

## SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF MOTHERS-IN-LAW ACROSS DIVERSE CULTURES

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### Abstract

The family structure of every nation, along with the roles and relationships within it, is based on unique cultural values. From this perspective, the image of the mother-in-law has become an important social symbol in many societies. She is regarded not only as a figure of family experience and wisdom, but also as a connecting link between generations, and at times as a source of familial conflict. In traditional families, the mother-in-law is often viewed as the manager of the household and the mentor responsible for guiding the daughter-in-law. In the cultures of various countries, including those of the East, the West, and African societies, the status of mothers-in-law, the expectations in mother-in-law–daughter-in-law relationships, the cultural roots of intergenerational conflicts, and the strategies for mitigating such tensions are interpreted in different ways. This study analyzes these differences and examines social perceptions of mothers-in-law from a broader intercultural perspective.

### Keywords

mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship, cultural values, patriarchal family system, gender roles, interpersonal communication culture.

**Introduction.** Social perceptions of mothers-in-law are closely linked to cultural values, gender roles, and intergenerational relation systems. In most societies, the status of the mother-in-law provides insights into the role of women and power dynamics within the family. These perceptions are shaped by historical processes, religious beliefs, and economic modes of life. Research indicates that complex mother-in-law–daughter-in-law relationships are a global phenomenon, though some societies have developed more effective resolution strategies.

Cultural differences are primarily defined by family structure and values:

Western Model: Focuses on individual freedom, equality, and psychological distance.

Eastern Model: Based on tradition, hierarchy, and the authority of the elder generation.

African Model: Rooted in collectivism and community prestige. . In Central Asian societies, particularly in Uzbek, Tajik, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz cultural contexts, the institution of the mother-in-law occupies a structurally significant role within the extended family system. The multigenerational co-residence model reinforces the authority and symbolic status of the mother-in-law. Within this framework, she is typically perceived as the custodian of family traditions, the moral regulator of domestic life, and the primary transmitter of cultural norms across generations.

The daughter-in-law, by contrast, is often conceptualized as an individual undergoing social adaptation into a pre-existing familial structure. The process of integration frequently involves regulation of household responsibilities, dress codes, communicative behavior, and social interactions. In this relational hierarchy, the mother-in-law assumes the role of mentor and normative guide.

Folklore and oral traditions across the region construct dual archetypal representations of the mother-in-law. On the one hand, she appears as a benevolent, wise, and nurturing figure who

accepts the bride as her own daughter. On the other hand, she is portrayed as strict, demanding, and evaluative, emphasizing discipline, domestic competence, and moral propriety. These contrasting representations reflect broader ambivalences embedded in gendered power relations within patriarchal kinship systems.

However, contemporary socio-demographic transformations are gradually reshaping this institution. The increasing prevalence of nuclear family arrangements and the growing tendency of young couples to establish independent households have contributed to a relative decline in the everyday authority and social intervention of mothers-in-law. Urbanization, women's education, and labor market participation further mediate these changing dynamics.

In South Asian contexts, particularly in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship constitutes one of the most influential components of the patrilocal family structure. In many cases, the bride relocates to the husband's parental household, where hierarchical generational authority is clearly structured. Within this system, the mother-in-law often functions as the domestic authority figure, supervising household management and social conformity.

Persistent dowry practices in parts of South Asia further complicate these relationships. The dowry system, deeply embedded in historical and socio-economic traditions, has been identified by scholars as a structural factor contributing to familial tension and gender-based vulnerability. Various studies and official reports indicate that dowry-related conflicts continue to result in significant levels of psychological abuse, domestic violence, and, in extreme cases, criminal prosecution and imprisonment of family members.

At the same time, contemporary social change has led to increased legal awareness and resistance among younger women. Advocacy movements, legal reforms, and women's rights organizations have contributed to shifts in power negotiation within households. Interestingly, there have also been cases of collective mobilization among mothers-in-law seeking to protect their perceived social and legal rights, reflecting the multidimensional and evolving nature of this institution.

Overall, the mother-in-law institution in both Central and South Asia represents a complex intersection of tradition, gender hierarchy, intergenerational authority, and modern social transformation. Its current evolution illustrates the tension between deeply rooted cultural norms and emerging individualistic and egalitarian family models.

In Middle Eastern societies, particularly within Arab countries, Turkey, and Iran, family systems have historically been structured around patriarchal and extended household models. Multigenerational co-residence—often involving several nuclear units within a shared residential compound—has traditionally intensified mother-in-law/daughter-in-law dynamics. Within this structure, women's social roles have largely centered on household management, childrearing, and adherence to religious and moral prescriptions.

In many Arab societies, the mother-in-law occupies a central female authority position within the domestic hierarchy. Although the formal head of the family is typically male, the mother-in-law often exercises significant informal power over internal household governance. The daughter-in-law's integration into the family frequently entails adaptation to established norms concerning dress, food preparation, marital obligations, and community etiquette. In certain contexts, the daughter-in-law's autonomy may be limited, particularly during the early stages of marriage. Religious norms, including interpretations of Islamic law (Sharia), as well as local customs and honor-based traditions, play a substantial role in structuring these relationships. The mother-in-law may also serve as the son's closest advisor, influencing the daughter-in-law's socialization into family culture.

In Turkish society, especially in historically extended family regions such as parts of Western Anatolia, the mother-in-law has traditionally functioned as the domestic authority figure.

Expectations of discipline, obedience, and household competence have shaped the early marital experience of many brides. A form of implicit “trial period” often characterizes the daughter-in-law’s initial adaptation, during which her domestic skills and conformity to family norms are evaluated. Turkish mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships are frequently described as emotionally interdependent and culturally symbolic. Traditional norms emphasize modesty, respect, and compliance on the part of the daughter-in-law, while the mother-in-law assumes responsibility for facilitating her integration into the household.

However, processes of urbanization, increased female education, and women’s economic participation have contributed to significant shifts in family structures in Turkey. Nuclear households have become increasingly common, and separate residence from parents is widely preferred among younger generations. As a result, overt intergenerational conflicts appear to be declining in frequency, although cultural expectations continue to shape relational dynamics.

In Iran, mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations are similarly embedded in patriarchal kinship structures, though characterized by a distinct cultural-religious framework. While men formally occupy the position of family head, the mother-in-law often plays a leading role among women within the domestic sphere. Influenced by Shi’a cultural traditions, family hierarchy remains strongly institutionalized. The mother-in-law is typically perceived as an experienced and respected figure whose guidance shapes household management and childrearing practices. In rural areas, daughters-in-law may experience more limited autonomy, often sharing domestic responsibilities under the supervision or consultation of the mother-in-law.

Contemporary urban Iran, however, demonstrates gradual transformation. Increasing educational attainment among women and broader socio-economic changes have strengthened daughters-in-law’s decision-making capacity. Although intergenerational tensions may be publicly discussed—particularly in digital and social media spaces—formal academic research often frames these dynamics as part of the continuity of hierarchical family organization rather than as purely conflictual phenomena.

In East Asia, South Korea provides an illustrative example of historically entrenched filial and patrilineal traditions. A long-standing Confucian-influenced norm dictates that the eldest son remains responsible for co-residing with and caring for aging parents. Consequently, the eldest daughter-in-law traditionally assumes substantial domestic and caregiving responsibilities, often facing heightened expectations and pressures.

Empirical studies have consistently highlighted the complexity of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships in Korea. Earlier survey data indicated relatively low preference among women for marrying eldest sons, reflecting anticipated familial burdens. More recent studies suggest that while modernization has altered many aspects of Korean social life, tensions surrounding intergenerational expectations persist. Younger generations, increasingly influenced by individualistic and Western-oriented values, often resist rigid hierarchical obedience. Meanwhile, older generations may expect continuity of traditional norms, including deference similar to what they themselves practiced in relation to their own mothers-in-law. This intergenerational value gap contributes to ongoing negotiation and, at times, conflict within contemporary Korean families.

Overall, across the Middle East and East Asia, the institution of the mother-in-law reflects the intersection of patriarchy, religion, cultural continuity, and modernization. While extended family systems historically concentrated domestic authority in the figure of the mother-in-law, processes of urbanization, female education, legal reform, and shifting gender ideologies are gradually transforming the structure and intensity of these relationships. The evolution of this institution thus provides a significant lens for understanding broader patterns of social change in gendered family hierarchies.

Certainly, there are also countries in which mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships are characterized by psychological maturity, cultural refinement, and constructive interaction. Such contexts are typically distinguished by principles of personal autonomy, psychological awareness, mutual respect, and clearly defined interpersonal boundaries within the family.

In Western societies, mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships are generally structured around individual freedom, independence, and emotional distance. Young couples usually establish separate households, which minimizes direct interference from parents. Within this framework, the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are perceived as two autonomous and equal individuals. Conflicts tend to be less frequent because personal boundaries are recognized as an important cultural value.

In Norway, for example, young adults are socialized early into independent living arrangements separate from their parents. Intergenerational relationships are largely based on equality rather than hierarchy. As a result, daughters-in-law are not accustomed to receiving directives or routine guidance from their mothers-in-law, nor do they typically seek frequent assistance. Young couples are expected to resolve their own problems independently. In cases of marital or psychological difficulties, they are more likely to seek professional counseling rather than parental intervention. Contact with the husband's extended family is generally limited to formal or ceremonial gatherings.

In Mexico, intergenerational female relationships are often described as emotionally close and supportive. In some cases, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law develop friendships characterized by trust and mutual disclosure. It is not uncommon for daughters-in-law to share personal concerns with their mothers-in-law. In turn, mothers-in-law may actively support both their sons and daughters-in-law in practical and emotional matters. Such supportive interaction can contribute to the prevention of domestic conflicts and the resolution of everyday challenges.

The mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship remains one of the most sensitive determinants of the psychological climate within the family. Comparative cultural analysis suggests several principles that may foster healthier and more constructive interaction. Respect for personal autonomy and private space enables young couples to make independent decisions. Recognition of the couple's right to manage household affairs without excessive interference reduces tension. Advice, when offered, should be framed as supportive guidance rather than authoritative instruction.

Open communication and active listening practices are essential. Psychological literature often conceptualizes such interaction within the framework of emotional intelligence, emphasizing empathy, self-regulation, and constructive dialogue. The mother-in-law's experience may be shared as accumulated wisdom rather than imposed authority, while the daughter-in-law may be accepted not merely as an in-law but as a valued member of the family. Both excessive emotional closeness and excessive distance may generate misunderstandings; balanced relational proximity appears to be optimal.

Reducing stereotypical expectations is also crucial. Normative assumptions such as "the daughter-in-law must endure everything" or "the mother-in-law must command" are increasingly incompatible with contemporary social structures. Transitional stress is common: mothers may struggle to accept their sons' independence, while daughters-in-law experience adaptation-related pressures. In such contexts, patience, emotional support, and acknowledgment of adjustment processes are particularly important.

Comparative evidence indicates that the more open and adaptable a culture is, the lower the likelihood of persistent intergenerational conflict. When individual psychological boundaries are respected, women's social status is strengthened, and family roles are clearly negotiated, mutual respect and supportive relationships are more likely to emerge. Therefore, enhancing socio-psychological literacy, developing communication culture, clarifying rights and responsibilities,



respecting personal boundaries, and acknowledging value diversity represent important mechanisms for strengthening contemporary family relationships. Ultimately, cross-cultural comparison suggests that the most stable family systems are those capable of balancing tradition with modernity

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