. Caldwell also argued that education transformed the power relationship in a multigenerational household such that, “a young woman with schooling is more likely to challenge her in-laws, and the in-laws are less likely to fight the challenge” (412). According to him educated daughters-in-law can bargain successfully with less-educated

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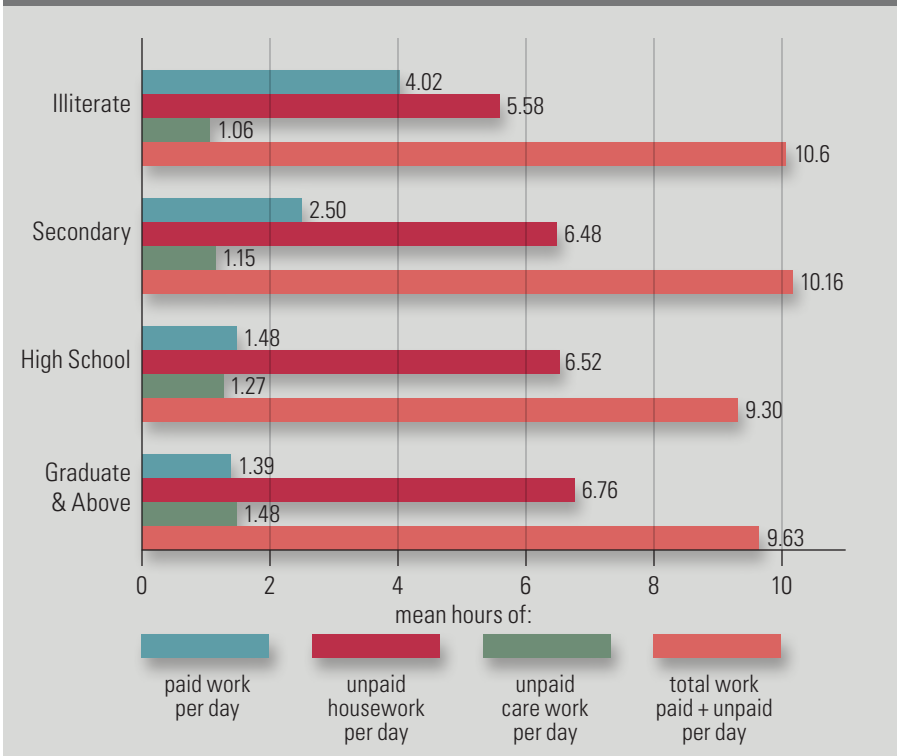
mothers-in-law for a larger slice of the family budget to spend on food, and health care for their children. Thus, a young daughter-in-law’s education tips the traditional balance of familial relationships in her favor, and by extension she is likely to exert more autonomy by doing less household work and demanding equal participation from her mother-in-law. Therefore one expects that an increase in the education of a daughter-in-law would

decrease her unpaid work and increase her paid work in the economy.

According to Caldwell’s thesis, their paid work should increase, and unpaid work should decrease as their education increases.

Graph 2 shows the amount of work done by daughters-in-law based on their educational levels. Interestingly, we see the exact opposite: as the education level of a daughter-in-law in a multigenerational household increases, her paid work decreases while her unpaid work increases. How do we explain this anomaly?

**GRAPH 2: Time spent on different work activities (paid & unpaid) by daughter-in-law in hours per day based on education levels.**



### Patriarchal Bargain Theory

Patriarchal bargain theory (PBT) helps explain how the increased bargaining power of an educated daughter-in-law fails to decrease her burden of unpaid household work or increase her opportunities for paid work. PBT notes that educated women are more likely to resist patriarchal norms, and are more likely to be subjected to violence in order to discipline and control their behavior inside and outside the household. While one can argue that patriarchal households should thus prefer daughters-in-law with less education, in reality the reverse happens. Marriage market preferences in India are increasingly skewed towards getting an educated bride because she is thought to be better at raising children.

This creates a dilemma in patriarchal households that feel pressured to accept educated brides for their sons, but are not ready to accommodate their terms. An educated daughter-in-law is subjected to coercion and violence to mold her according to the norms of the patriarchal marital home. These norms aim to confine her to unpaid work in the household and to restrict her mobility outside the household. A woman's mobility outside the household is seen as an opportunity for romantic or sexual encounters out of wedlock, and hence fiercely regulated in patriarchal households. An educated bride does not automatically consent to these restrictions and so she is seen by her marital family as a threat. Thus, a patriarchal household considers non-participation in market work by women as a proxy for sexual fidelity and a marker of family honor.

Since the son is usually employed and away from the home during the day, the task of confining an educated daughter-in-law falls on the mother-in-law. She makes sure that the daughter-in-law is completely devoted to her household duties. When a daughter-in-law is more educated and assertive, her bargaining power challenges the mother-in-law's authority. Thus the mother-in-law exerts more power on the daughter-in-law by giving her even more household work. Within this patriarchal context, daughters-in-law rarely rebel. Instead they are more likely to internalize these norms and do more housework in order to prove themselves to be compliant members of the household. In cases where the daughter-in-law rebels, violence is used. This is evident from the thousands of *reported* cases of domestic violence in India.

## Role of Caste and Class

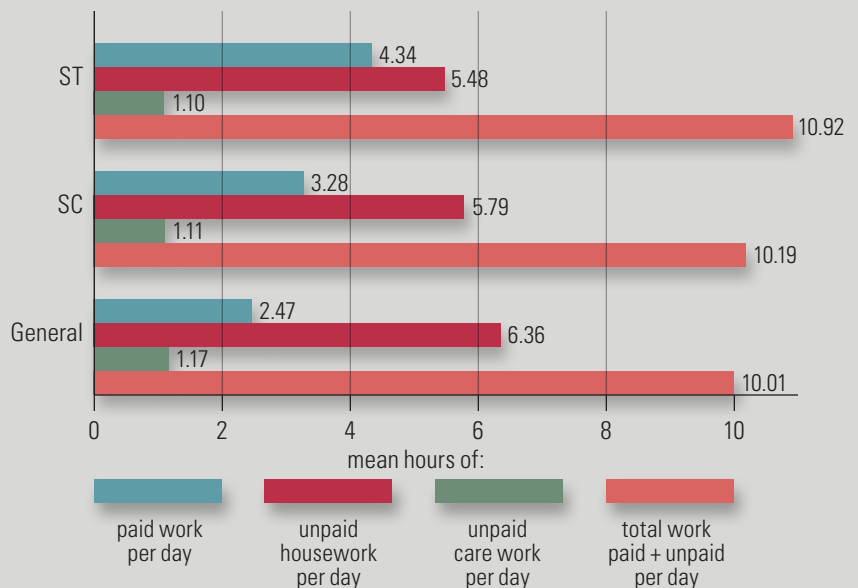
While PBT helps explain the unexpected results of our time use patterns among educated daughters-in-law, these patterns vary based on the caste and class position of the households.

Caste and class heavily influence practices such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and asset ownership in India. These institutions also shape a woman's options outside the home and her bargaining power inside it.

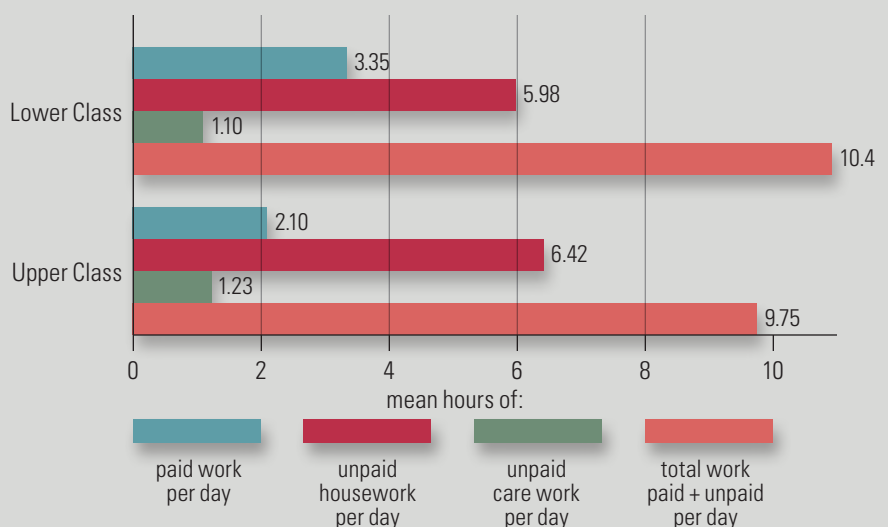
Graphs 3 and 4 show the time spent per day on different work activities (paid & unpaid) by daughters-in-law based on caste and class identities. Graph 3 shows

that daughters-in-law from 'upper caste' households (known as 'General' castes in India) do more unpaid work and less paid work per day as compared to daughters-in-laws from 'lower caste' households. Among these marginalized 'lower caste' groups exist two specific categories of communities that the Indian constitution lists as Scheduled Caste (SC), and Scheduled Tribes (ST).

**GRAPH 3: Time spent on different work activities (paid & unpaid) by daughter-in-law in hours per day based on caste.**



**GRAPH 4: Time spent on different work activities (paid & unpaid) by daughter-in-law in hours per day based on class.**





Cartoon featured in *The Hindu*, 2011.

Graph 4 shows that daughters-in-law from upper class households do more unpaid work and less paid work per day as compared to daughters-in-law from lower class households.

Within the sensibilities of the Indian caste system, the higher a particular caste group is perceived to be, the lesser market work is expected from its women. This means that ‘higher’ caste households tend to diminish the preference for obtaining work and incidence of women’s employment outside the household. On the other hand, such norms are less likely to be imposed in households that belong to the ‘lower’ castes. These restrictions on the bargaining power of Indian

women are part of the patriarchal setup where contact with males outside the household is deemed as ‘polluting’ and is to be avoided at all cost. Therefore working outside, especially for young married women, is considered socially degrading for the household, and working inside the house is considered a pure form of wifely duty that is enforced as well as rewarded. This effect is particularly strong for the daughters-in-law in ‘upper’ caste households, causing educated daughters-in-law in ‘upper’ caste households to do relatively more household work compared to the ‘lower’ caste household. Since caste and class status in India are highly correlated, upper class women also strictly specialize in household management, spending

more time in household/care work. But for lower-class married women, working outside the home is inevitable and is seen as a necessary evil given the need for additional income. Increased education is less likely to be a source of bargaining power for upper caste/class daughters-in-law, who are more likely to be constrained by caste and class than lower caste/class daughters-in-law.

## Conclusion

It is easy to imagine that one chooses to spend time based on one’s educational qualifications, job, business or interests. However, data shows that social norms and expectations, such as gender roles, play an important role in these decisions. This short piece analyzes the Indian time use survey to show how individuals spend their time not just of their own volition but under the influence of complex societal factors. Finally, these factors are not the same for everyone, but differ based on the privileges of age, household structure, caste, and class.



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The main takeaway from this simple analysis is that males do not do any unpaid work in their own households, and the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law do all unpaid work with the latter doing disproportionately more work.