

Marriage Migration and Women's Landholding and Household Ownership in India

Shubhra Kriti¹

Abstract

Despite several legislative reforms, such as the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act of 2005, to ensure gender equality in property inheritance rights, the socio-cultural enforcement of patrilocality traits continues to annihilate women's landholding and household ownership rights. This study investigates the impact of female marriage migration, a distinct feature of patrilocal societies, on women's status of landholding and household ownership across India and its districts. Utilising relevant information from multiple data sources, we constructed a district-level household panel data comprising two-time points and employed robust econometric strategies, such as panel regression models with random effects, that consider unobserved heterogeneity and omitted variable bias, allowing for the inclusion of time-invariant characteristics to investigate the afore-mentioned research question. Additionally, we performed robustness checks using sub-sample analyses and the endogenous relationship of the land and household ownership rights to the marriage migration. Our findings suggest a strong negative association of women's landholding and household ownership status with marriage migration/patrilocality. This asserts that the "patriarchy-landholding hypothesis" holds true in this case. The study thus makes a significant contribution by filling the research gap persisting in understanding the gender gap in property ownership from a socio-cultural lens of marriage migration/patrilocality viewpoint.

Keywords: Marriage Migration, Patrilocality, Land ownership, Housing Ownership, Women's Status

Introduction

With the surname of the father before marriage and that of the husband thereafter, women bear the identity of two households in their lifetime in India. Yet she belongs to none! Being raised as "an asset to someone else's household ('paraya dhan')", the country considers a rearing daughter as watering neighbour's garden.

Patrilocality, a system of postmarital residence where a woman migrates to their husband's family post-marriage — is one of the key features of a patriarchal society. Post-marriage migration of women from natal families continues to perpetuate the culture of patrilineage or male ownership of property inheritance. India, being predominantly an agrarian patriarchal society, fosters anecdotal evidence of a patrilocal set-up dating long back to the Vedic period (Khalil & Mookerjee, 2019). Deeply entrenched patriarchy, entailing the socio-cultural enforcement of patrilocal set-up for over thirty centuries, has led to the mass subjugation/ subordination of women with male predominance in regard to land ownership and household property rights. The latest available figures from the National Family and Health Survey, 2019-21 (NFHS, 2019-21) highlight that not even one-fifth of the total Indian women own land or household ownership (IIPS and MoHFW, 2021). While the influence of patriarchal culture on

¹ PhD Scholar, International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, Maharashtra-400088

women's landholding has received wide attention among social researchers, the relationship of the latter, specifically with patrilocality, *i.e.*, marriage migration of women, didn't receive due attention. The existing evidence on the subject emphasised more on geographical heterogeneity (Licart, 2023), legal and cultural barriers to women's land ownership and its potential socio-economic implications (Agarwal, 2020). However, these research works either analysed a single time-point (Licart, 2023), or provided a very descriptive assessment in comparison with other South Asian countries (Agarwal, 2020; Khalil & Mookerjee, 2019). Moreover, a bigger concern of their analyses lies in their construct of patrilocality, which does not account for "migration due to marriage", which is a key feature of it. Also, these studies fail to capture patrilocality within a nuclear family structure, where sons don't live with their parents, but married women still move to their husband's houses.

In the absence of systematic and robust empirical documentation of the association between 'marriage migration of women, a direct measure of 'patrilocality'² and 'land and housing ownership rights', this study makes a significant contribution to bridging the research gaps on the subject matter. In particular, by investigating women's land and household ownership in accordance with patrilocality levels across the districts of India. Thus, it provides a critical explanation for the continued marginalisation of women from property ownership rights.

Building on the theoretical framework of the '*landholding-patriarchy hypothesis*' (Arokiasamy and Goli, 2012), we formulated the following hypothesis for this study:

Hypothesis H₀: Higher marriage migration among women would correspond to lower landholding and household ownership across Indian districts.

Through this study, we contend that socio-cultural structural practices such as marriage migration or patrilocality must be considered alongside individual characteristic traits to ensure the preservation of women's land and property rights. Building a strong women's agency with effective implementation of gender-equitable property rights, would not be possible without addressing patriarchal traits such as patrilocality.

Data and Methods

Data Source

This study utilises a district-level panel dataset constructed from multiple data sources (see Table 1) to empirically examine the linkages between patrilocality and women's land and household ownership status at the micro-level (across districts in India). The key predictor variable, "patrilocality", has been constructed by computing the ratio of female marriage migrants aged 10 to 49 years per male marriage migrants aged 10 to 49 years using the latest conducted rounds of the D-05 series of the Census of India (Census, 2001 and Census, 2011). Mathematically it can be expressed as,

$$\text{Patrilocality} = \left(\frac{\text{Female Marriage Migration}_{10-49\text{yrs.}}}{\text{Male Marriage Migration}_{10-49\text{yrs.}}} \right)$$

where, marriage migration refers to the number of females and males in the age-group of 10 years to 49 years, respectively, who migrated from the place of their last residence owing to marriage. This which could be—within the state of enumeration, outside the district of enumeration within the state, and elsewhere within the district of enumeration. For the two outcome variables of this study: "women's landholding ownership" and "women's household

² Note: Patrilocality and Marriage migration of women has been used interchangeably throughout the study.

ownership”, we draw information from the last two rounds of the National Family and Health Survey (IIPS and MoHFW, 2017, 2021).

Other control variables are compiled from multiple official data sources apart from the Census of India and NFHS; see Table 1 for a detailed description of data sources.

Utilising a district-level panel dataset for two distinct time points, this study employs panel data regression models with random effects to examine the association of landholding and household ownership status with patrilocality.

The mathematical formulations for the panel data random effects regression model are expressed as below:

$$Land_Ownership_{it} = \alpha + \beta_0 + \beta_1 Patrilocality_{it} + \beta_2 Control_variables_{it} + \beta_3 Time_dummy + \beta_{15} Regional_dummy + (u_i + v_{it}) \quad (1)$$

$$House_Ownership_{it} = \alpha + \beta_0 + \beta_1 Patrilocality_{it} + \beta_2 Control_variables_{it} + \beta_3 Time_dummy + \beta_4 Regional_dummy + (u_i + v_{it}) \quad (2)$$

Where, Landholding Ownership_{it} and Household Ownership_{it} represents the women’s landholding and household ownership status for district *i* in period *t*, respectively. β is the coefficient for independent variables. u_i ($i=1 \dots n$) is a random effect specific to an individual district or period that is not included in the regression. v_{it} is the balance amount of error from all other sources introduced for unit *i* at time period *t*.

Additionally, to assess the robustness of the main findings, the Durbin-Wu-Hausman Test for Endogeneity and Weak Instrument Variable Test have been performed to check the validity of the instrument. The reliability and consistency of the main findings were also cross-examined using Sub-sample heterogeneity analyses across different geographical regions.

Results and Discussion

The estimates obtained from random effects panel data regression models suggest a significant negative association of patrilocality with women’s land as well as household ownership status. This suggests that married female migrants are less likely to own a household or land of their own across districts in India. The “landholding-patriarchy hypothesis” holds in this scenario. Robustness checks also confirm the reliability and validity of our findings, as the association remains significantly strong and consistent, even after controlling for potential selection biases. Across the sub-samples of regions, the negative relationship between patrilocality and women’s land and household ownership are consistent (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Thus, we argue that women’s ownership of landholding and household is not only characterised by individual characteristics but is also guided by the social setting of patrilocal culture, which deeply engrains patriarchy. In such settings, women are prone to face the burden and costs of the traditional kinship system with the hierarchical continuation of male lineage over land and property inheritance to ensure that family wealth remains within the same patrilineage. Furthermore, women supposedly leave their natal home post-marriage and are considered to be of less utility for parents as filial responsibilities in later years are expected to be performed by sons in their later years. Again, this reduces women’s chance of land or property inheritance from their natal families either in the form of voluntary renunciation or subjugation of their legal inheritance rights due to weaker agency (Agarwal, 2020). Besides, customary practices such as dowry also act as a prominent reason behind forfeiting women’s land or household possessions. Adding to

the plight, such societies thrive on traditional “male-breadwinner” and “female-home-maker” models with weaker agency to women post-marriage (Licart, 2023). Land or household, being a prominent marker of financial and social power/prestige, thereby is vested in the hands of male authoritarianism, and women, in most cases, especially in rural areas, are pseudo-owners of the possession.

Conclusions

The study thereby significantly contributes to the subject of ‘gender inequalities in ownership status of household property’ by precisely measuring patrilocality using the information on marriage migration of women from the Census of India and examining its association with women’s ownership of land and housing. In addition, it also overcomes the limitation reported in earlier studies while accounting for patrilocality within nuclear families. The empirical findings of this study confirm the landholding-patriarchy hypothesis by showing the inverse relationship of patrilocality levels (married women migrants) with their respective landholding and household ownership across districts in India. In this context, female marriage migrants turn out to be the passive victims of patrilocal settings, which forfeits their rights over land and house ownership either in the form of voluntary renunciation or as a consequence of weaker women’s agency. We thereby envisage to consider the socio-cultural structural inequalities such as patrilocal residence alongside individual characteristics to enhance women’s status in property ownership. ‘Land’ and ‘Household’ Ownership is also a critical marker for women’s empowerment as they strengthen their agency by providing economic and social security. Thus, we contend that the enhancement of women’s agency through land and household ownership is not possible without addressing the broader socio-cultural forces underpinning gender inequalities in household or property ownership, such as patrilocality.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Variable	2001		2011		Difference	Data Source
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.		
Patrilocality	431.18	380.01	380.01	82.60	51.18***	Census of India (2001), (2011)
Landholding Ownership	11.74	9.79	12.79	9.68	-1.04	NFHS (2015-16), NFHS (2019-21)
Household Ownership	14.64	10.00	15.76	10.36	-1.12	NFHS (2015-16), NFHS (2019-21)
Mean Household Size	4.75	0.59	4.49	0.63	0.27***	NFHS (2015-16), NFHS (2019-21)
Nuclear Household	57.96	7.24	58.58	8.17	-0.62	NFHS (2015-16), NFHS (2019-21)
Women with 10 years of Schooling	41.66	14.39	33.78	14.17	7.87****	DLHS (2002-04), NFHS (2019-21)
Households in Low Wealth Quintile	47.48	19.71	19.37	17.65	28.11****	DLHS (2002-04), NFHS (2015-16)
Mean Age at Marriage	21.31	1.55	21.33	1.57	-0.01	Census of India (2001), (2011)
Urban	22.30	16.21	24.88	18.62	-2.58**	Census of India (2001), (2011)
Hindu	75.06	27.59	75.37	28.03	-0.32	NFHS (2015-16), NFHS (2019-21)
Muslims	11.89	17.17	11.57	17.40	0.32	NFHS (2015-16), NFHS (2019-21)
SCs	0.16	0.15	0.16	0.15	0.00	Census of India (2001), (2011)
STs	0.17	0.24	0.17	0.24	0.00	Census of India (2001), (2011)
Share of Agricultural Land	61.39	21.26	61.39	21.26	0.00	ICRISAT (2001-02, 2011-12)

Table 2. Random Effects Panel Data Regression assessing the relationship between Patrilocality and Household Ownership status of Women in India

Household Ownership	Unadjusted	Adjusted with key control variables	Adjusted with key controls, including Time and Region
Patrilocality	-0.0402*** (0.00232)	-0.0460*** (0.00307)	-0.0469*** (0.00347)
Mean Household Size		-1.326** (0.577)	0.234 (0.592)
Nuclear Households		-0.0778** (0.0377)	-0.0369 (0.0365)
Households in Low Quintile		0.0275*** (0.00797)	-0.0343*** (0.0114)
Mean Years of schooling above 10 years		0.0201*** (0.00757)	0.0171** (0.00723)
Urban		0.0250 (0.0158)	-0.00549 (0.0152)
Mean age at Marriage		-0.191 (0.246)	-0.415* (0.238)
Hindus		-0.0394*** (0.0146)	-0.0559*** (0.0143)
Muslims		-0.111*** (0.0194)	-0.130*** (0.0183)
SCs		2.030 (2.089)	0.0397 (1.943)
STs		-1.925 (1.303)	-0.0291 (1.242)
2011			-2.035*** (0.409)
North			0.504 (0.761)
West			1.650* (0.919)
South			9.445*** (1.039)
_Constant	31.52*** (0.993)	50.60*** (7.613)	49.59*** (8.030)
Observations	1,238	1,238	1,238
Number of id	619	619	619

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 3. Random Effects Panel Data Regression assessing the relationship between Patrilocality and Landholding Ownership status of Women in India

Landholding Ownership	Unadjusted	Adjusted with key control variables	Adjusted with key controls, including Time and Region
Patrilocality	-0.0436*** (0.00282)	-0.0431*** (0.00346)	-0.0408*** (0.00399)
Mean Household Size		-1.238* (0.651)	0.272 (0.747)
Nuclear Households		-0.0365 (0.0499)	0.0264 (0.0509)
Households in Low Quintile		-0.0140 (0.0143)	-0.0605*** (0.0196)
Mean Years of schooling above 10 years		0.0355* (0.0182)	0.0170 (0.0183)
Urban		-0.0166 (0.0173)	-0.0432** (0.0179)
Mean age at Marriage		0.0709 (0.223)	0.0642 (0.233)
Hindus		0.00559 (0.0134)	0.00167 (0.0142)
Muslims		-0.0644*** (0.0173)	-0.0801*** (0.0175)
SCs		-4.449** (1.752)	-4.597*** (1.748)
STs			-1.434 (1.132)
2011			-2.470*** (0.741)
North			0.659 (0.739)
West			1.213 (0.833)
South		-2.399** (1.100)	3.801*** (1.042)
_Constant	29.96*** (1.174)	37.05*** (7.879)	29.06*** (8.947)
Observations	1,238	1,238	1,238
Number of id	619	619	619

Standard errors in parentheses

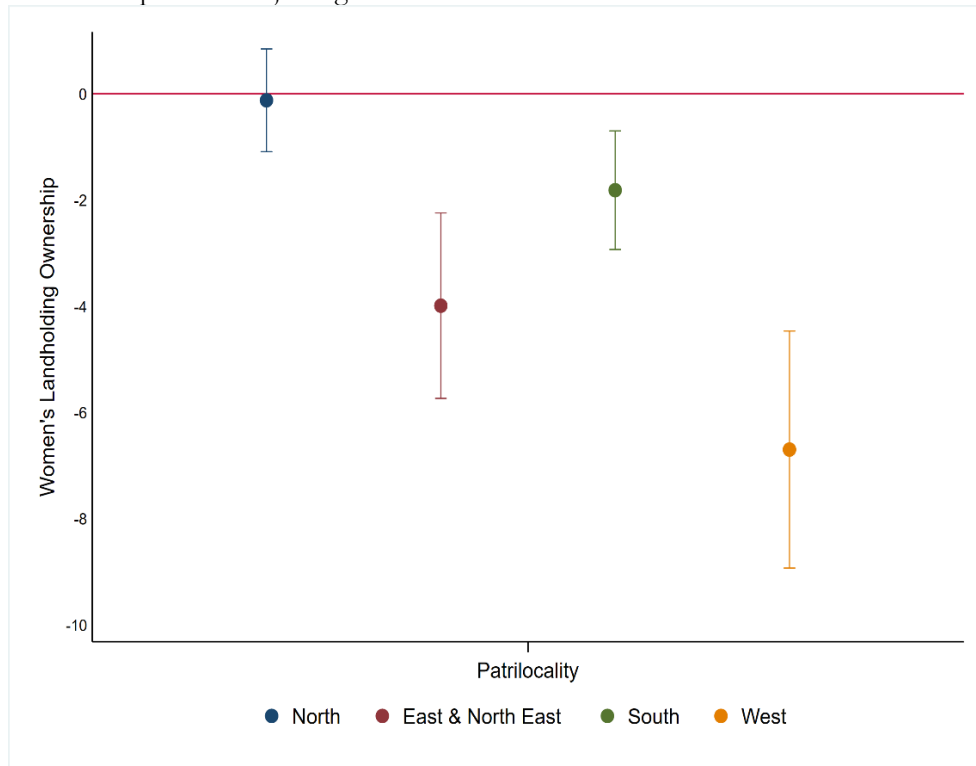
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 4. Tests for Endogeneity

Ho: Variables are exogenous	Household Ownership		Landholding Ownership	
Durbin (score) chi (2)	0.002045 (p=0.9639)	0.5081 (p=0.4760)	2.04392 (p=0.1528)	0.263059 (p=0.6080)
Wu-Hausman F (1, 1221)	0.501739 (p=0.9641)	0.501739 (p=0.4789)	2.0258 (p=0.1549)	0.259501 (p=0.6106)

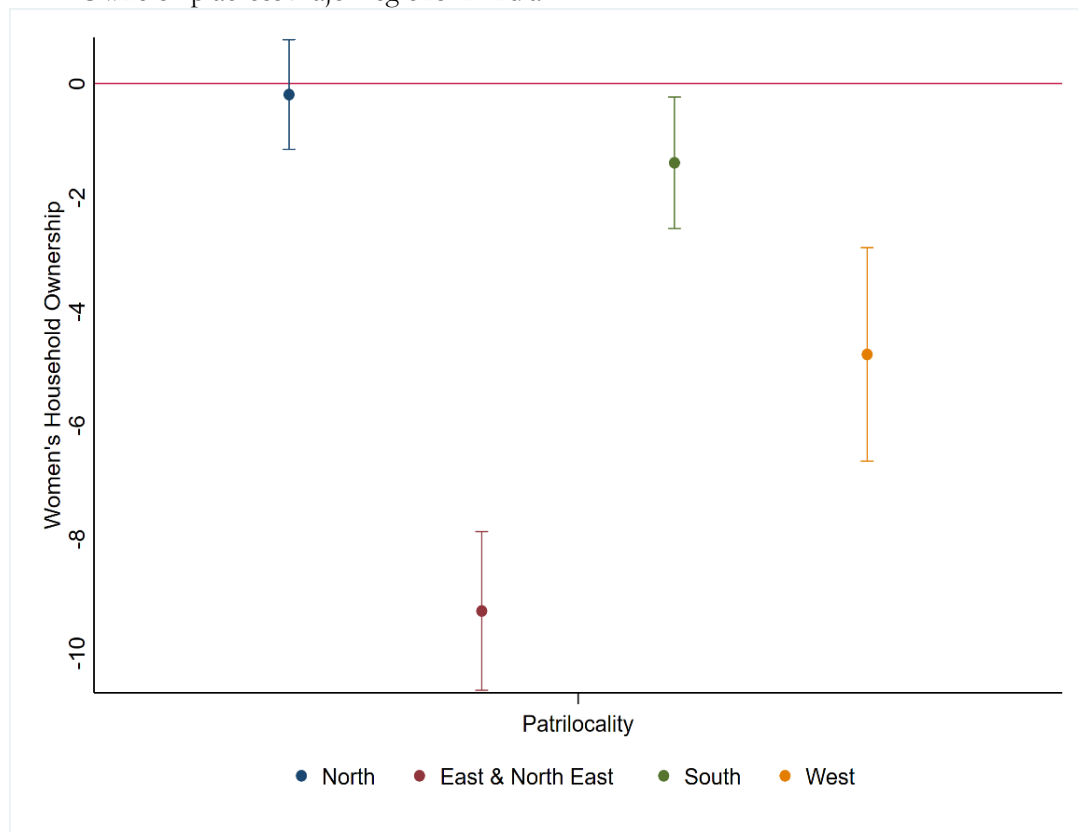
Heterogeneity Analyses

Figure 1. Co-efficient Plots showing the relationship between Patrilocality and Women's Landholding Ownership across major regions in India



Note: The model is adjusted for all key controls including time.

Figure 2. Co-efficient Plots showing the relationship between Patrilocality and Women's Household Ownership across major regions in India



Note: The model is adjusted for all key controls including time.