



Maternal mental health and economic autonomy in lowland rural Nepal

Do parents-in-law provide constraint or support?

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ABSTRACT

Background and objectives: In patrilocal societies, married women typically co-reside with their parents-in-law, who may act in their son's reproductive interests. These relationships may shape maternal mental health and autonomy. Few studies have examined these dynamics from an evolutionary perspective. Theoretically, marital kin may increase their fitness by increasing maternal investment or by reducing paternity uncertainty. We explored how co-residence with parents-in-law and husband is associated with maternal outcomes to evaluate whether marital kin provide support or constraint.

Methodology: We analysed data from 444 households in rural lowland Nepal. Maternal mental health was assessed by General Health Questionnaire. Logistic regression models investigated whether, relative to mothers living with both husband and parents-in-law, those co-resident with other combinations of relatives had poorer mental health and lower household economic autonomy (decision-making, bargaining power), adjusting for socio-economic confounders.

Results: Co-residence with husband only, or neither husband nor parents-in-law, was associated with higher odds of mothers reporting feeling worthless and losing sleep but also earning income and making household expenditure decisions. Husband co-residence was associated with overall maternal distress but also with less unpaid care work and greater decision-making responsibility. There

were no differences in maternal outcomes for mothers living with parents-in-law only, relative to those living with both husbands and parents-in-law.

Conclusions and implications: Co-residence of parents-in-law and husbands was associated with contrasting patterns of maternal mental health and economic autonomy. We suggest that different marital kin place different economic demands on mothers, while restricting their autonomy in different ways as forms of ‘mate-guarding’.

LAY SUMMARY We analysed associations of household composition with maternal mental health and economic autonomy in rural lowland Nepal. Parents-in-law broadly benefitted maternal mental health but reduced autonomy, whereas husbands promoted autonomy but worsened mental health. The presence of genetically unrelated individuals in the household impacts maternal mental health through pathways of both support and constraint.

KEYWORDS: maternal mental health; autonomy; parents-in-law; kin dynamics; household residence; rural Nepal