

For almost all Indians the family is the most important social unit. India had a strong preference for extended families, consisting of two or more married couples (often of more than a single generation), who share finances and a common kitchen, but with modernization and urbanization, nuclear households (a married couple or a man or a woman living alone or with unmarried children with or without unrelated individuals) have become more common. In fact, according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), conducted in 2019–21, more than half the number of households in both urban and rural India are nuclear. Traditionally, [marriage](#) was virtually universal, divorce rare, and almost every marriage produced children. Today, even though India's divorce rate is low compared to many other nations, the separation rate is thrice the divorce rate. Most marriages are [arranged](#) by family elders on the basis of caste, degree of consanguinity, economic status, education (if any), and astrology. A [bride](#) traditionally moves to her [husband's](#) house. However, nonarranged “love marriages” are increasingly common in cities.

Within many families, there is a clear order of social [precedence](#) and influence based on gender, age, and, in the case of a woman, the number of her male children. The senior male of the household—whether father, grandfather, or uncle—typically is the recognized family head, and his wife is the person who regulates the tasks assigned to female family members. Males enjoy higher status than females; boys are often pampered while girls are relatively neglected. This is reflected in significantly different rates of mortality and [morbidity](#) between the sexes, allegedly (though reliable statistics are lacking) in occasional female [infanticide](#), and increasingly in the [abortion](#) of [female fetuses](#) following prenatal gender testing. With time, slight improvements have been seen in women's participation in decisions about their own earnings (from 82 percent in 2015–16 to 85 percent in 2019–21) and about major household purchases (73 percent in 2015–16 to 80 percent in 2019–21). The preference for male children is largely connected to the institution of [dowry](#), since the family's [obligation](#) to provide a suitable dowry to the bride's new family represents a major financial liability. Although the practice of dowry was made illegal in 1961, there have been reports of dowry-related harassment in recent years. Traditionally, women were expected to treat their husbands as if they were gods, and obedience of wives to husbands was a strong [social norm](#). This expectation of devotion may follow a husband to the grave; within some caste groups, widows are not allowed to remarry even if they are bereaved at a young age.