

How Did East Asia Overtake South Asia on Gender?

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In 1900, East and South Asia were extremely patriarchal. Men were revered as high status, while female sacrifice was glorified. By socialising women to marry, obey their in-laws and stay put, Asian families consolidated trusted networks of social cooperation. Since chastity was crucial for family honour, women were also tightly restricted. But, over the 20th century, East Asian women increasingly undertook paid work in the public sphere, forged solidarity and gained status. Growth also catalysed a broader process of cultural liberalisation: autonomy, dating, and divorce. South Asian patriarchy is much more persistent. Intimate partner violence remains normalised. To explain this divergence, I suggest that every patrilocal family faces a trade-off between honour (achieved by social policing) and income (earned by exploiting female labour). East Asian female employment rose because rising wages compensated for honour. East Asian culture also differed: they were exogamous and less concerned about female seclusion.

Introduction

Our world is marked by what I call ‘The Great Gender Divergence’. Over the twentieth century, the entire world became more gender equal, but rates of progress varied, and there persist large disparities between regions. This is a fundamental fact about humanity, but it has never been explained. While there is a vast literature on the global economic divergence, there is nothing on ‘The Great Gender Divergence’¹. This paper contributes to this literature by focusing on regions that were patriarchal in 1900, yet have since diverged.

Methodology

To contribute to this new and important field, I have analysed several millennia of cultural evolution in every world region. By piecing together disparate data from different disciplines, topics, countries, and periods, seeing cross-country similarities and differences, I can identify systematic patterns about what drives change and continuity. While country specialists may emphasise specific idiosyncrasies (like communism), my comparative approach reveals regional trends.

This paper thus draws on published literature (from economics, history, sociology, and anthropology), as well as my own qualitative research (two months of qualitative research across six states of India, interviews with Asian migrants, as well as zoom interviews to China and Taiwan). In India, I stayed with families in Delhi, Jaipur, Udaipur, Bangalore, Mumbai, and Calcutta, then joined a research team touring villages in Bihar. On top of this, I have done qualitative research in Mexico, Morocco, the US, Canada, The Gambia, Zambia, Italy, Spain, Poland, Cambodia, Vietnam, Turkey and Uzbekistan. Through in-depth life history interviews, I learn how and why social expectations have changed over the generations. Cross-country, longitudinal analysis enables me to identify structural drivers of change. For example, in Uzbekistan I realised that even if women work, tight-knit kinship and divorce stigma maintain obedience.

A socio-economic, geographic and generational range of participants enabled my comparative analysis. Farmers, traders, waitresses, drivers, teachers, housewives, office workers, politicians, students, academics, activists, and government bureaucrats all shared their diverse perspectives. I introduced myself as an academic, writing a book on global history and culture. Group discussions were usually thematic, e.g. women were asked how their lives differed from their mothers. Individuals were asked them to narrate their life histories. Since self-presentations are carefully curated, I triangulated accounts through observation; interviewing relatives; and comparing what people said in different settings. Conceivably, a person may speak differently versus when alone. To mitigate bias, I have frequently shared my analysis and

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invited critique. Open transparency has helped me build trust, network and learn. Many participants have contacted me repeatedly, providing more insights. All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

The Patrilocal Trap

East and South Asian societies were primarily patrilineal and patrilocal (Surowiec, Snyder, and Creanza 2019). Men were revered as high-status, knowledgeable authorities, providers, scions of the family line, and performers of funeral rites. ‘Men decide, women follow’ was the Confucian model. ‘Man high, woman low’ is a similar idiom from Korea. Women were to serve, obey and produce men (K. Jung 2014; Su-ling 1953; Yuen, Law, and Ho 2003; 2003).

Daughters were perceived as less valuable because they would soon marry into another family. The Telegu said, ‘Bringing up a daughter is like watering a plant in another's courtyard’ (Dube 1988). This difference in treatment is reflected in sex ratios, mortality, education, and stunting (Jayachandran and Pande 2017). When Chinese families were plagued by cholera or famine, they drowned girls at birth or sold them as slaves (Hershatter 2011). Punjabi girls likewise died disproportionately (Sami 2002). Elite Korean boys were educated in the classics, but girls (however wealthy) were kept ignorant (Jun Yoo 2008). In 1930s Shantou, boys outnumbered girls 3:1. (Siu and Siu 2010). Chinese girls grew up learning they were less valued and more constrained (Croll 1995). Likewise in India before 1901, female literacy was almost zero (Roy 2005; Amin 1996).

Patrilocality meant that men lived on family land, supported by their family and village. A young bride was an outsider with no claim to resources (Liu 2001). Her husband’s kin imposed close policing, to preserve prestige. If visitors called and only a woman was present, she might answer that ‘no one is home’ (Hershatter 2011). Korean women had no independent identity (H. Choi 2009).

Female chastity, obedience and sacrifice were praised as virtuous (Altekar 2009; Hinsch 2010; 2013; Kandiyoti 1988; Shu and Chen 2023; Verma 2018; Mandelbaum 1986). In Northern China, wealthy girls’ feet were broken - to improve their prospects for marriage by signalling confinement (X. Fan and Wu 2020). Both Confucius and the Laws of Manu prescribed female subordination. The Bhagavad Gita 9.32 describes girls and sudras (lowest caste) as lower births, born of sinful parentage, barred from Hindu moksa (spiritual liberation). Every year - for Karwa Chauth - Hindu wives are expected to fast and pray for their husbands.

Female subordination and seclusion in traditional patrilocal societies emerged from a coordination failure which I call “the Patrilocal Trap”. Trusted networks of commerce and cooperation were consolidated through inter-marriage. Daughters were socialised to marry, please their in-laws and stay put. Like boys, girls learnt to obey their elders and put family first (Shu and Chen 2023, 29). Living with her husband’s kin, a wife might be entirely alone, without allies. Women internalised the responsibility to stay silent and maintain her family’s reputation. Publicly talking about private matters was ‘shameful’. Divorce was heavily stigmatised. My theory explains why mothers-in-law can be so tyrannical. Wives’ unwavering loyalty gave their husband’s family the upper hand. Mothers-in-law could command obedience, since the daughter-in-law cannot credibly threaten exit; her family would be humiliated.

Institutions reinforced social policing: an entire family could be penalised for one member’s disobedience. In East Asia, punishment was enforced by the state, as well as other families; in South Asia, assemblies of older men might ostracise members from their endogamous networks of commerce, cooperation, and future marriages (Chowdhry 2004; Ong 2022; Mandelbaum 1986). Fear of ostracism instilled conformity (Murmu 2020).

In patrilineal societies with valuable land or herds, women bear sons to perpetuate their husbands’ lineage. Inheritance generates a profound anxiety about female sexuality. Families maintained honour by removing all doubts about the virginity of unmarried women and the fidelity of wives. Women were tightly policed and their movements restricted. If a woman was seen as moving about too freely, the ensuing gossip would soon circulate through close-knit rural communities, ruin her marriage prospects, and disgrace her family (Dube 1988; Mandelbaum 1986).

Despite the grinding poverty of village life, women earning wages away from home was rare. Few families wanted to stick their neck out and be the first to send their daughter away, because she might be perceived by the village as promiscuous:

“At that time it wasn’t as open as now, with so many people going out... People seeing a girl leaving home would think “Who knows what she’s doing. Could she be doing other things, going off with men?” Chastity is extremely important to Chinese people. Other girls growing up in the village could be observed by everyone. But if you ran so far away, no one could see what you were doing, so later you wouldn’t be able to find a husband. Better families, those with promise, wouldn’t let you marry their son” – explained a Chinese woman (Jacka 2006).

Patrilocal networks and patrilineal descent thus generated two negative feedback loops, entrenching female subordination and seclusion. Women were socialised to obey their in-laws, who imposed tight restrictions.

The Honour-Income Trade-Off

Why might patrilineal families support women’s paid work outside the home? In abstraction, each family faced a trade-off between honour and income. Families gained respectability by conforming to gender status beliefs: men were authorities, while women stayed away from unrelated men. But the more women were secluded, the less that families could exploit their labour. Families might be tempted to supplement their meagre earnings by putting their daughter to work in towns. But this would jeopardise honour and network inclusion.

Economically desperate families were the most likely to send their daughters and wives away to work. Yet once family circumstances improved, the women would be brought back home to regain respectability (as previously argued by Goldin 1994). Meanwhile, the wealthiest families displayed their affluence by keeping women in seclusion and foregoing the financial benefits of female work (Jacka 1997). Elite [yangban] Korean women were veiled (Jun Yoo 2008). Upwardly mobile families gained status by following suit.

On average, South Asians and East Asians seemed to make different trade-offs between honour and income. The size of the ‘market reward’ from putting women to work needed to be larger in South Asia than in East Asia in order to compensate for the loss of honour.

Preference for status and seclusion versus preference for exploitation

East Asian families were less concerned about female seclusion than South Asian families, but this small difference could make a big difference when economic conditions changed. East Asian families were more willing to treat daughters as an economic resource. This meant that female employment was more responsive to economic conditions. When railways brought cheaper industrial goods, Chinese families ceased to bind their daughters’ feet, so they could move into new productive activities (Bossen and Gates 2017). Before Communism, women’s economic contributions were similar to men’s in the highly commercialised Lower Yangzi region (J. K. Kung and Lee 2010).

South Asians guarded female reproduction more zealously. This was manifest in child marriage, purdah, and strict surveillance (Fuller and Narasimhan 2013). All of these were less responsive to economic conditions. When industry moved from home-production to factories, women stayed at home. Female workers in industry fell from 17% to 11% between 1901 and 1921, then remained low (Roy 2005). Rather than work at mills in Calcutta, Bengali women worked from home at a third of the factory wage. To prevent shame, men migrated to towns alone (Forbes 1996; Sen 1999, 113). Even when commerce flourished in the early 1900s, many castes in Uttar Pradesh restricted female mobility because they prioritised honour over earnings. Urban Chamars (Dalits) put their wives in seclusion (Gupta 2001). Publishers like the Aligarh Institute Gazette urged their readers to restrict female mobility:

“We wish our women to be educated. But if education means letting them loose to mix with whom they please; if it means that as they rise in learning, they shall deteriorate in morals; if it means the

loss of our honour and the invasion of the privacy of our homes; we prefer our honour to the education of our women, even though we may be called obstinate, and prejudiced, and wrong-headed” (Gupta 2001).

The age of marriage was always much lower in South Asia than East Asia. In 1931, Indian girls’ mean age of marriage was just 13. Chinese girls were marrying at 18, and Japanese girls even later (Caldwell 2005; Government of India 1974; Saito 2011).

Why did South Asians idealise female seclusion?

South Asian culture has extremely deep roots. The Indus Valley Civilisation was remarkably egalitarian, but after 2000 BCE there were several waves of pastoralist tribes from Central Asia. These Sintashta Steppe men (often armed with wagons and battle axes) reproduced with the women to form Ancestral North Indians. Steppe ancestry is highest among Brahmins and Bhumihars (Basu, Sarkar-Roy, and Majumder 2016; Narasimhan et al. 2019; Karmin et al. 2015). Poetic hymns in the Rgveda (1500-1200 BCE) glorified military might and male heirs (Whitaker 2011).

Endogamy amongst upper caste populations hardened under the Gupta Empire (Basu, Sarkar-Roy, and Majumder 2016; Narasimhan et al. 2019). The Mahabharata and Ramayana were canonised during this period. Sita was revered as the model of female devotion. Smriti commentators extolled pre-pubescent marriage, widow chastity and the patrilineal obligation to bear sons (Verma 2018; Thapur 1896; Brodbeck 2016). Rulers thus empowered religious authorities, who preached that spiritual growth was contingent on casteist patriarchy. Brahmins maintained their purity and spiritual prestige through tight controls over female reproduction. Outside the Gupta empire, there was still admixture (especially among tribals) (Basu, Sarkar-Roy, and Majumder 2016).

Central Asian invasions and Mughal rule strengthened ideals of female seclusion and veiling. In late 8th century Baghdad, the Abbasid court prescribed veiling. In cities across the Caliphate, conquered people culturally assimilated to Muslim Arab-Persian ideals. By the 14th century, women withdrew from public life. Purdah was then introduced to South Asia by Amir Timur - alongside new cuisine, music, and architecture. Seclusion became normative in urban north India, upwardly mobile families followed suit to gain prestige (Misra 1967; Eaton 1996; Sharma 2016, 164).

Since Rajput honour was already contingent on female chastity, subsequent invasions may have catalysed cultural tightening and even stricter controls. That would explain why the first recorded sati was in 9th century Rajasthan (Verma 2018). Religious antagonism continued to be expressed through controls over women. In the early 1900s in Uttar Pradesh, Hindu publicists broadcast unsubstantiated allegations of rape, aggression, abductions, conversions, and forced marriages by Muslim men (Gupta 2001).

Bhutan is the exception that proves the rule. Unlike the rest of South Asia, female employment is in line with the global average. This may stem from their North-East Asian origin (Gayden et al. 2009) and geographical isolation. Nepalese also have North-East Asian origins, but they assimilated to Hinduism, adopted an Indo-Aryan language, and female labour force participation is now low. By contrast, Bhutanese people are Buddhist and speak Dzongkha (a Tibetan language). Their North-East Asian culture may have been protected and preserved by the Himalayas.

How did East Asia overcome the Patrilocal Trap?

East Asia overcame the Patrilocal Trap because it industrialised rapidly and families were willing to exploit female labour in response to new economic opportunities. East Asia witnessed the classic case of balanced growth: rapid productivity growth in agriculture, which released labour into other sectors; combined with rapid growth in manufacturing and services, which absorbed surplus labour. The demand for labour in industry and services was so strong that the opportunity cost of restricting one’s daughter increased for entire villages. Thanks to the late age of marriage, there was an abundant supply of unmarried women who could be hired simultaneously. This synchronised effect helped overcome families’ concern about stigma

and their daughter becoming uniquely unmarriageable. With high economic rewards and growing social acceptance, female factory work soon became normalised (L. Kung 1994; Jacka 1997).

East Asian states and employers realised that women were cheap, efficient workers. The Meiji Government called on girls to ‘reel for the nation’ (Tsurumi 1990). Emulating the Japanese experience, Asian factory managers in China sought to capitalise on low-cost, educated, disposable labour – in food-processing, textiles, electronics, and subsequently services (Siu 2010, 18).

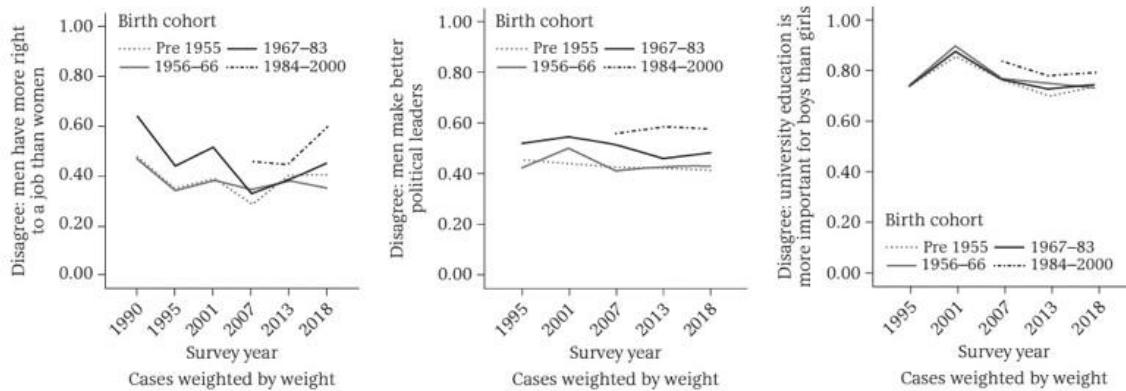
Industrialisation created the social context for women to gain emancipation. Daughters gained ‘face’ (respect) by remitting earnings, supporting their families and showing filial piety (Gruijters 2018; Shi 2017; H. Zhang 2017). Working women expressed newfound pride, exemptions from care work, and voice in family decision-making (Goodburn 2015; Jacka 1997; Salaff 1976; N. Zhang 2014). Over the 1990s and 2000s, Chinese sons and daughters were providing equal financial support (Bauer et al. 1992; Lei 2013; Hu 2017). Married daughters who lived with their parents actually provided more money than sons, plus more emotional support (Li, Feldman, and Jin 2004). In rural areas, daughters play the same role (Li, Feldman, and Jin 2004; Shi 2017). Female worth is no longer reduced to chastity, marriage and male heirs.

By migrating to cities, women made friends, bemoaned unfair practices, and discovered more egalitarian alternatives. Emboldened by peers, women came to expect and demand better - in dating, domesticity, and industrial relations alike (Kim 2011; Koo 2001). Mingling freely in cities, young adults increasingly dated before marriage, chose their own partners, then established nuclear households (Thornton and Lin 1994; Farrer 2002). They gained freedoms.

Mass female employment generates attitudinal change. Chinese sons of working mothers are more likely to endorse gender equality, welcome their wife’s contributions and do more housework (X. Chen and Ge 2018; Shu and Chen 2023, 59). Chinese women now want to work; they have become much more independent and assertive (Xiang 2021). This holds right across the class spectrum - from university graduates to precarious migrants (Fengjiang 2021; K. Xie 2021).

College educated, urban Chinese men and women increasingly champion gender equality and share care-work (Shu and Chen 2023:63-65, 162; Xie 2021). Sons are no longer seen as necessary to continue the family line (Shu and Chen 2023, 108). In Korea too, son preference has waned (E. J. Choi and Hwang 2020)

Attitudes toward vertical equality



Attitudes toward horizontal differentiation

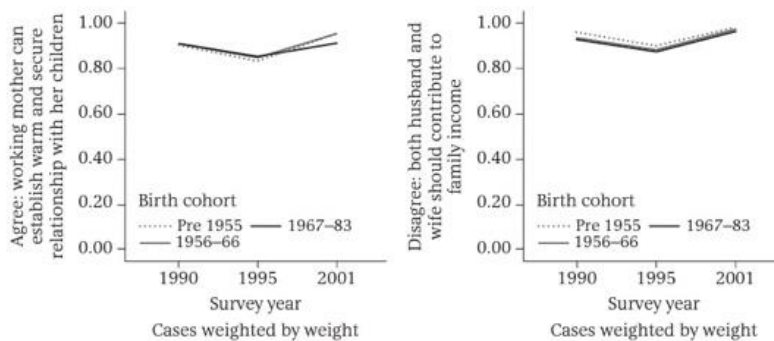


FIGURE 3.3 Variations in proportion holding egalitarian gender attitudes by birth cohort and survey year

Source: World Value Survey, Waves 1-7, $n=10,827$

(Shu and Chen 2023)

Rapid economic growth has fostered cultural liberalisation

This section sets out my original theorisation of the relationship between economic development and cultural change across East Asia.

Filial piety (xiao) is still widely regarded as the paramount virtue. Parents continue to rely on their children in old age. ‘They see their children as an extension of themselves’, remarked Fang (a 34 year old migrant from Shanghai), and see their children as an extension of themselves - who are equally keen to provide for their parents (Nakano 2022; Qi 2015; Remmert 2021; Sun 2017; Yan 2021; Yeh et al. 2013).

Intergenerational solidarity remains strong, but its content has changed. Families are now more materialistic, liberal and gender equal. If parents only have a daughter, they rely on her financially. Instead of socialising her to please in-laws, parents increasingly want their daughters to become economically independent (K. Xie 2021). Girls often take the place of sons – in bilateral residence, naming practices, financial transfers, and economic independence (T. Chen, Leeson, and Liu 2017; Choukhmane, Coeurdacier, and Jin 2023; Eklund 2018; Hu 2017; Shi 2017). Bias does persist. Chinese daughters are less likely to inherit wealth (Hu 2017). But East Asian young women are more like sons: single, self-reliant careerists, navigating the world. Fang and Jing (two university students from Shanghai) explained:

‘It’s important to make our families proud. You need to respect your parents, because they brought you into the world, and you’re indebted to them.

How do you do this?

By going to a good college and by getting a good job.

What about getting a good husband?

Yes, but that’s not so important, our parents want them to be economically independent. That’s important”.

East Asians have also become more individualistic. Let me suggest seven ways in which economic growth has fostered cultural liberalisation.

First, salaries and pensions weaken dependence on kin (Davis and Friedman 2014; Yan 2009). Once men can get good jobs at BYD, it is less imperative to please myriad uncles. Stem families can now be more self-reliant. Only a minority of Chinese people actually want to live with parents or in-laws (Ogihara 2023).

Second, rural-urban migration can foster individualism. When men and women travel independently for work or study, arrange their own accommodation, away from kinship policing, cook for themselves, form new friendships, they become more self-reliant. By thinking and acting for themselves, making their own decisions, they get a taste for individualism (Farrer 2002). I hear this narrative again and again - in interviews worldwide. Chinese women usually tell me that their priority is to be economically independent.

Third, when young adults go to university, socialise with a diverse network, they may come to see alternatives, and critically reflect on unfairness. Socialising no longer revolves around the family. Instead, men and women hang out at cafes with friends, sharing ideas and perspectives. Bao (a student) shared that his parents were both teachers, yet his mother did all the housework. At university in Beijing, his female classmates lambasted son preference and controlling fathers. Listening to their criticisms, he became more empathetic.

Fourth, East Asians are exogamous. As China urbanises, people seize any and all opportunities to develop ties of trust, intimacy and reciprocity (*guanxi*). Frequent social contact, social eating together, exchanging gifts at personally significant events, showing care and loyalty all strengthen *guanxi*. Crucially, these ties can be built with anyone - relatives, friends, classmates, neighbours or colleagues. In a survey of firms in the Pearl River Delta, 97% had mobilised capital from *guanxi* networks, 62% of this was from non-kin (Bian 2019). As networks expand, people are no longer beholden to a close-knit group.

Fifth, prestige is increasingly defined by economic success (rather than Confucianism). As people are increasingly judged by wealth, and economic opportunities create possibilities for independence, Chinese women prioritise economic advancement (Fengjiang 2021; Xiang 2021). Materialism feeds into what I call the 'Honour-Income Trade-Off': income is now more heavily valued.

Sixth, skill-biased technological change has enabled more skilled work. Jobs are now more attractive because they are more psychologically rewarding, culturally esteemed, and high-paying. Women can take pride in socially valued talents, relish creativity, and get excited about careers. Discriminatory adverts are also rarer for skilled jobs

As educated women become journalists, authors, publishers and filmmakers, they publicly champion gender equality. In Hong Kong, Ann Hui's popular films often showed women striving for personal fulfilment (Ho 1999). In China, "Shanghai Baby" (1999) and "Candy" (2000) were officially banned, but sales nevertheless boomed. Protagonists' quests for pleasure and self-discovery resonated widely - especially with urban educated women (Song 2016). Yang Li shot to fame with the punchline: "How is he so average, yet so full of confidence?" (Liao 2024). "Kim Ji-Young, Born 1982" topped Asian literary charts, in its portrayal of Korea's everyday sexism (E. White 2020). Television dramas (like "Imperfect victim") open up national debates about rape (L. Zhang 2023b). Taiwan's international film festival - "Women make waves" - now celebrates its 30th year (Festival 2023). U.S. content is also enormously popular, exposing viewers to greater heterogeneity (Frater 2023).

Feminist consciousness is also emerging on social media. "Girls help girls" has become a popular hashtag of female solidarity on "Little Red Book" (Chinese Instagram). Women bemoan patriarchal privileges, condemn domestic violence, encourage other women to escape abuse, share stories about female solidarity, and offer advice. 'Selfless sisters' (伏弟魔) - expected to sacrifice for their brothers - are no longer praised as virtuous. They are increasingly seen as unfairly exploited. Since "Little Red Book" is primarily popular

with women, it is something of a female filter bubble. Women decry sexism and reinforce righteous resistance. Chinese young women increasingly seek equality (R. Yang 2023).

Economic development, urbanisation, and universities thus tend to erode kinship, strengthen individualism and encourage women’s careerism. Daughters still feel great intergenerational loyalty, but their parents typically want them to be happy and economically independent. From my interviews, women are no longer socialised to please their in-laws.

Back in 1975, only 2 in 1000 Taiwanese men were divorced (Cheng 2016). East Asians have since become much more accepting and likely to divorce (Shu and Chen 2023, 108; L. Zhang 2023a). I suggest that as families become less dependent on extended kin and more reliant on their children’s salaries, they become more tolerant of divorce. 80% of Taiwanese women see no problem with divorce. Acceptance is highest among college graduates (Chiang and Park 2023). If she wants to leave, her family may now be more supportive. The meaning of marriage has shifted from consolidating trusted networks to individual fulfilment. Wives are no longer expected to endure abuse.

Across East Asia, there seems to be a growing gender divide. Chinese young women have become much more feminist than male peers (Liao 2024; R. Yang 2023). Young Taiwanese men are no more likely to share housework than their grandfathers (Yu and Liu 2014, 247). Unimpressed by available offers, more women are now choosing to remain single (Nakano 2022). In our conversations, women from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan all emphasised major generational change:

“In my parents’ generation, they thought you should get married... My mother had a lot of problems with my father but she doesn’t think of divorce..

Is that the same for your friends?

We don’t even want to get married... I live in a shared house with other women... Today’s Asian parents, they’re not as controlling as 20 years ago. They let me chose what to do, and what person I want to be” – Jiaoxian, an unmarried Chinese woman living in Tokyo.

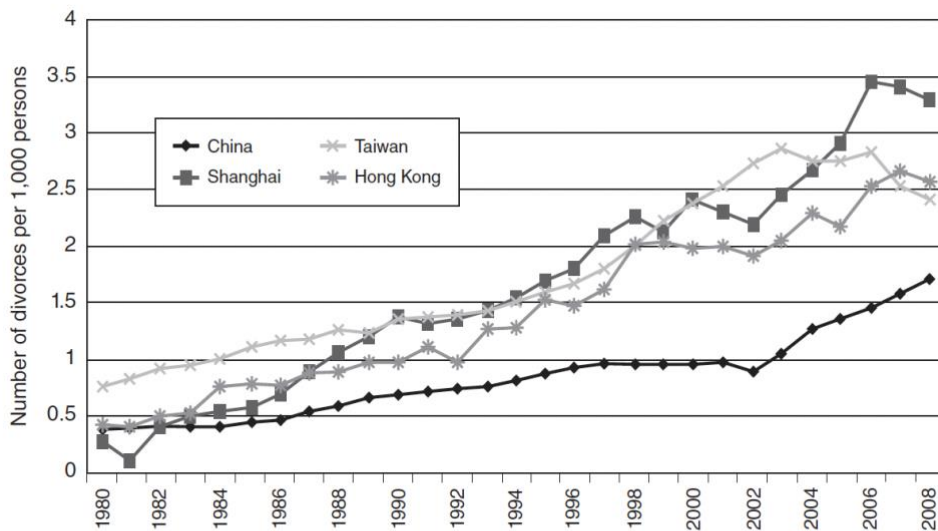


Figure 1.1. Crude divorce rates, 1980–2008.

SOURCES: For Hong Kong, Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department 2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b; for Shanghai, Shanghai Tongji Nianjian 2008; for China, Zhongguo Minzheng Tongji Nianjian 2012; Zhongguo Tongji Nianjian 2012; for Taiwan, Taiwan Department of Household Registration, Ministry of the Interior, “Number and Rates of Birth, Death, Marriage and Divorce, 1981–2012.”

(Davis and Friedman 2014, 14)

East Asia's Heterogeneity

Although all East Asian societies have become more gender equal, there is substantial heterogeneity. Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan are closing gender gaps in pay, seniority and parliamentary representation (Woo 2023; Lin, Gan, and Pan 2020). Japan and South Korea, meanwhile, have the largest gender pay gaps in the OECD. Management remains 85% male, while female graduates may be treated like secretaries, expected to pour the tea and run errands. Korean police and courts have routinely ignored allegations of rape, making women feel alone and afraid (H. Jung 2023; Liddle and Nakajima 2000; Nemoto 2016; Takenoshita 2020; Yamaguchi 2019). Never seeing others speak out, victims anticipate stigma, so stay silent. I call this a "Despondency Trap".

I suggest that male-dominated management in Korea and Japan stem from their systems of lifetime employment and heavy automation. Men at the bottom of the hierarchy are treated like workhorses; they lack high pay, status and seniority. Firms try to secure junior male workers' loyalty by rewarding them with patriarchy. Gender income disparities are largest among low ranking and less educated workers (Yamaguchi 2019). In Shintani Metals, blue-collar men are given positions of authority, then use rough language to bully junior women (Roberson 2002). There has also been heavy automation. South Korea has the world's highest robot density. This suppresses demand for medium-skilled labour (Schauer 2018; Acemoglu and Restrepo 2017). There is no shortage of talent, because extremely well-educated men are willing to work ultra-long hours (the longest in the OECD) (Dittrich and Neuhaus 2023). Since demand is artificially low in manufacturing, some men move into services, undertaking roles that would have otherwise been done by women. Companies can maintain patriarchy, elevating men above skilled female graduates. Discrimination makes workplaces incredibly unpleasant, pushing women out. Meanwhile, the mansphere brims with misogyny (Jung 2023:114).

Korean and Japanese women's low-status roles in the labour market reinforces gender status beliefs. It helps explain why support for gender equality is weaker than in China and Taiwan, alongside lower support for divorce, and a larger gender gap in share of housework (W. Fan and Qian 2022; Kan et al. 2022; W.-S. Yang and Yen 2011). As Himari (working at a bubble tea shop) remarked,

"In Japan, they teach boys not to cry and girls not to complain".

Democratisation also shapes East Asia's cultural heterogeneity. Frustrated by persistent patriarchy, Korean feminists have rallied against sexual harassment. They became increasingly organised, outspoken, and assertive - testifying in public, sharing stories, publicly supporting each other. Decrying shame and stigma, they chorus "Not your fault" (Chang 2009; Chung 2019; H. Jung 2023). Government has been less responsive to feminist demands in China, since dissent is punished. Police tend to ignore intimate partner violence (Chin and Lin 2022; Fincher 2018; Zheng 2022).

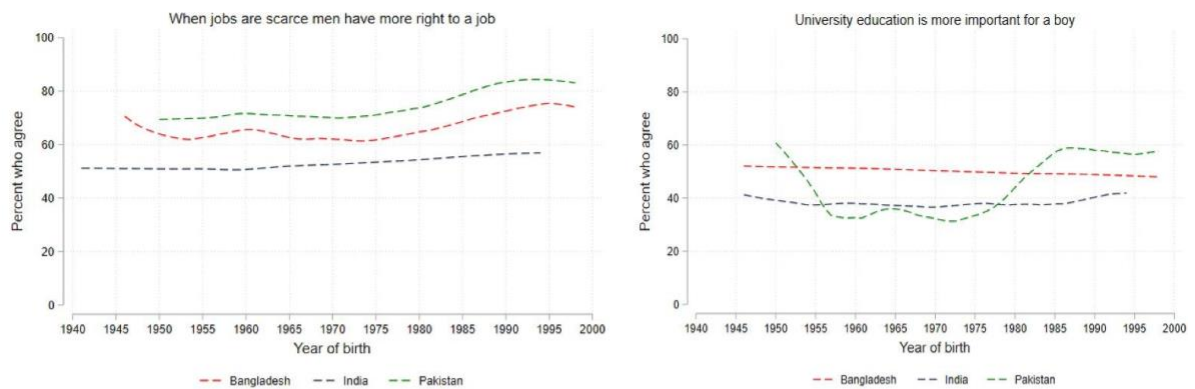
East Asia's history and diversity reveal that job-creating economic growth is a major engine of gender equality. When companies run out of skilled men, they hire and promote women. As vast swathes of women demonstrate equal competence in socially valued domains, they gain status. Structural transformation, exposure to women in positions of prestige and collective reflections encourage two ideological shifts. People come to (1) personally believe that women are equally competent and deserving of status; (2) realise that gender equality is broadly supported in their wider community. East Asia has thus overcome both elements of the Patrilocal Trap: no longer subordinate or secluded, women have gained freedom and status.

South Asia remains caught in the Patrilocal Trap

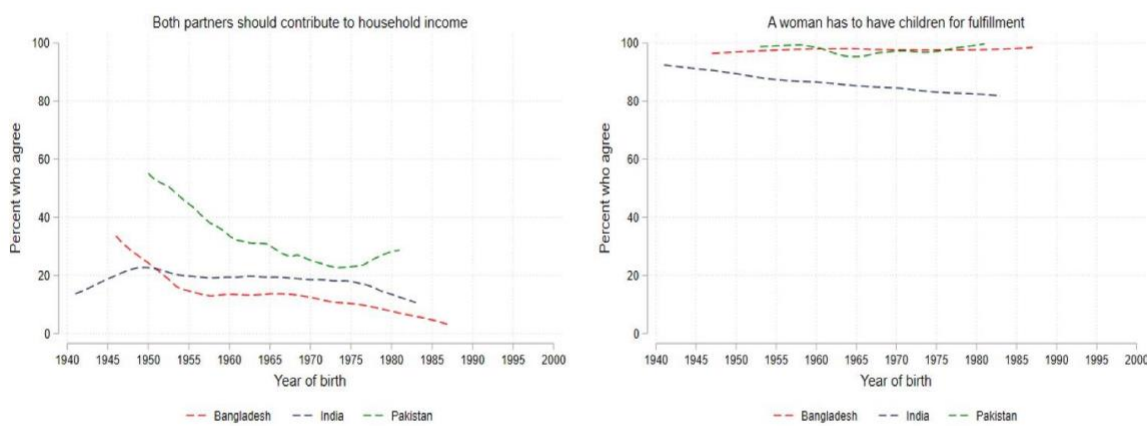
After India's authoritarian 'emergency' of the 1970s, rights organisations expanded, gained autonomy, and addressed a broader range of issues. Civil society organisations collaborated with legislators, judges, and bureaucrats (Subramanian 2014). Indian women now have more legal rights than their counterparts in the Middle East and North Africa. However, South Asian politics and labour markets are still dominated by men, while divorce remains rare, and intimate partner violence is widely accepted. Younger generations are just as likely to endorse patriarchy as their grandparents. South Asian women born in the 1990s are just as likely to have been beaten as their grandmothers. Pakistani and Nepalese women born in the 1990s are

actually less likely to have a say than women born in the 1950s. In Pakistan, young men and women are more likely to justify wife-beating. Patriarchy is extremely persistent (Bussolo et al. 2023).

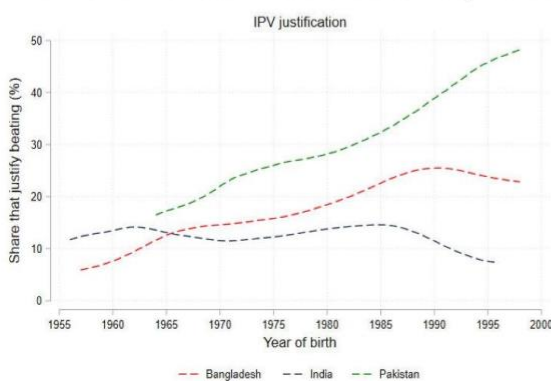
Panel a: Trends in attitude towards job (left) and education (right)



Panel b: Trends in attitudes towards childbearing (left) and income contribution (right)



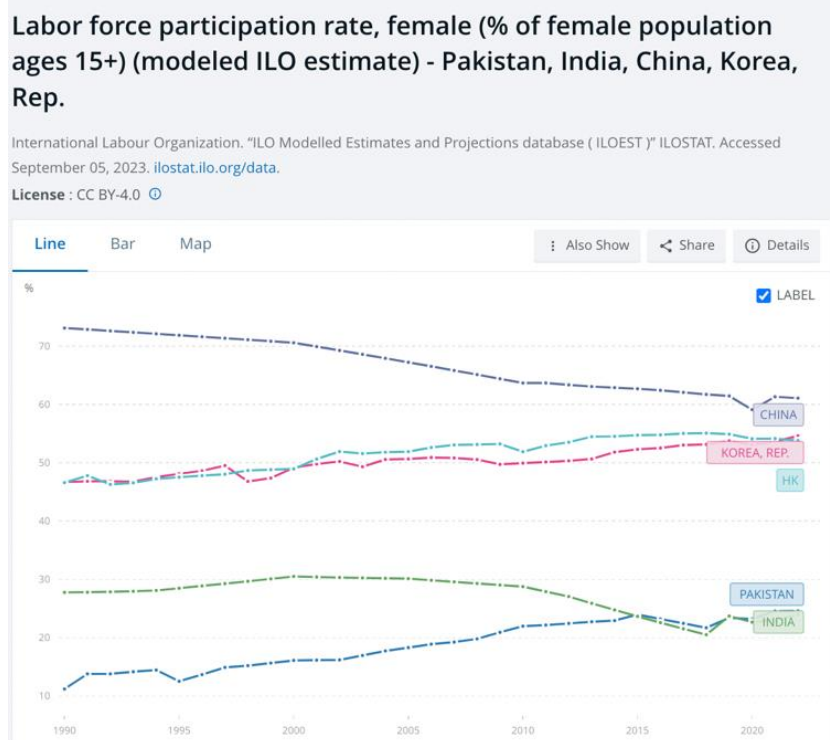
Panel c: Trends in attitude towards IPV justification



(Bussolo et al. 2023).

Economics and culture help explain why South Asia remains caught in the Patrilocl Trap. First, structural transformation is slow. India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh remain 63-65% rural. The labour shortages which caused employers in the 'Asian tiger' countries to resort to hiring women have not yet materialised in South Asia. Men are first in line for jobs and employers need not hire women. Most workers are also employed precariously. They remain heavily reliant on networks of kinship - consolidated by inter-marriage (Munshi 2019; Munshi and Rosenzweig 2009). Inclusion requires cultural conformity. Even though girls are better educated than ever before, they are still taught to marry, please their in-laws, and stay put. Divorce is totally stigmatised because marriage locks in vital networks of kinship.

Culture also mediates women's proclivity to work outside the home. South Asian men preserve their honour by providing for their families, keeping their wives in line, and eliminating any possible rumour of female impropriety. South Asians thus accept larger opportunity costs of women not working outside the family. Female employment is thus lower than other regions with similar income.



(World Bank 2024)

Slow economic development and the persistence of caste

South Asia's industrialisation has not generated so many jobs (Basole 2022a). The growth elasticity of employment has been very low in India relative to other countries and over time (Basole 2022b). Agriculture has mechanised (Siddiqui et al. 2017), but there has been very little growth in demand from manufacturing and services (Beyer, Chocce Falla, and Rama 2019). The labour shortages which caused employers in East Asian countries to resort to hiring women have not materialised in South Asia. Job queues are long, men are first in line, and employers need not hire women.

India has also seen zero change in the scale of production (Basole 2022b). Most Indians work in tiny firms and tiny farms, with low productivity. Small-scale production generates a vicious cycle (Basole 2022b). Low-income workers cannot afford modern sector goods. The modern sector thus caters to a narrow stratum of affluent people and is extremely capital intensive. This suppresses job-creation and perpetuates small-scale employment (Basole 2022b).

South Asians are overwhelmingly trapped in agricultural or casual employment (Beyer, Chocce Falla, and Rama 2019; Basole 2022b). Workers typically lack job security, regular pay cheques, let alone insurance against unemployment and workplace injury (Harriss-White 2020). Precarious employment and devastating monsoons heighten reliance on kin (Munshi 2019). India's cities (especially the smaller ones) are rife with caste-based residential segregation (Haque, Das, and Patel 2018; Sidhwani 2015; Singh, Vithayathil, and Pradhan 2019a).

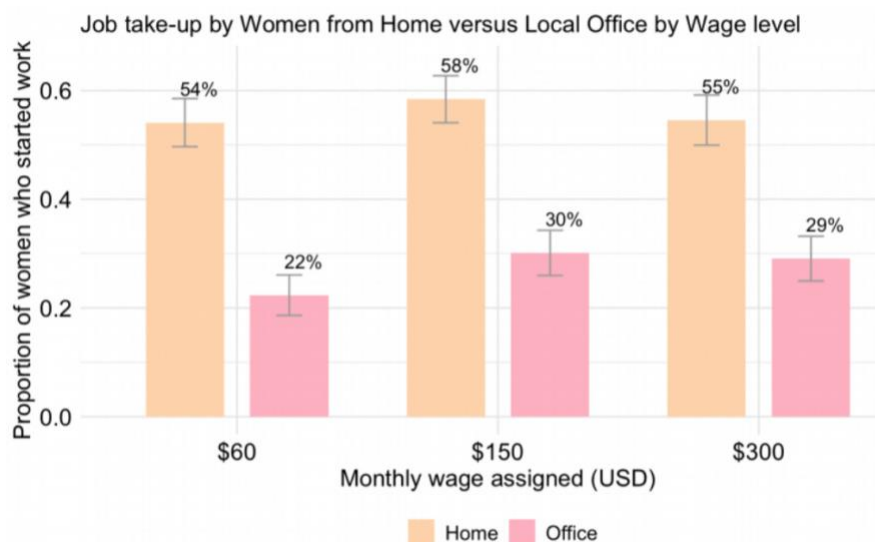
Even if people migrate to towns, they remain dependent on close-knit networks, which maintain strict surveillance (messaging via Whatsapp). Eager to protect family honour, Bihari migrants in Kolkata comply with rural norms; their wives remain back in the village (R. Chowdhury 2023).

“Everything is so dependent on social relations: contacts, helping each other, solving problems, capitalism is so entrenched in social networks, these are built through reciprocation of favours, attending each other’s events and buying gifts. We still need that community. This is why we have all these annoying aunties when you are getting harassed” – Pooja, lecturer from Haryana.

In India there is a lot of fear and anxiety. If you rock the boat, you’ll be poor. If you speak out you’ll be a social outcaste. They don’t want to face the consequences of going against the grain” – Aanya, professional in Mumbai.

Weak demand for labour also means that Dalit women struggle to escape the rural oppression and find work in the city. Gender wage gaps are largest among lower castes (Deshpande, Goel, and Khanna 2018). The poorest, least educated women have been the major victims of falling female employment (Desai and Joshi 2019).

Economics matters, but it is not a full explanation of persistent patriarchy. South Asia’s rate of female employment is far lower than countries with similar incomes (World Bank 2022). Sri Lanka has prospered economically, but female employment remains as low as Pakistan. A Randomised Control Trial in Mumbai offered poor women well-paid office jobs, but most refused because their husbands said no (Jalota and Ho 2023).



(Jalota and Ho 2023).

Men secure status as dominant providers, while eliminating rumours of female impropriety

South Asians still tend to believe that men have higher status. Over 80% say that a wife should obey her husband (Corichi 2022). Women are also supposed to keep their distance from unrelated men (Phadke and Ranade 2011). Even if privately egalitarian, most believe that female work will be widely condemned. Eager to maintain social respect, men tend to resist their wives’ employment (Bernhardt et al. 2018; Bursztyn et al. 2023; R. Chowdhury 2023). Cultural preferences are so strong that families may forgo economic opportunities (Jalota and Ho 2023)

Purdah – the ideal of female seclusion – varies geographically. In Bangladesh, Pakistan and north India, female employment responds weakly to urban demand for labour – as proxied by nightlights (Sarkar, Sahoo, and Klasen 2019). Even if pucca roads and buses improve access to jobs, women tend to forgo earnings if their communities practise purdah (Lei, Desai, and Vanneman 2019). Restrictions in rural Odisha and Uttar Pradesh are so heavy that women (especially wealthy women) have very few friends (Andrew et al. 2020; Anukriti et al. 2020). Pakistan’s garment factories are always seeking docile female workers but cannot entice women from their homes. Garment factories are only 28% female (Khatana 2020).

“It’s shameful, why are you not providing for your wife?” people will say – Shami, from Bihar (explaining why his wife had not come to the city to work) (see also (S. Alam 2018; Khatana 2020; Sen 1999; Kamal 2020)

The poorest families have little to lose and regularly sacrifice social respect for the sake of barebones survival. In Delhi, Dhaka and Uttar Pradesh, women only turn to waged work under the most desperate conditions. If the rains don’t come, and families are really struggling, more women join the labour market (Asadullah and Wahhaj 2017; Balk 1994; Dhanaraj and Mahambare 2022; Kaur 2019; Kibria 1998; Mehrotra and Parida 2017; Mitra 2006; Sarkar, Sahoo, and Klasen 2019). Once family finances improve, women withdraw from the workforce so they can gain respectability and marry their children upwards (Rao and Husain 1991; Desai and Joshi 2019). Hindu groups of Dalit, OBC, and non-Brahmin forward castes that were initially poor but experienced upward economic mobility tended to adopt female seclusion. Women were more likely to require a chaperone or permission (Reed 2021).

Even if women work, they are still caught in the Patrilocal Trap. Indian women who have more education or higher earnings than their husbands have the highest likelihood of frequent and severe violence (Weitzman 2014). I suggest this is a consequence of gender status beliefs and intensive kinship.

Economic dependency and violence are dual strategies used to secure dominance. Yusuf (a young man from Lahore) shared that his mother craved greater freedoms: she wanted to listen to music, watch US TV, and go out to buy nice clothes for Eid. His father (Murad) answered with violence, to make her scared and submit. After a motorbike accident, Murad’s arm was reinforced with metal plates. Murad was now much more powerful: he broke Yusuf’s rib and severely injured his wife. His own mother cautioned, “not so hard!”. The violence was thus highly calculated: he wanted to instil fear, not to incapacitate her entirely. In 2022, I spent a week with Anav - a driver from a village in Bihar. I asked whether he would want his future wife to work:

Anav: No, partly because if she earned money, then she would not respect me, she might be unruly...

Alice: How do you know this?

Anav: I see women who earn their own money and don’t speak to their husbands respectfully.

Alice: What would you do if your wife didn’t show respect in public?

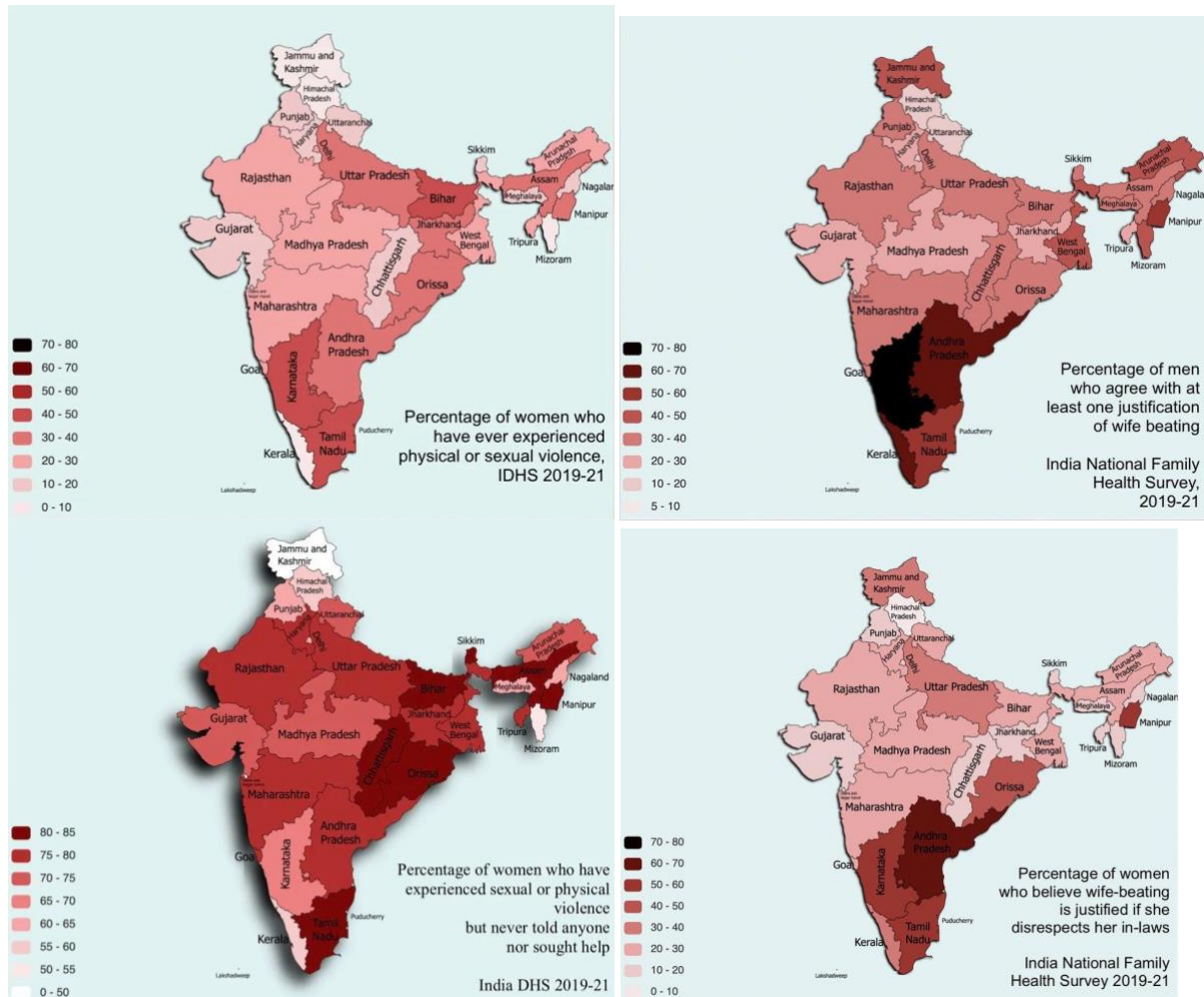
Anav: Of course I would beat her [translated].

Anav was mostly concerned about his public reputation: he did not want other villagers to think his wife lacked respect.

Regardless of whether an Indian woman has recently been employed, she is just as likely to have experienced marital control. The only difference is that a recently-employed woman is more likely to have been accused of infidelity – since she is leaving the house (IIPS/India and ICF 2022). Bangladeshi women who join savings groups or work in garment factories are also at heightened risk of domestic violence (Koenig et al. 2003). Bangladeshi men may also try to control women’s earnings (F. Chowdhury 2020). Confronted by patriarchal backlash, women may prefer to stay at home (Sen 1997).

In countries with intensive kinship (by caste, clan or tribe), female employment may provide autonomous spending power, but does not necessarily advance marital equality. Knowing she cannot leave, he beats with impunity. Endogamous networks are consolidated by marriage, and divorce is totally humiliating, so she remains trapped. 60% of Pakistanis are married to close relatives. Only 26% believe that a wife should have the right to divorce her husband (Pew Forum, Washington, and Inquiries 2013). Yusuf (from Lahore) described many instances of family violence. One female relative was married to a cousin, endured a difficult pregnancy, chronic violence, malnourishment and then died young. Everyone mourned, but the two families maintain strong ties of kinship. “It happens” – remarked his uncle, nonchalantly. Another aunt was badly beaten and sought a divorce, but her parents refused.

Intensive kinship locks in a culture of violence, whereby insoluble marriage trumps women’s pain². Although South Indian husbands are more supportive of their wives working outside the home, they exhibit equally high ‘marital control’ (IIPS/India and ICF 2022). Dominance is sometimes maintained through force, which has been normalised (IIPS/India and ICF 2022). In rural Karnataka, grooms may beat their new brides to coercively extract large dowries. Husbands are so confident in their wife’s loyalty that they beat them into begging their parents for more money (Bloch and Rao 2002). Violence then persists through generations. Sons of abused women are more likely to beat their own wives. Their sisters are more likely to endure beatings. Violence begets violence; it is normalised.



Maps mine using data from (IIPS/India and ICF 2022)

The sections below detail how patriarchy is naturalised.

Loving mothers reproduce patriarchal sons

Women spend more time on household chores in countries where female domesticity is widely endorsed. This holds even for countries at similar levels of economic development (World Bank 2022). Culturally constructed ideals of motherhood raise the volume of care-work, making it difficult to combine with paid work. Women themselves may view care as an expression of love. As observed by Bhattacharya (2021), “Many women find greater love, social recognition and self-worth in being caregivers”.

² Across Africa, people are more likely to justify and experience wife-beating if their society is endogamous (i.e. marries kin) (Alesina, Brioschi, and La Ferrara 2021).

Most South Asian women remain at home; her main role is “take care of her home and cook for her family” (Bussolo et al. 2023). In India, female employment plummets not with childbirth, but marriage (Abraham, Lahoti, and Swaminathan 2021). Loving mothers intensively care for their children (especially their sons). Boys may never learn to cook for themselves, let alone others. 47% of Indian men have never seen their fathers do any domestic work (UNFPA and Equimundo 2022). Sons, especially upper castes, are bred with expectations of dominance. In Delhi, employed women actually receive fewer matrimonial suitors (Afridi et al. 2023). In Bangalore, Bhavika told me:

“If a woman at office interjects, they’d say “Shhh, we are talking”. Accepting authority from a woman is a challenge for them because they’ve been raised to believe they’re the centre of the universe. You sit back and a woman will always be subservient to you”.

Suppression of dissent reinforces despondency

Since marriages are the lynchpin of kinship networks, daughters are encouraged to please their in-laws, stay quiet and preserve marriages at all costs (Narayan 2020). Patriarchal privileges and authority are widely taken for granted, not subjects of debate. If men and women rarely see successful defiance, they may underestimate wider support and feel resigned to fate.

Whenever I asked her opinion, Premjyoti (a maid in Jaipur) gave the same answer: “it’s tradition”. Never once did she express her own judgement. Men eating first and having far greater freedoms were all accepted as immutable. Like many other South Asian women, she had never been encouraged to critique independently (see also Narayan 2020). If women passively adjust, men learn they can get away with almost anything. Once, in a violent fit of rage, Premjyoti’s husband tied her up and starved her for five days. Marital control was normalised by participants from across the class spectrum (which is consistent with representative data from DHS 2022):

“My friends are very controlled by their husbands. You have to dance to their tune. If she’s fifteen minutes late he gets mad. It’s very normalised in our culture” – Chakrika, professional in Delhi.

“Live or die you stay in your house” - 19 year old Muslim woman, in rural Rajasthan (who saw male violence as inevitable and inescapable) [translated]

Stigma and sexual harassment

City streets are recognised as men’s terrain, while women are deemed out of place. In Delhi and Kolkata, men respect each other as providers: sacrificing for their families, achieving status (Chowdhury 2023; Philip 2022). Lechery persists with impunity. For middle class young men, ‘eve teasing’ is just a bit of fun. They resent women’s encroachment on their turf and eye any woman on the streets as fair game (Philip 2022).

Women who venture out may be treated as prostitutes, vulnerable to abuse. Afifa, a tea seller in Dhaka, said: “when I sell tea, some men annoy me. They sometimes touch my body and harass me.” Since harassment is common knowledge, women who work in public may shame their kin (Khatana 2020; S. C. White 2017). Victims usually keep quiet. Sri Lanka’s free trade zone is sometimes called vesa kalape (whore zone) (Hewamanne 2020). In Bangladesh’s garment industry, male supervisors sometimes speak to women in sexually derogatory ways, making unsolicited sexual remarks, touching them sexually (Siddiqi 2003). Sexual harassment is also rampant in construction (Choudhury 2013).

‘Good girls’ stay at home, while those who step out are subjected to slander. Female loitering in Mumbai’s city streets is strongly condemned (Phadke and Ranade 2011). ‘Good Muslim women’ in Dhaka likewise avoid spaces where they might encounter unrelated men. Strict guardrails are imposed for girls’ own protection. Even if parents send their daughters to college or faraway factories, they often choose colleges with strict curfews (Krishnan 2019; Narayan 2020). Foxconn factories secure parental trust and female labour by providing hostels and imposing 6pm curfews (Zhou and Christopher 2023).

Girls may even restrict themselves - fearing sexual assault, shame and ostracism (Krishnan 2019; Satija 2015). In urban Indian neighbourhoods with high levels of sexual harassment, women are far less likely to seek outside employment. This effect is strongest in patriarchal homes – where women practice purdah or are beaten for leaving without permission (Chakraborty et al. 2018). Men pursue Delhi's finest colleges, women prioritise safety (Borker 2018). Media reporting of sexual violence further inflames fears, suppressing female labour supply outside the home (Siddique 2022). The Delhi 2012 gang rape amplified widespread concerns; many women abandoned opportunities to study because they were scared. As long as parents fear for their daughters' honour and safety, public spaces will remain male dominated. If women are nervous to venture out, they may not gain the confidence, capacities and friendships that help men navigate social and economic relationships.

“Our national capital is unsafe for women, no matter what caste or community you are from. And if anything happens, shame on you, blame on you” – Eesha, Delhi (Dalit journalist).

“Your life is over, ruined for ever” my parents told me. “If there's a rumour then you're not marriageable, you're not respected, it's over” – Aadvika, lecturer in Chennai.

“After 2012, we felt helpless and scared to go out after dark. I didn't want to go to Delhi to study nor did any of my friends” - Lakshmi, student from Bangalore.

“I cannot leave my house alone in Haryana without a male escort. Within 3 minutes someone will call my mother. All eyes are on you, you blame yourself” – Pooja, lecturer.

Cultural celebrations then naturalise inequalities. With relatives asking incessantly, women left on the shelf soon feel like failures (Bhattacharya 2021; Lamb 2022). Marriage, motherhood and sacrifice are all celebrated as crowning achievements (Ortegren 2023). Women are pressured to marry, but unable to exit – “The Patrilocal Trap”.

“A single woman is constantly pestered about being unmarried. It would have been intolerable to live in India as a single woman past 35” - Meera, professional in Delhi.

Religion

Female employment and divorce are low across India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Since each country has a different religious majority, religion cannot be the primary driver of gender relations in South Asia. But there are four ways in which religion may reinforce patriarchy. First, if close-knit communities are deeply religious, sacrosanct teachings go unquestioned (Gervais, Najle, and Caluori 2024). Second, even if members are privately critical, they may conform to gain respectability. When Pakistani preachers emphasise ‘Hell’, they are implicitly threatening earthly ostracism. Third, if people regard paradise as paramount, and contingent upon patriarchal ideals, female labour supply may be unresponsive to economic incentives. Even if women are employed as professionals, they still feel obliged to follow religious tenets and obey their husbands. Scripture is thus invoked to legitimise the Patrilocal Trap. Fourth, religious violence and discrimination may be worsening gender inequalities.

Following religious revivalism, most people in Bangladesh and Pakistan now want Sharia to be the law of the land (Wormald 2013). Pakistani Facebook users who pray daily and endorse religious absolutism are more likely to think that men have the right to beat their wives and refuse permission to work (Charles et al. 2023). If female employment exposes families to rumours of impropriety and jeopardises their place in paradise, they may be willing to accept large opportunity costs. Aaman (a market trader in Mumbai) told me that paradise is more important than money. During COVID, his friend became indebted and permitted his wife to work. Aaman cautioned him not to be so materialistic:

“Earth is just an examination centre. What really matters is the afterlife. We will be judged, we have to account for our actions. If a woman moves in public, she may be sexually harassed or pursue an extra marital affair. If she commits adultery then the husband will also be punished in the afterlife... Life on earth is nothing, so pursuing material gains now pales in comparison to the afterlife”.

Wahhabism has made its mark on South Asia, thanks partly to oil wealth. Saudi Arabia champions itself as the historic heartland of the ‘ummah’ (the worldwide community of Muslims). Pilgrimage is a religious obligation, returnees are greatly respected. Saudi Arabia can thus export its gender norms. By citing scripture and invoking fears of hell, female subordination and seclusion are praised as piety. Indian return migrants from Saudi Arabia are more likely to say that a man should have the final word, more tolerant of gender-based violence and more likely to blame a woman if she gets molested (Joseph et al. 2022). In Dharavi, Muslim men told me their wives started wearing the burqa after they returned from Saudi Arabia.

In India, Muslims are more likely to say that men should be providers (Corichi 2022). In these close-knit communities, female employment carries heightened stigma. Muslim women indeed less likely to participate in the labour force and earn money (Desai and Tamsah 2014).

Religious discrimination may be worsening gender inequalities. Muslim Indians are increasingly living in communities with worse public services, like secondary schools (Adukia et al. 2023). Girls may be reluctant to travel outside their neighbourhood to distant schools, then struggle to get well-paid jobs. After Hindu-Muslim riots, some communities have tightened surveillance, dress codes and curfews. Islamic organisations such as the Jamaat-e-Islamic have also gained influence by providing crucial relief. Communal violence thus seems to have exacerbated pre-existing inequalities (Khan 2007; Kumar 2016; Robinson 2010). This is consistent with a wider body of evidence suggesting that when people feel under siege, they seek strength through unity, want norm violators to be punished and gravitate towards supernatural punishment (Aslam, Weill, and Iqbal 2022; V. K. Choi et al. 2022; Henrich et al. 2019; Jackson et al. 2021; Sinding Bentzen 2019).

The Persistent Patrilocal Trap

Female employment remains lower than other countries with similar wealth (World Bank 2022). Of the few Indian women in the labour force, only 15% are employed in services (Arora 2023). South Asian women rarely get the opportunity to mix and mingle with diverse others, expand their horizons, build solidarity outside the family, or gain status. From laughter to walking, Pakistani girls are closely policed (Laghari 2016). It is men who go out into the world, run family businesses, migrate to new economic opportunities, inherit assets, resolve community problems, mobilise political networks (Goyal 2023). Community support for female employment is also widely underestimated (Bursztyrn et al. 2023).

Globally, groups who predominate in socially valued domains are stereotyped as more competent and deserving of status. In countries where men monopolise prestigious positions, they continue to be revered (Ridgeway 2011; 2019). So too in South Asia, men are widely revered as superior leaders and executives, more entitled to education and employment (Bussolo et al. 2023). Over a third of Indians say that men are entitled to beat their wives in some conditions. Over a third of women say they are controlled by their husbands (Prillaman 2023:48-50). Pakistani women garment workers may not even question wage gaps, as they presume men to be more competent (Khatana 2020). Men who are accustomed to deference then react aggressively when given insufficient respect. The Aurat (Women’s) March triggered major patriarchal backlash (Z. Alam 2021).

Public spaces are men’s turf. Only 20% of women (but 68% of men) in Madhya Pradesh had attended a village assembly meeting in the past year. Only 16% of women (but 53% of men) had recently made a claim on a local official. Men have greater political knowledge, networks and collective efficacy. Twice as many men raised their political demands beyond the ballot box (Prillaman 2023, 57). If gender status beliefs are widely endorsed then female power grabs are strongly resisted. Women who participated in Self Help Groups and gender sensitisation were subsequently more likely to be publicly humiliated by their husbands. (Prillaman 2023).

Indian women struggle to be electorally competitive. They have little opportunity to congregate with peers, amass knowledge of the wider world, forge alliances with unknown men, and accrue campaign funds. South Asia’s few women leaders tend to be especially privileged – i.e. wealthy, upper caste, or members of family dynasties with guaranteed name recognition. For ordinary women, politics is out of reach (Chandra 2016;

Prillaman 2018). In India, a woman's electoral victory has no demonstration effect (Iyer 2019). Other parties are no more likely to field women candidates and women in nearby constituencies are no more likely to stand for office. Half the seats of Bihar's village councils were reserved for women in 2006 and 2011, but husbands tended to contest the elections, a process referred to as 'proxy mukhiya' (Sanyal, Rao, and Majumdar 2015).

South Asia's Patrilocal Trap is not insurmountable

Despite the persistence of cultural traditions in South Asia, the Patrilocal Trap is not insurmountable. The diversity of historical experience within South Asia suggest there are many ways to tip the income-honour trade-off and promote female labour force participation.

When factories opened up in Bangladesh, families increasingly invested in their daughters' education, delayed marriage, and supported their employment (Heath and Mushfiq Mobarak 2015). Female employment continues to rise in Bangladesh, especially amongst graduates. Through formal employment, women accrue self-esteem and social respect (Heintz, Kabeer, and Mahmud 2018).

Indian women seize economic opportunities when they feel safe. If a woman can work for a female-owned enterprise, she will readily accept a lower wage (Chiplunkar and Goldberg 2021). Free from lecherous outsiders, her family no longer need worry about a loss of honour. For similar reasons, women are much more likely to work in neighbourhoods where they do not fear rape (Azfar 2019; Chakraborty et al. 2018).

Female graduates are pursuing careers in IT, engineering, telecoms, finance, and hospitality. Emboldened by peers, they are capitalising on rising demand for skilled labour in Chennai, Bengaluru and Hyderabad. Many female graduates want to work (Bridges, Lawson, and Begum 2011; Sarkar, Sahoo, and Klasen 2019).

In cities, upper caste women are actually more likely to participate in the labour force - since they can find respectable work (alongside upper caste men) (Mehrotra and Parida 2017; Fuller and Narasimhan 2014). They are exercising far greater autonomy than their grandmothers, gathering as friends, and collectively castigating sexism.

Traditional institutions are clearly not insurmountable, and they are likely to weaken with structural transformation. In large, thriving, southern cities there is less untouchability, more social mobility, and declining caste segregation (Asher, Novosad, and Rafkin 2021; Singh, Vithayathil, and Pradhan 2019b; Thorat and Joshi 2020). This bodes well for gender equality.

Conclusion

In 1900, East and South Asia were both caught in the Patrilocal Trap. Trusted networks were consolidated by socialising girls to marry, please their in-laws, and endure any abuse. Since men's honour depended on female chastity, their movements were tightly restricted. East Asia overcame the Patrilocal Trap because it industrialised rapidly and families were willing to exploit female labour in response to new economic opportunities. By migrating to cities and providing for their families, women gained status, freedom, and friendships.

In South Asia, men's honour hinges on maintaining status, keeping their wives economically dependent, while preventing rumours of impropriety. Slow economic development means that female earnings are too low to compensate for cultural preferences, so most women remain at home, beholden to their in-laws, enmeshed in social networks that demand strict conformity.

Men's far greater freedoms enable them to amass advantage, become revered as knowledgeable authorities, dominate public spaces and lecher at women with impunity. While many women are privately critical, their encroachments risk lechery, slander and backlash. Women thus tend to specialise in care-giving, breeding

patriarchal entitlements. Many young, educated, urban and especially south Indian women want to break out of the Patrilocal Trap. Safety and structural transformation would help them realise their ambitions.

References

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