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***Curse of the Mummy-ji:***  
**The Influence of Mothers-in-Law**  
**on Women in India**

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# Extended families are widespread in developing countries

- Women's decision-making ability within the household is typically assessed relative to the husband.
- However, in several developing countries, extended or non-nuclear households are widespread.
- In traditional patrilocal societies, a woman moves in with the husband and his family upon marriage.
- To fully understand intra-household interactions, we need to examine the role and the influence of household members other than the husband on women's welfare.



# Mothers-in-law play an especially important role

- Several studies have shown that **the mother-in-law (MIL)** plays a crucial role in determining her **daughter-in-law's (DIL)** level of autonomy and well-being in extended households (see Gram et al. 2019 for a review).
  - Arguably, the MIL may be an even stronger influence on a woman than her husband, especially during the early years of the marriage.
  - Discordance between the MIL and DIL may be as, if not more, important as spousal discordance.
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# Research questions

- Does co-residence with the MIL affect her DIL social network?
- If so, why and how does the MIL exert her influence?
- What are the consequences of these restrictions for the DIL?

# Data from rural Uttar Pradesh, India

- We surveyed 671 currently married 18-30-year-old women in rural Uttar Pradesh during June-August 2018.
- 68% of the women lived with the MIL at the time of survey.
- Uttar Pradesh is a north Indian state where women have extremely low levels of empowerment.
- Collected data on women's #general peers and #close peers outside the household in the same village.

# 1. Women who live with MIL have fewer social connections outside the household

- Co-residence with MIL decreases a woman's #close peers outside the household by 37%
- No such influence of fathers-in-law and sisters-in-law

|                             | <b>Outcome: # close outside peers in the village</b> |                     |                     |                     |                     |
|-----------------------------|--|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Mother-in-law               | -0.133***<br>[0.045]                                 | -0.138**<br>[0.053] | -0.137**<br>[0.053] | -0.133**<br>[0.053] | -0.134**<br>[0.054] |
| Father-in-law               |  | 0.003<br>[0.048]    | 0.01<br>[0.048]     | 0.007<br>[0.048]    | 0.005<br>[0.048]    |
| # other women > age 18      |  |                     | -0.028<br>[0.018]   |                     |                     |
| # other 18-30 women         |  |                     |                     | -0.032<br>[0.024]   |                     |
| # other 18-30 married women |  |                     |                     |                     | -0.035<br>[0.027]   |
| Control mean                | 0.361  | 0.361               | 0.361               | 0.361               | 0.361               |
| N                           | 671  | 653                 | 653                 | 653                 | 653                 |

## 2. Women who live with MIL have less freedom of movement

|                | Outcome: DIL is usually allowed to visit the following places alone: |                      |                      |                              |                      |                               |                           |
|----------------|--|----------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
|                | Home of relatives/<br>friends  | Health facility      | Grocery store        | Short distance bus/<br>train | Market               | Outside village/<br>community | Wears ghunghat/<br>purdah |
|                | (1)  | (2)                  | (3)                  | (4)                          | (5)                  | (6)                           | (7)                       |
| Lives with MIL | -0.167***<br>[0.036]   | -0.134***<br>[0.033] | -0.157***<br>[0.034] | -0.043*<br>[0.026]           | -0.096***<br>[0.031] | -0.083**<br>[0.036]           | 0.064**<br>[0.028]        |
| N              | 671  | 671                  | 671                  | 671                          | 671                  | 671                           | 671                       |
| Control Mean   | 0.218  | 0.255                | 0.310                | 0.125                        | 0.329                | 0.296                         | 0.838                     |

- Co-residence with MIL decreases the DIL's probability of visiting a health facility alone by 53%

### 3. MIL's restrictive behavior is partly driven by her preferences

| Outcome: # close peers in the village         |                             |                          |  |   |   |  |
|---|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--|---|---|--|
|   | MIL<br>disapproves<br>of FP | MIL<br>approves<br>of FP | Ideal Kids <sup>MIL</sup><br>> Ideal Kids <sup>DIL</sup> | Ideal Kids <sup>MIL</sup><br><= Ideal Kids <sup>DIL</sup> | Ideal Sons <sup>MIL</sup><br>> DIL's sons | Ideal Sons <sup>MIL</sup><br><= DIL sons |
|   | (1)                         | (2)                      | (3)  | (4)   | (5)                                       | (6)                                      |
| Lives with MIL                                | -0.160**<br>[0.074]         | -0.115<br>[0.090]        | -0.117*<br>[0.065]                                       | 0.0003<br>[0.154]   | -0.127**<br>[0.065]                       | 0.074<br>[0.145]                         |
| Control Mean                                  | 0.556                       | 0.691                    | 0.572  | 0.744   | 0.573                                     | 0.733                                    |
| Outcome: # close outside peers in the village |                             |                          |  |   |   |  |
| Lives with MIL                                | -0.149**<br>[0.060]         | -0.119<br>[0.073]        | -0.103**<br>[0.051]                                      | -0.169<br>[0.121]   | -0.098*<br>[0.050]                        | -0.164<br>[0.136]                        |
| Control Mean                                  | 0.348                       | 0.383                    | 0.329  | 0.488   | 0.316                                     | 0.533                                    |
| N   | 320                         | 351                      | 519  | 152   | 530                                       | 141                                      |

- MIL fears that outside influence may cause her DIL's fertility outcomes and family planning use to deviate from her preferences.
- Effects stronger when the husband is a migrant.



## 4. Lack of close outside peers worsens access to FP-RH services

|                       | <b>Has visited<br/>FP clinic</b> | <b>Uses modern<br/>method</b> | <b>Beliefs about FP<br/>use in village</b> | <b>Allowed to visit health<br/>facility with someone</b> |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|--|
|                       | (1)                              | (2)                           | (3)  | (4)  |
| # close outside peers | 0.130***<br>[0.041]              | 0.067*<br>[0.035]             | 0.233*<br>[0.135]                          | 0.024**<br>[0.010]                                       |
| N                     | 671                              | 670                           | 671  | 671  |
| Control mean          | 0.303                            | 0.164                         | 2.295                                      | 0.971  |

Mediation analysis shows that the DIL's number of close outside peers is an important mechanism through which co-residence with MIL alters her family planning outcomes.

# Key take-aways for operational teams

- Future interventions that aim to reach women would benefit from:
  - addressing the gatekeeper-role of the MIL into their targeting strategies, or
  - by jointly targeting the MIL and the DIL in a joint family.
- Co-residence with MIL restricts women's mobility and ability to form close social connections outside the home.
  - These restrictions deprive the DIL of the beneficial impacts that social networks can have on women.
- Our results are informative for policies that leverage social networks to increase women's access and uptake of family planning and reproductive health services.
- If women have few close peers, it would be more challenging to reach them and to diffuse information or other policy interventions through their networks.