



**Epitome : International Journal  
of Multidisciplinary Research**

**ISSN : 2395-6968**

## **Awakening of Relationships: Reframing the Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law Relationship in Indian Society**

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### ***Abstract:***

*The relationship between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law occupies a central yet contentious position within the Indian family structure. Frequently portrayed through stereotypes of conflict, control, and emotional distance, this relationship has often been reduced to a narrative of rivalry between women. This paper challenges such reductive representations by examining the socio-cultural, psychological, and patriarchal forces that shape the mother-in-law–daughter-in-law dynamic. Drawing on feminist sociological perspectives, the study argues that generational differences, shifting gender roles, and internalized patriarchy rather than inherent personal antagonism are the primary sources of tension. The paper highlights how*

*patriarchy sustains itself by encouraging conflict between women, thereby diverting attention from structural inequalities. By emphasizing dialogue, mutual respect, emotional autonomy, and intergenerational solidarity, the study proposes a reframing of the relationship as one of potential alliance rather than inevitable conflict. Strengthening this bond can challenge patriarchal power within the household and contribute to broader social transformation.*

### ***Keywords:***

*Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship; Patriarchy; Indian family system; Gender roles; Women's solidarity; Intergenerational conflict; Feminist sociology; Domestic power structures.*



## Introduction

Human relationships form the emotional foundation of social life, and within the Indian family system, few relationships are as complex as that between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Marriage introduces a woman into a new household, where she must adapt to unfamiliar customs, values, and expectations. Simultaneously, the mother-in-law must accommodate a new individual within a space she has long managed. This process of mutual adjustment often gives rise to misunderstandings, emotional strain, and conflict.

Popular discourse frequently portrays the mother-in-law as authoritarian and the daughter-in-law as oppressed. While such representations contain elements of lived reality, they obscure the deeper structural forces at play. This paper argues that the tension between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law cannot be understood in isolation from patriarchy, generational shifts, and the changing socio-economic position of women in India.

## **Patriarchy and the Politics of Women's Relationships**

Feminist scholars have long argued that patriarchy does not operate solely through male dominance but is also sustained through divisions among women. Within the household, women are often positioned in hierarchical roles, with older women exercising authority over younger ones. This authority, however, is not innate but derived from patriarchal norms that reward compliance and endurance.

When women internalize patriarchal values, conflict between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law becomes normalized. Comparison, control, emotional withdrawal, and jealousy emerge as tools through which power is negotiated. Patriarchy thrives when women are engaged in conflict with one another, as it prevents collective resistance and reinforces existing hierarchies.



## **Generational Shifts and Changing Gender Roles**

The relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law is also shaped by generational differences. Older women often come from socio-cultural contexts where domestic labor and obedience defined womanhood. Younger women, by contrast, increasingly enter marriage after higher education, employment, and economic independence. These differing life experiences lead to contrasting expectations regarding autonomy, decision-making, and emotional expression .

While mothers-in-law may perceive these changes as a loss of control or authority, daughters-in-law may experience traditional expectations as restrictive and dismissive of their individuality. Without open communication, these differences harden into resentment rather than understanding.

## **Emotional Labor, Comparison, and Invisible Work**

Women's emotional and domestic labor remains largely invisible despite its central role in sustaining family life (Dube, 1997). Daughters-in-law are often expected to perform household responsibilities as unquestioned duties, while their efforts remain undervalued. Simultaneously, comparisons with other daughters-in-law or with previous generations reinforce feelings of inadequacy and emotional exhaustion.

Such comparisons ignore the diversity of women's capacities, circumstances, and aspirations. A daughter-in-law who balances paid employment and domestic work faces challenges fundamentally different from those of earlier generations. Recognizing these differences is crucial for building empathy and respect.



### **Reframing the Relationship: From Rivalry to Solidarity**

The assumption that a mother-in-law must become a substitute mother to her daughter-in-law is both unrealistic and emotionally burdensome. The bond between a mother and daughter is rooted in biology and lifelong intimacy, whereas the mother-in-law–daughter-in-law relationship is formed through marriage and requires time to develop trust and affection. Acknowledging this distinction allows the relationship to evolve on its own terms rather than through imposed expectations.

When mothers-in-law view daughters-in-law as partners in their son's happiness rather than competitors, and when daughters-in-law offer respect without the pressure of emotional substitution, the relationship gains stability. Mutual support between these women can weaken patriarchal dominance by ensuring that women's voices carry weight in household decisions.

As Kandiyoti (1988) argues, when women negotiate power collectively rather than competitively, patriarchal structures are destabilized. Solidarity between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law thus holds transformative potential not only for families but for society at large.

### **Conclusion**

The mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship is neither inherently antagonistic nor destined for conflict. It is shaped by patriarchy, generational change, emotional labor, and social expectations placed upon women. By moving beyond stereotypes and fostering dialogue, empathy, and respect, this relationship can transform from a site of tension into one of support and empowerment.

Strengthening bonds between women within the family challenges the very foundations of patriarchal power. When women stand together rather than against one another, households become more equitable, and society moves closer to genuine gender justice.



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