

**Understanding Women's Autonomy:  
Wives of Punjabi Truck Drivers in Punjab and BC**

**by  
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## **Abstract**

This study examines the widely held view that Punjabi women lack autonomy, having relatively little freedom to make their own choices. Through a survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews, the research explored understandings of their autonomy among 17 truck driver wives in Punjab and 14 in British Columbia, taking account of the implications of the lengthy absences of the women's husbands. The study finds that the way women perceive and experience autonomy must be understood and measured with more nuance than is the case in much previous research. This has placed too much emphasis on attempts to compress perceptions and experiences of autonomy into discreet, quantitative measures. Research for this paper revealed many inconsistencies in commonly understood indicators of autonomy, highlighting the importance of examining the diverse circumstances of women and the unpredictability of human agency.

**Keywords:** women's autonomy; Punjabi women; women's autonomy in Punjab; conceptualization of autonomy; measuring autonomy; women in Punjab

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to Bhajan Kaur Sidhu, the most devoted and loving woman I know. Your strength and resilience are a lifelong inspiration. I am blessed to have you as my mom.

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# **Chapter 1.**

## **Introduction**

### **1.1. The motivation for this study**

I am a first-generation Punjabi woman, born and raised in Canada, in a large joint family, and my own experience has led me to question arguments and ideas that I found in the scholarly literature about the status of women in South Asian society in general, and in Punjabi society in particular. Much of the literature concerns what is seen as the lack of autonomy of Punjabi women, meaning that they are thought to have relatively little freedom to make their own choices, and that they are generally subject to the authority of men in their households, even if they are not subject to outright oppression and to violence. I found these arguments to be in conflict with my own experience and with what I have learnt from my interactions with hundreds of Punjabi women in Canada, India and beyond. I was led, therefore, to question the current literature, and undertake research of my own on the status of women in Punjabi society. In particular, given that I am myself the wife of a Punjabi truck driver, in British Columbia, I decided to investigate the implications of the long periods that truck drivers spend away from their families and households for intra-household relations and for the autonomy of their wives.

I set out in my study, drawing on women's own accounts of their experiences obtained through a survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews, to examine how the wives of Punjabi truck drivers perceive their own autonomy and the implications of the regular absences of their husbands from the household for family relations, taking Punjab and British Columbia as comparative cases. My study draws attention to the severe limitations of attempts to compress perceptions and experiences of autonomy into discrete, quantitative measures – which is what is attempted in much existing research. I show the inconsistencies in how women can report their experience to a

researcher, and how misleading readings of survey data may be. This small-scale study, therefore, of the experiences of Punjabi women, both in Punjab and in BC, offers valuable insights into understanding women's autonomy in the South Asian context, and shows how an in-depth analysis of the nuances that occur in individual households illuminates the complex realities of women's lives.

In this chapter, I first review the literature concerning the status of women in Punjabi society. I then review literature on truck driver families and discuss why the status of the wives of truck drivers makes for an informative study. Then, I discuss the conceptualization and measurement of women's autonomy and review findings on the determinants of women's autonomy. Finally, I provide a brief overview of the thesis.

## **1.2. The status of women in Punjabi society**

There are reasons to expect that women's autonomy in Punjab may be higher than that of women elsewhere in India. Punjab has historically been one of the most prosperous states and remains one of the most economically developed, with social conditions that are quite advanced relative to most other states. Early in this century, Punjab's Gross State Domestic Product growth rate of 10.18 per cent exceeded the national average of 9.57 per cent (Niti Aayog, 2018, pg. 21). Although the growth of Gross State Domestic Product decreased to 5.93 per cent in 2016-17 (Niti Aayog, 2018, pg. 21) Punjab remains one of the more advanced states in the country, with almost all villages interconnected by modern transport, electricity and access to medical facilities and schools (Das Gupta, 1987). In regard to 2011 Human Development Indicators, Punjab ranks fourth highest in India for literacy, has the lowest proportion of under-weight children, and ranks sixth lowest for infant mortality (Corbridge, Harriss & Jeffrey, 2013). According to a prominent study on kinship structure and female autonomy by Dyson and Moore (1983), the demography of Punjab differs from other states in northern India, with its longstanding pattern of relatively late marriage, female literacy and early fertility decline, among other characteristics, possibly due to the influence of

the egalitarian concepts of the Sikh religion, which is dominant in Punjab (Dyson & Moore, 1983).

Despite the presence, however, of positive indicators suggesting that women may have relatively high autonomy in Punjab, there is abundant counter-evidence that women remain oppressed, especially within the household. Women remain oppressed due to patriarchal norms and are implicated in deeply engrained gendered practices and “reproduction of relations of power in which they are constituted as inferior” (Mooney, 2005). This inferior social position is reproduced mostly through cultural practices around Punjabi marriage, for Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim communities alike.<sup>1</sup> Gendered marital practices related to dowry, exogamous marriage, and patrilocal residence, subordinate and disempower Punjabi women from rights to property and inheritance (Dyson & Moore, 1983; Mooney, 1995; Sabherwal, 2014). Brides’ families are burdened by the costs of dowry, which can include vehicles, jewelry and cash demands by the grooms’ families. Dowry demands are often compounded in the hypergamous notion that the groom’s family is superior to the bride’s in status and their ability to make demands (Mooney, 2005, pg. 8).

These cultural practices are still in place and contribute to son preference, female infanticide and foeticide for those who feel that they are unable to afford the expense of a daughter’s wedding (Mooney, 2005; Sabherwal, 2014; Kaur et al., 2018). Punjab appears to have a longstanding problem of selective discrimination against female children based on norms and values of the patrilineal kinship system and the unidirectional flow of resources from a woman’s natal to affinal home (Dyson & Moore, 1983; Das Gupta, 1987; Dreze & Sen, 1995; Corbridge, Harriss & Jeffrey, 2013). A selective discrimination study in Punjab found empirical evidence of increased female

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<sup>1</sup> Although there are religious and cultural differences between Muslim, Sikh and Hindu women, findings suggest that in similar contexts, as in Punjab, these women have similar levels of autonomy, and in patriarchal settings such as in Punjab, autonomy is shaped by traditional factors that confer status, notably family structure and values related to gender norms, and not the primacy of religion or nationality (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Dyson & Moore, 1983).

child mortality due to neglect in the allocation of food and health care, with stronger discrimination against higher birth order girls (Das Gupta, 1987). Punjab has one of the lowest sex ratios in the country, and the ratio is still declining (Dyson & Moore, 1983; Corbridge, Harriss & Jeffrey, 2013). According to the NITI Aayog, a policy think tank of the Government of India, an astounding 63 million girls are 'missing' in the subcontinent (Gowen, 2018). Many of these girls are, or were, from Punjab. Out of the sixteen major states, Punjab ranked thirteenth for sex ratio (Corbridge, Harriss & Jeffrey, 2013).

### **Patriarchal norms in Punjabi society**

Most sociological studies describe Punjabi families as patriarchal and collectivistic (Mooney, 2005; Mooney 2020; Gill & Matthews, 1995). According to the 2011 Census, 23.9 per cent of households in Punjab are joint families, compared to the national average of 18 per cent, and the state ranks 4<sup>th</sup> highest for the proportion of joint families, after Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana (Sunderarajan, 2012). Structurally, a joint family can include three to four living generations, including grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts, nieces and nephews, all living together in the same household, sharing a common kitchen and often spending from a common purse. In the household, the men are part of a hierarchical structure, organized by age, whereby sons submit to fathers and younger brothers to older ones. The women of the household are also subject to a similar hierarchical structure among themselves and are additionally subjected to male hegemony and authority. Change takes place over generations. The demise of elderly parents is counterbalanced by new members entering the family as daughters-in-law through marriage, and new-born children. Daughters leave to live with their husbands' families after their marriages.

Family and the household are the backbone of traditional patriarchal and hierarchical practices that reproduce gendered roles of male dominance and female subordination in traditional Punjabi households (Mooney, 2020). The lines of hierarchy and authority are clearly drawn and family norms, and 'rules of conduct' help create and

maintain family order and assist family members with decisions affecting most aspects of life, including careers and marriage (Chadda & Deb, 2013). Each family member is expected to focus on family integrity, family loyalty, and family unity at the expense of individuality, privacy and personal space (Chadda & Deb, 2013; Mullatti, 1995). Family members emotionally invest in and develop relationships with each other over the years. Accordingly, when a son gets married, his marriage is superimposed on these pre-existing relationships. His new bride must learn and adapt to the family norms and values of her husband's household, and perform new roles as a daughter-in-law, a sister-in-law and often an aunt. As women age and acquire daughters-in-law themselves, they climb the hierarchy in the family structure and gain autonomy as well as authority over more junior members (Dyson & Moore, 1983; Gill & Matthews, 1995, Sabherwal, 2014).

The roles of men and women in the Punjabi household are deeply rooted in tradition and are clearly segregated. Men, who are considered the head of the household, are expected to take care of matters outside of the household, and they occupy most positions of power and authority. Men represent the family in the community and public at large, and in legal, commercial or religious transactions (Gill & Matthews, 1995). Furthermore, "cultural norms and values are defined in relation to manhood, masculinity, and male dominance and control, and men are focal in most cultural spaces, and certainly those in the public realm" (Mooney, 2020, pg. 11). Earning males are expected to assist family members during periods of economic hardship and illness and provide security to women and children. In addition to productive wage work, men are also responsible for the psychological needs of their aging parents (Chadda & Deb, 2013; Dyson & Moore, 1983).

If women take on work outside of the home, it is done in addition to housework. Although more women are beginning to take on gainful employment outside of the home, and this is sometimes seen as a means to increasing women's mobility and autonomy (Acharya, 2010; Kabeer, 1999; Sathar & Kazi, 2000; Singh, 2010), there is still

a clear norm that assigns men to wage work outside the home, and women to work inside the home. Punjab has the second lowest rate of female labour force participation across major states at 11.1 per cent, only a little above Jammu and Kashmir (Labour Bureau India, 2016). In the household, women provide emotional and social support and manage most of the housework chores and child rearing (Gill & Matthews, 1995). Women are also expected to accept a position subservient to males and subordinate their personal preferences to the needs of others (Mooney, 2020). For instance, it is common in Punjabi households for women to serve food first to the men and children in the family before serving themselves (Sangappa & Kavle, 2010). However, a woman's role in the household, her relationships with the other men and women in the family, and the extent of autonomy she enjoys within it, directly relate to her husband's position in the family hierarchy (Bloom, Wypij & Das Gupta, 2001).

### **Oppression of women in Punjabi society**

Studies suggest that women living in joint families are more oppressed than women living in nuclear families (Dyson & Moore, 1983; Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Mooney, 2005; Khan, 2014). In joint families, women are physically and socioeconomically affiliated with the husband's household after marriage, while severing ties with their natal families (Dyson & Moore, 1983; Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Mooney, 2005). New daughters-in-law are required to put their natal identities in the past and are "resocialized" to identify their interests with those of their husband's kin (Dyson & Moore, 1983, p.44). Their allegiances become those of their in-law's (Mooney, 2005), and they are expected to respect and display deference to their husband's male kin and older females in the household by displaying modesty and humility (Gill & Matthews, 1995; Mooney, 2005). In order to preserve their reputation and chastity, women are restricted in their personal movements, and 'protected' from other males in the form of seclusion, referred to as '*purdah*' in the Indian sub-continent, and '*hijab*' in the Muslim context, both literally meaning 'curtain' (Saiyid, 1998). A woman's perceived behaviour within her household and community, and guardianship of this reputation is a

matter of honour and shame, *izzat* and *sharam* (Dyson & Moore, 1983; Gill & Matthews, 1995). A violation of women's honour in the Punjabi culture amounts to the loss of family honour and social standing in the community and can be a main cause of oppression for the woman.

Honour is the cultural principle and moral code applied to the natural mechanisms and sexual aspects of Punjabi kinship (Das, 1976). Significantly, honour is associated with men and *izzat* is the “male register”, conveying reputation, dignity, and respect, and connoting influence, power, and authority (Mooney, 2020, pg.11). *Sharam*, the “female register”, is literally translated as shame, but “more accurately refers to its prevention via modesty, humility, and sexual propriety, in other words, by maintaining purity as formulated and expected by men” (Mooney, 2020, pg.11). Women can be labelled *besharam*, or without shame, and made to feel guilty even when their actions abide by societal norms. This language, used to invoke feelings of guilt, is a measure used to regulate women’s behaviour. Shameful behaviour is referred to as *behzti*, or without honour (Das, 1976; Mooney, 2020). Women, especially mothers and sisters-in-law, subject other women’s *sharam* to surveillance and regulation to uphold their household’s and men’s *izzat* (Mooney 2010, 2011) by way of monitoring women’s movement, in and outside of the home, women’s dealings with other men in the household, and in their mannerisms and body language. At the same time, and through all stages of their lives, women are guarded by male kin, with marriage transferring guardianship from the natal to the conjugal line (Mooney, 2020). Perceived violations of male honour can result in retribution, such as “physical, mental, or emotional assault” (Virdi, 2013, pg. 111), and at an extreme, honour killings. As Nicole Pope explains, “‘honour’ killings, in my view, are an extreme – the most extreme – form of patriarchal control. But patriarchy takes many shapes and forms, and it certainly exists in Western liberal societies even if we sometimes too confidently believe women have equality” (Pope, 2004; pg. 201).

## Signs of Change?

Much of the literature on Punjabi families depicts the patriarchal culture described above, where women are oppressed, subservient to men, and required to subordinate their own preferences to the needs of others. I question this view, given that the socio-cultural milieu of India is changing (Harriss, Jeffrey & Brown, 2020, pg. 4), and it seems unlikely that there have not been fundamental transformations in family structures (Chadda & Deb, 2013). The last two decades have witnessed changes in marital norms and the role of women in conjugal relationships, especially as nuclear families now form the highest percentage of households (Krishnan, 2019). A study of Indian family systems found a progressive increase in the proportion of nuclear families, although more so in urban areas, with an associated progressive decrease in the number of household members. Furthermore, the study revealed trends including a decrease in age of the head of the household, reflecting change in power structures, and an increase in households headed by females, suggesting a change in traditional gender roles (Chadda & Deb, 2013). Between 1991 and 2011, the number of households in Punjab grew substantially from 3.42 million to 5.51 million, at an increasing annual rate of 29.26% in 2011, and the average household now consists of five persons (World Data Atlas, 2011). These structural changes have resulted in functional changes in Punjabi households, including changes in marriage rituals, power structures in the family, interactions with extended family members and in occupational preferences (Wasal & Singh, 2018). These trends suggest that changes may be taking place in the traditional gender roles of Punjabi women. Based on the literature showing how changing structures of household relations in Punjab improve the autonomy of Punjabi women, we might expect that the extended absence of Punjabi truck drivers, which changes the structure of relations within their households, could improve the autonomy of their wives.

### **1.3. The case of truck driver families**

Truck driving life can be emotionally and physically demanding. In North America, after spending about two months training, a truck driver can be on the road for 4 to 6 days a week and 19 to 24 days a month while working as a long-haul driver, averaging 550 miles per day (Viscelli, 2016). Truck drivers in India can be away from the home for the same number of days, but are in training for a significantly longer period, normally two years as an apprentice and up to three if navigating mountainous regions (Ubhaykar, 2019). Long hours and consecutive days spent driving on the road constitute a major drawback for individuals with young families or those wishing to start a family (Gill, 2013). Long absences mean missing holidays, birthdays, children's milestones, extra-curricular activities and other special celebrations.

Many truck drivers feel disconnected from family and their household role during their regular absences for work. Although technology has adapted to the point where most truck drivers have a regular means of communication with their spouse and children, it can be difficult for them to focus on their families at the same time as concentrating on driving. Studies on families with a commuting spouse indicate that the partner at home, usually the woman, often felt like a single parent with no support system (Snyder, 2016; Zvonkovic et al., 2005). A North American study of family work and relationships of truck driver families found these families contended with issues of breadwinning, family work (where women undertook all tasks traditionally tied to men, for instance yard work, financial decisions, household repairs in addition to their own work), and emotional connection (Zvonkovic et. al, 2005). The same study found that women were worried about their husband's safety and their emotional well-being, in addition to having the ability to pay household bills (Zvonkovic et. al, 2005).

Based on the literature demonstrating additional emotional burdens in the families of truck drivers, we might expect the wives of Punjabi truck drivers to be even more oppressed. Given the level of concentration truck drivers are required to maintain, and the stress and dangerous conditions – weather and otherwise – they endure, they

may not be able to engage with their families in a meaningful way. Existing literature thus leads us to two opposing hypotheses:

1. Based on the literature demonstrating additional emotional burdens in the families of truck drivers, we would expect the wives of Punjabi truck drivers to be even more oppressed.
2. Based on the literature showing how changing structures of household relations in Punjab improve the autonomy of Punjabi women, we would expect that the extended absence of Punjabi truck drivers, which changes the structure of relations within their households, could improve the autonomy of their wives.

#### **1.4. Conceptualizing and measuring women's autonomy**

Generations of scholars have sought to clarify the conceptual meaning of autonomy, with some scholars focusing on the resources – material and immaterial, individual and network, private and public – that women need to have “control over their own lives” (Dixon-Mueller, 1978; Dyson & Moore, 1983; Jejeebhoy & Sather, 2001; Bloom, Wypij & Das Gupta, 2001; Agarwala & Lynch, 2006; Kabeer et al., 2011; Richardson et al., 2018), and others focusing on status of women in relation to men (Dyson & Moore, 1983; Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Kabeer et al., 2011).

Scholars have, however, come to some consensus over time that autonomy is, firstly, a multidimensional process of change, and secondly, contextual, or shaped by social norms and values that occur in a specific place and time (Kabeer et al., 2011). Scholars have moved away from single-dimensional conceptualizations of women’s autonomy, emphasizing that it encompasses multiple different dimensions (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Agarwala & Lynch, 2006; Richardson et al, 2018). Furthermore, scholars have acknowledged that women’s autonomy can take on different meanings and manifestations, depending on the context (Jejeebhoy & Sather, 2001; Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). For instance, working outside of the home is a common indicator of autonomy (Ahmed et al. 2009). However, in the context of South Asia, this indicator must be interpreted with the contextual understanding that many women of

higher economic status stay home because it is a matter of social status and prestige (Kabeer, 2001).

The literature on women's autonomy is quite extensive, but scholars have generally identified five different dimensions of women's autonomy that are important to consider, namely freedom of movement, household decision-making, access to and control over resources, freedom from violence, and, in more recent studies, community involvement (Richardson et al., 2018).

**Freedom of movement** – Whether or not women have the freedom to travel outside of the home is a measure of autonomy frequently referred to in the South Asian literature, given the context in which the practice of *purdah*, or the restriction of female personal movements, is prevalent (Ghuman, 2003; Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Sandberg & Rafail, 2013; Sathar & Kazi, 2000; Bloom, Wypij & Das Gupta, 2001; Richardson et al., 2018). This measure gauges how freely women can travel to various places, such as a neighbor's house, the market or temple, or outside of the village, such as her natal home, without an escort. Sometimes this measure also includes questions about whether or not women are required to ask permission before leaving.

**Household decision-making** - The most commonly and earliest used measure of autonomy is that of a woman's involvement in household decisions. This is logical as decision-making in any capacity is central in conceptualizing power (McElroy, 1992). Scholars have sought to gauge women's participation in decision-making by asking about a range of household decisions, such as: what food to prepare for meals (Sathar & Kazi, 2000; Bloom, Wypij & Das Gupta, 2001; Richardson et al., 2018; Agarwala & Lynch, 2006; Jejeebhoy & Sather, 2001); children's matters, such as the numbers of children to have and children's education (Sathar & Kazi, 2000; Bloom, Wypij & Das Gupta, 2001; Richardson et al., 2018; Agarwala & Lynch, 2006; Jejeebhoy & Sather, 2001); and whether or not women should work outside of the home (Sathar & Kazi, 2000; Ghuman, 2003).

These decisions are not equal: deciding about a meal is not the same as deciding about how many children to have. Yet, efforts to empower women in less controversial household decisions, such as how to discipline a misbehaving child, may have positive effects on empowering women in more controversial household decisions, such as family planning or control over money (Agarwala & Lynch, 2006, pg. 2095). This dimension of women's autonomy is perhaps better labelled, as it is by Agarwala and Lynch (2006), as 'family decisions', so more clearly distinguishing it from participation in the sphere of economic decision-making.

**Household economic resources** – Multiple questions are asked about the extent to which women have a say in relation to different resources (Kabeer, 1999), although there is some variation as to the specific questions asked. For instance, some scholars ask whether women have access to a source of money (from the husband or household, wages earned, or gifts or support from natal family) and whether women have independent control over the money (Bloom, Wypij & Das Gupta, 2001; Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Sathar & Kazi, 2000; Ghuman, 2003). Others question about who has the greatest say in decisions related to the purchase of food, major household purchases (such as a TV), and when to buy or sell animals, etc. (Agarwala & Lynch, 2006).

**Freedom from violence** – Another commonly used dimension is fear of, or perceived fear of partner violence, which captures views on and actual experience with partner violence (Agarwala & Lynch, 2006; Ghuman, 2003; Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Sandberg & Rafail, 2013; Sathar & Kazi, 2000). Women who have experienced violence from an intimate partner generally have less autonomy than women who have not, so it is considered a negative measure (Kabeer, 1999).

In their findings, Agarwala and Lynch (2006) suggest this dimension of autonomy should be further delineated into two sub-dimensions of "feared and actual violence" as it suggests that in India (and Pakistan) a woman's view on the legitimacy of violence does not reflect the same aspect of autonomy as do her experiences of actual violence (pg. 2094).

**Freedom to participate in the community** – This measure indicates women’s involvement in community affairs and political participation (Agarwala & Lynch, 2006; Richardson et al., 2018). This is a significant indicator for autonomy as it is typically men who represent the household at the community level. It is measured by involvement in political activities or protests (Kabeer et al., 2011), reading the newspaper or listening to the radio (Agarwala & Lynch, 2006), freedom to travel without asking permission (Agarwala & Lynch, 2006), participation in groups (Kabeer et al., 2011) and consultation by others in the community (Kabeer et al., 2011).

Most studies on women’s autonomy use statistical methods to analyze results. While statistical methods are helpful in explaining general trends, they do not in themselves provide insights into the nuances and complex realities of women’s lives. As Kabeer (1999, pg. 447) suggests, statistical perspectives on measures of autonomy, such as decision-making, are ‘simple windows on complex realities.’ They provide brief insights but cannot offer details about the negotiations and subtle forms of manipulation that occur in private between men and women (Kabeer, 1999). In my study, I supplement my measures of autonomy with ethnographic description which provides valuable insights into Punjabi women’s autonomy, and an in-depth understanding of the nuances that occur in individual households and the complex realities of women’s lives.

### **Conceptualization and measurements used in my study**

In line with earlier writers, I conceptualize autonomy as “the extent to which women exert control over their own lives within the families in which they live”, following Jejeebhoy (2000, pg. 205) and Agarwala and Lynch (2006). In this definition, control means the extent to which women have a say in a particular matter and their ability to determine an outcome or event in their lives, even though others may be opposed to it (Bloom, Wypij & Das Gupta, 2001).

Following the scheme of Agarwala and Lynch (2006), I include four dimensions in my measure of women's autonomy: family decisions, household economic decisions, freedom from violence and community involvement. I combine freedom of mobility with community involvement as most questions include whether permission is or is not required to go to certain places most of which are within the community. However, I expand community involvement, from political activities or protests (Agarwala & Lynch, 2006; Kabeer et al., 2011) to include participation in community activities because the lives of Punjabi women are rooted within the defined parameters of the domestic sphere, with responsibilities for household chores and child-rearing. Stepping out of the household to participate in the community, for instance going to a neighbour's house to help make food for an important event or volunteering at the local temple, are indications of autonomous behaviour. These dimensions are measured using a survey questionnaire, although some questions concerning household income and spending money were asked in the in-depth interviews. These have been identified as such.

**Family decisions** – I conceptualize family decisions as who in the family decides the following, and who in the family has the greatest say in these decisions, as was the procedure used in earlier work by Jejeebhoy and Sathar (2001) and Agarwala and Lynch (2006):

1. What to make for dinner?
2. The number of children to have?
3. Where the children should go to school?
4. When and to whom the children should get married?

I operationalize the extent of women's involvement in family decision-making by using values of: not involved (at all); involved (to some extent); and equally involved. Questions of varying weight are helpful in examining the actual extent of women's involvement in specific decisions and provide an understanding of their autonomy. I

recognise that these decisions are not all of equal weight and they will be considered accordingly in the analysis of the survey data.

**Household economic decisions** – I conceptualize family decisions as who in the family decides the following, and who in the family has the greatest say in these decisions, as in the earlier research of Jejeebhoy and Sathar (2001) and Agarwala and Lynch (2006):

1. What food to buy for family meals?
2. Whether to purchase clothes for themselves and for children?
3. Whether to purchase small household items (small appliances, dishware, etc.)?
4. Whether to purchase medium household items (large appliances, furniture, undertake small scale renovations)?
5. Whether to purchase large items (vehicles, undertake large scale renovations, land)?

Again, I operationalize the extent of women's involvement in economic decision-making by using values of: not involved (at all); involved (to some extent); and equally involved; and recognise that these decisions are not all of equal weight and consider them accordingly in the analysis of the survey data.

The following questions were asked in the interviews and are operationalized by yes or no values.

6. Do you have a say in how household income is spent?
7. Do you get spending money?
8. Are you able to spend it without having to consult with someone?
9. If you need money for something, are you able to get it?

**Freedom from violence** – I conceptualize freedom from violence as women’s actual experience with violence from their husband but expand it to include experience with violence at the hands of other members within the household. I further expand this dimension to include freedom from domination from other family members.

1. Do you feel intimidated to question decisions made by other family members, elder family members, in front of others?
2. Do you feel intimidated to voice your own opinions in front of other family members, elder family members?
3. Has your husband ever beaten you?
4. Have other family members ever beaten you?

Following the recommendation by Agarwala and Lynch (2006), I have divided the questions to address feared and actual violence. The first two questions address the fear or threat of violence through women’s experience of intimidation or subjugation, and the last two questions address actual experience with violence.

This measure is operationalized by the values: no concerns (women have no fear or concerns about partner violence, have never experienced it, are able to voice their concerns and opinions freely without repercussions); concerned (women monitor themselves with their mannerisms and restrict their speech to not be perceived as ‘out of line’ by not portraying a well-behaved, soft spoken traditional housemaker as expected in many patriarchal Punjabi households); and very concerned (has experienced partner violence in the past and is afraid to openly speak her mind).

**Community involvement** – This measure includes women’s ability to leave the household to go to different places, unaccompanied, as well as participate in village events such as parades or festivals, including political participation. Whether or not women need permission to go to these places is also measured.

1. Can you go to a neighbour's house? Are you able to go alone? Do you need to ask permission before you go?

2. Can you go to a local temple? Are you able to go alone? Do you need to ask permission before you go?
3. Can you go to a local market? Are you able to go alone? Do you need to ask permission before you go?
4. Can you go to local community events like the fair, a parade, etc.? Are you able to go alone? Do you need to ask permission before you go?
5. Can you go to your natal home? Are you able to go alone? Do you need to ask permission before you go?
6. Can you go to participate or volunteer in political events, like campaigns or rallies, or support electoral candidates? Are you able to go alone? Do you need to ask permission before you go?
7. Can you participate or volunteer in school events, religious or neighbourhood festivities? Are you able to go alone? Do you need to ask permission before you go?

## **1.5. Determinants of women's autonomy**

Research, over the last half-century or so, has shown the significance of women's autonomy in relation to many important development objectives. Dyson and Moore's seminal study, and later others, found that increased female autonomy led to decreased fertility rates, improved child health and education, and improved standards of living for women in India and Pakistan (Dyson & Moore 1983; Basu & Basu, 1991; Balk, 1994). These findings led the United Nations in 1995 (Agarwala & Lynch, 2006) to declare that women's autonomy is essential to human dignity and must be considered a basic human right (UNDP, 1995). The United Nations (UN Women, 2020) stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, with a focus on four priorities:

1. Women lead, participate in and benefit equally from governance systems
2. Women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy
3. All women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence

4. Women and girls contribute to and have greater influence in building sustainable peace and resilience, and benefit equally from the prevention of natural disasters and conflicts and humanitarian action

Scholarship has helped identify the various factors that could affect or predict women's autonomy. Demographic attributes of individuals, such as socioeconomic background (including employment), age, age of marriage, age difference with husband, number of children, kinship relations and education are commonly cited factors that influence women's autonomy to different degrees (Dyson & Moore, 1983; Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Bloom, Wypij & Das Gupta, 2001). Recent research on India has included focus on how women's autonomy is influenced by employment (Sangappa & Kavle, 2010), and by religion and region (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Sathar & Kazi, 2000). Education is generally seen to be positively associated with autonomy, though some studies based on India find the impact and results of education to be uncertain. Conversely, living in the same household with mothers-in-law diminishes women's autonomy in two ways. First, women are subject to the authority of the mother-in-law, limiting their interpersonal control, and second, mothers-in law can mediate women's contact with natal kin, limiting their interaction and the opportunity to request support (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Bloom, Wypij & Das Gupta, 2001).

The significance of education is often stressed as a key factor for increasing autonomy. The importance of education as a change catalyst, particularly for increasing autonomy of girls, has been emphasized in most international development agendas, including those of USAID, UNESCO, World Bank and the United Nations, which has deemed 'Quality Education' as the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (USAID, 2008; UNESCO Gem Report 2020; World Bank Girls Education, 2017; UNSG, 2015). The right to education is also stressed in many countries' charters of rights and freedoms, and in constitutions, including the Constitution of India and in India's Right to Education Act (2009), which makes education compulsory and free for all children up to the age of 14 (Harriss, Jeffrey & Brown, 2020).

Yet, India has seriously failed to realize this promise in the Constitution (Harriss, Jeffrey & Brown, 2020). The country has an estimated 11.9 million primary and lower secondary school-age children, 6 to 13 years old, out of school (UNICEF, 2014b), with the proportion of girls out of school being higher than that of boys (UNICEF, 2014a). There is also considerable evidence that social and schooling experiences are a major factor in discouraging female participation and learning, from social attitudes towards the educated female, to schools as sites of gendered discrimination and violence (Stromquist & Fischmann, 2009).

The Indian economist Amartya Sen believes the capabilities acquired in and through education can provide people with freedom and options to decide what kind of life to lead (1999). Although the majority of India's population is far from reaching this sort of freedom, "qualitative research from India does indicate that under certain conditions, education can be a site at which limiting conceptions of women's potential are challenged (Klenk 2010), alternative futures are rendered possible (Patel 2017), and patriarchal mindsets contested (Unterhalter & Dutt 2001)" (Harriss, Jeffrey & Brown, 2020, pg. 424). Sen, and in other work, his colleague, Jean Dreze, have influenced how scholars, practitioners and activists research and think about schooling in poor countries (Jeffrey, Jeffery & Jeffery, 2008).

Nevertheless, concerns have been raised about Sen and Dreze's arguments, particularly the emphasis on the importance of education as a means to expand capabilities. Sen and Dreze downplay the contextualized meaning of how schooling is differently received by people of different gender, caste, religion and nationality (Jeffrey, Jeffery & Jeffery, 2008). Empirical studies question the experience of schooling and its meaning in a larger socioeconomic milieu, the many factors that go into the making of identity, and therefore, the limits to and possibilities of autonomy of women (Jeffery & Basu, 1996). In other work done by Roger Jeffery and Patricia Jeffery (1997), they conclude that "our discussions with women... do not point to any differences between the educated and uneducated with respect to the norms they articulate about

joint and separate living, their fear of responsibilities which would come with independence, and the financial implications that those living arrangements would entail” (1997, pg. 171). Women are “structurally” powerless because they have no independent earning power or ownership of property (Jeffery & Jeffery, 1997).

The empowering potential of education is too often constrained by a combination of structural factors and normative ideas: the influence of family, employment conditions, particularly a lack of ‘suitable’ work for educated women, and social factors based on restrictive gender norms (Jejeebhoy & Sather, 2001; Chatterjee, Desai & Vanneman, 2018; Harriss, Jeffrey & Brown, 2020). “Complex socioeconomic phenomena underlie this paradox.” (Chatterjee, Desai & Vanneman, 2018, pg. 3). Education can have the potential to improve multiple freedoms, *if* some or ideally all of these other conditions permit (Jeffrey, Jeffery & Jeffery, 2008). Based on the literature showing how education can be differently received in different contexts and given the low levels of female employment in Punjab, we might expect that education may not improve the autonomy of Punjabi truck driver wives.

## **1.6. Overview of the thesis**

The next chapter explains the methods used in the fieldwork for this qualitative study, namely a questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews in which I collected data on the four different dimensions of women’s autonomy that I have distinguished: family decisions, household economic decisions, freedom from violence, and community involvement. Chapter three provides a brief overview of the demographics of the women, and the findings from the questionnaire for women in Punjab and BC. Chapter four focuses on the findings from Punjab, starting with a general overview of truck driving families in Punjab. I then explain in detail the different experiences of women and how the conditional effects of family and social context impact their level of autonomy. Chapter five presents similar analysis on the case of the women in British

Columbia. Chapter six is a discussion addressing the key questions identified in the paper, before concluding remarks about the research.

## Chapter 2.

### Research design and methods

#### 2.1. Research question

This project explores the impact of the structural changes that occur within the household as a result of the absences of truck driving husbands and how these changes may influence women's autonomy. I examine how far women sharing the *same* cultural background, being born and raised in Punjabi families, act in different ways in the different social contexts of Punjab and BC. My work has been influenced by research that compares women's autonomy in different social and cultural contexts, (Agarwala & Lynch, 2006; Richardson et al., 2018), for instance women in North and South India (Dyson & Moore, 1983; Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001). I provide a nuanced understanding of how the effects of disruptions in the household division of labour, due to the prolonged absences of truck driving husbands, manifest differently in the different contexts and their impacts on Punjabi women's autonomy. Through empirical data on the experiences of Punjabi truck driver wives, the chapters that follow will address the following questions:

1. *What are the implications of prolonged absences of husbands for family and household relations and for wives' perceptions of their levels of autonomy?*
2. *How is women's autonomy conditioned by patriarchal configurations and conservative social norms, in the comparative cases of Punjab and British Columbia?*

Grounded in the gendered, familial and sociocultural perceptions and realities of Punjabi women, in Punjab and of immigrant women in BC, the focus of this study is on exploring their experiences in the household and in society, and to understand the underlying reasons for the differing levels of autonomy.

Specifically, I aim to examine these hypotheses:

1. Based on the literature demonstrating additional emotional burdens to the family of truck drivers, we would expect the wives of Punjabi truck drivers to be even more oppressed.
2. Based on the literature showing how changing structures of household relations in Punjab improve the autonomy of Punjabi women, we would expect that the extended absence of Punjabi truck drivers, which changes the structure of relations within their households, could improve the autonomy of their wives.

I also strive to achieve a better understanding of the patriarchy and gender inequality that form many of the social norms that impact women's autonomy in the community that has shaped my own identity. As a researcher, I recognize that my interpretation, analysis, and writing on this topic will be structured by my upbringing, values, biases and experiences.

## **2.2. Ethical clearance**

This research posed minimal risks to the research subjects. The interview process as well as the data collection and transcription, described in detail below, neither inflicted bodily harm nor placed individuals in hazardous situations, physically or psychologically. A Minimal Risk Approval letter was issued by the Research Ethics Board (REB) at Simon Fraser University, giving ethical clearance to this study.

## **2.3. Study population**

For this study, I conducted fieldwork in Jalandhar, Punjab over a period of six weeks in the fall of 2019, followed by three weeks of fieldwork in the lower mainland of BC at the beginning of 2020. Jalandhar was selected for convenience as that was the location of my host family and allowed for greater financial affordability. Staying with family also allowed the greatest number of participants to be recruited through snowball sampling in a short timeframe, due to the family's familiarity with the area and

its people. Jalandhar is one of the five largest districts in Punjab, and the participants were selected from small and rural villages on the outskirts of Jalandhar City. In BC the Lower Mainland region was selected, specifically between Abbotsford and Surrey, due to the concentration of truck driving diaspora from Punjab in the area.

A total of 31 individuals, women who are wives of Punjabi truck drivers<sup>2</sup>, participated in the study. I recruited 17 (55%) of the participants in Punjab, from 15 households<sup>3</sup>, and 14 (45%) participants in BC, all from different households. In recruiting, I looked for a balanced distribution between the ages of the women in order to capture perceptions and experiences in regard to their autonomy at different stages of their lives. I gained access to these women through family and personal connections in Punjab, and through my husband, who was previously employed as a truck-driver and now owns a trucking company, in BC. I requested a two-hour session with each woman, two days ahead of time whenever possible, but sometimes just an hour or so before the actual survey questionnaire and interview. In Punjab, the interviews were scheduled by family members, and access to the women was relatively straightforward, in that most of the women are housewives and available at any point in the day to speak to me. In BC, I scheduled the interview sessions myself via telephone or through social media, and I found it quite difficult to coordinate times with many of the women, as they all had to work, had previous engagements, or had little unscheduled or free time to meet with me.

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<sup>2</sup> One driver is a long-distance taxi-driver. He was included in my study because his work is very similar to that of truck drivers, in that he is gone from home for extended periods on a regular basis and is required to drive at all hours of day and night. The difference is that truck drivers haul cargo and he carries passengers, likely requiring him to be more focused and alert to dangers on the road.

<sup>3</sup> Three of the women belong to one household, as they are married to brothers who are all truck drivers.

## 2.4. Data collection

Survey questionnaires and individual, semi-structured interviews, ranging from 45 minutes to an hour and half for both, focused on personal perspectives and anecdotes, providing a space for participants to articulate their experiences and perceptions in a way that would not have been available within a large-scale survey. I was solely responsible for conducting all interviews, which were carried out in my native language, Punjabi, and in English with some participants from British Columbia, who were fluent English speakers and chose to speak in English. Informed consent, including the consent to record interviews for subsequent transcription, was obtained from all respondents. No one refused to participate in this study.

In-depth interviews were confidential, and participants were assured that any information that could reveal their identity or place of work would not be released without their consent. Each woman completed the survey and interview. To ensure privacy, I had originally planned to speak to the women in a public place, such as a coffee shop, and outside of the family home. However, public places that could offer a bit of privacy were not close by, so for convenience, the discussions all took place at the women's homes. After I explained my study and ethical obligations, and the requirement to keep the survey and interview responses and all information confidential, I obtained oral consent and asked to use a separate room, away from other family members, for the survey and interview. All the women obliged although on one occasion two younger women visiting the household wanted to join out of curiosity. They were respectfully denied with an explanation of the ethical requirements to keep information confidential. One mother-in-law refused to leave the room; however, when I asked her daughter-in-law, the woman I was interviewing, if she was comfortable having her in the room, she smiled and nodded and explained that the older woman was hard of hearing.

I began by establishing rapport by sharing my own personal experiences as the wife of a former long-haul truck driver and as a mother of two young children. I noticed

these commonalities, my local attire of simple *salwar kameez* (loose pants and long tunic) and the informal chit chat established a warm and comfortable rapport. I started with basic profile data (age), age of marriage, husband’s age, level of education, employment, number of children, number of people in the household (and their relation to them).

I then began the survey questionnaire, so I could understand the women’s thoughts, opinions and attitudes (Berg, 2004) about their level of autonomy before starting with the in-depth essential interview questions. I asked them about the extent of their involvement in the following questions and recorded their response on the questionnaire. These standardized questions and answers helped the women be more at ease, and speak freely, often emotionally, about their experiences.

**Family decisions** – Who in your family decides the following, and who has the greatest say in this decision:

	<b>Not involved</b>	<b>Involved</b>	<b>Equally involved</b>
What to make for dinner?			
The number of children to have?			
Where the children should go to school?			
When and to whom the children should get married?			

Not involved: women are not involved in this decision at all.

Involved: women are somewhat involved in this decision; others are involved in this decision as well.

Equally involved: women are equal decision makers in this decision.

**Household economic decisions** – Who in your family decides the following, and who has the greatest say in this decision:

	<b>Not involved</b>	<b>Involved</b>	<b>Equally involved</b>
What food to buy for family meals?			
Whether to purchase clothes for themselves, for children?			
Whether to purchase small household items (small appliances, dishware, etc.)?			
Whether to purchase medium household items (large appliances, furniture, undertake small scale renovations)?			
Whether to purchase large items (vehicles, undertake large scale renovations, land)?			
(related questions from interviews)	No	Sometimes	Yes
Do you have a say in how household income is spent?			
Do you get spending money?			
Are you able to spend it without having to consult with someone?			
If you need money for something, are you able to get it?			

Not involved: women are not involved in this decision at all.

Involved: women are somewhat involved in this decision; others are involved in this decision as well.

Equally involved: women are equal decision makers in this decision.

**Freedom from violence** – In household discussions or arguments:

	No	Sometimes	Yes
Do you feel intimidated to question decisions made by other family members, elder family members, in front of others?			
Do you feel intimidated to voice your own opinions in front of other family members, elder family members?			
Has your husband ever beaten you?			
Have other family members ever beaten you?			

No: does not feel intimidated to question decisions or voice own opinion and has never experienced violence.

Sometimes: at times feels intimidated to question decisions or voice own opinion and has experienced violence.

Yes: is intimidated to question decisions or voice own opinion and has experienced violence.

**Community involvement** – Are you able to go to these particular locations? Do you need to ask permission to leave the household? Can you go alone?

	Yes/No	Require permission Yes/No	Can go alone Yes/No
Can you go to a neighbour's house?			
Can you go to a local temple?			
Can you go to a local market?			
Can you go to local community events like the fair, a parade, etc.?			
Can you go to your natal home?			
Can you go to participate or volunteer in political events, like campaigns or rallies, or support electoral candidates?			
Can you participate or volunteer in school events, religious or neighbourhood festivities?			

Yes: can go to this particular location. No: cannot go to this particular location.

Require permission – Yes: must ask permission before going to this particular location. No: does not need to ask permission before going to this particular location.

Can go alone – Yes: is able to go by herself to this particular location. No: cannot go by herself to this particular location.

After completing the survey, I proceeded with the interview. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on understanding multiple aspects affecting woman's autonomy. I inquired about their autonomy in their natal home before marriage, as the nature of women's relationships with natal kin is an essential consideration in women's autonomy in north India, then focused on the relationship with the husband and other household members. I also inquired about daily life in the household, family relations and the decision-making hierarchy after the husband started work as a truck driver, requiring him to be away for extended periods, as that is central to the study. I asked the women how they spent their time in the husband's absence, and whether they found themselves to be more busy with household chores, children, tending animals or distracted by other matters that arose in the husband's absence.

Although the above themes offered a useful guide in conducting the interviews, a slightly different set of questions ultimately applied to each participant in accordance with their own experience. Participants were also given the opportunity to share any additional information they considered to be relevant to the conversation at the end of the interview. In this way, detailed first-person narrative accounts were valuable in eliciting important data in explaining the conditioning affects of family configurations and conservative social norms that can lead to different levels of autonomy for women.

## **2.5. Data analysis**

For confidentiality purposes, a nonidentifying numeric code was assigned to each participant and used to identify the corresponding interview transcription in the data analysis phase. A master file of participant names and codes assigned to them was password-protected and stored digitally in my computer. All audio transcriptions as well as hand-written interview notes that may have contained identifying information were digitalized, coded and stored in a location different from where the master file was kept in order to avoid a breach in confidentiality.

I was personally responsible for the transcription of audio-recorded interviews, translations from Punjabi to English, where necessary, and data analysis. A triangulation of data sources, comparing primary data from the survey questionnaire and interview responses of respondents and secondary data obtained from the literature, has also been used so as to increase the validity of the results.

## Chapter 3.

### Findings from Survey Questionnaire

#### 3.1. Overview of the women in Punjab and BC

Table 1 summarizes the profile of Punjabi women surveyed and interviewed in this study, from Punjab and BC.

**Table 1. Basic characteristics of surveyed Punjabi women**

	<b>Punjab</b>	<b>BC</b>
<b>Mean age (years)</b>	40	53
<b>Median age (years)</b>	44	41
<b>Average age of marriage (years)</b>	21	33
<b>Average children (n)</b>	2	2
<b>Level of education (% , N)</b>		
Primary	41.2 (7)	14.3 (2)
Junior secondary	41.2 (7)	21.4 (3)
Senior secondary	11.8 (2)	21.4 (3)
Bachelor	5.9 (1)	21.4 (3)
Post-graduate	-	21.4 (3)
<b>Head of household (% , n)</b>		
Joint (self and husband)	47.1 (8)	85.7 (12)
Other joint <sup>4</sup>	35.3 (6)	14.3 (2)
Husband	11.8 (2)	-
Self	5.9 (1)	-
<b>Paid Employment Outside of Household</b>		
None	88.2 (15)	7.1 (1)
Part-time/Seasonal	11.8 (2)	50 (7)
Full-time	-	42.8 (6)

<sup>4</sup> Other joint indicates other people living in the household, not including the woman. The combination could include husband and others, or others such as the in-laws.

The women interviewed in Punjab are younger on average by thirteen years than women in BC, at 40 and 53 years respectively. There is a widely held view in literature that as women age, their level of autonomy increases respectively (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Gill & Matthews, 1995; Mooney, 2020) indicating that the women sampled in BC may enjoy a higher level of autonomy than the women sampled in Punjab simply because they are older. The mean age of marriage for the women in Punjab is 21, which is higher than the legal age of marriage in India at 18, and the mean number of children is 2, which is slightly lower than the Indian average of 2.3 (Niti Aayog, 2016). The mean age of marriage of women in BC is 33, substantially higher than that of the women in Punjab – which might perhaps reflect higher levels of autonomy resulting from years spent in education and in employment - and the number of children is the same.

Most of the women in Punjab have only primary or junior levels of education, with seven women in each category. Two women have senior secondary level of education and one has a bachelor's degree. Eighty-eight per cent of the women in Punjab are housewives and are not gainfully employed. Two women are casually employed. The first has completed grade 10 and works as a seamstress out of her home. The second has completed Plus 2 (equivalent of high school graduation in BC) and operates a small convenience store in a town about 5km from her village. Although both women can keep their earnings, the woman who operates the convenience store puts all her income towards her children's school fees as her husband's income is not enough to cover the expenses.

The levels of education for women in BC are more evenly distributed, with three women in each of post-graduate, bachelor, senior and junior levels of secondary education and two with only primary level of education. The youngest three women, aged 29, 30 and 33 have some of the highest education, including two post-graduate degrees and one bachelor's degree. The oldest three, aged 47, 52 and 64 all have senior secondary education. The remaining seven women range from 40 to 47 years old and have a mix of primary Grade 5 education to a post-graduate degree in Economics. In BC,

all but one of the women are employed. The unemployed woman works as a home-maker and has never worked outside of the home since her arrival in Canada, in 2011, or before that in Punjab. All the gainfully employed women either have their own personal bank accounts or a shared account with their husband, to which they have equal access.

The 'head of the household' indicates the key decision makers of the family, and the person(s) who approves all major decisions, and without whom, major decisions cannot happen. Interestingly, forty-seven per cent of the women in Punjab claimed to be equal partners with their husbands as the heads of the household, and with an additional woman who declared herself to be head of household, account for more than fifty per cent of the women who are equally involved in all household decisions, including major decisions for the family. This is significant because this is not what the literature describes. In BC, eighty-six per cent claimed to be equal partners with their husbands as the heads of the household.

The 'other joint' variable indicates other people in the household, who are jointly the 'head' of the household. In Punjab, 'other joint' reflects two other people in the household who are the 'heads' for six of the women living in four households (three of the women are married to brothers and live in one household). The four households consist of the following combinations of main decision-makers: 1) a grandmother '*bibi*' and husband's uncle '*chacha*' (who are mother and son); 2) the mother-in-law and eldest brother-in-law are the heads of the household with three women married to brothers; 3) both mother and father-in-law; and 4) the husband and the mother-in-law. Furthermore, in the second household, where the heads of the household are the mother-in-law and eldest brother-in-law, the father-in-law is still alive and well, but is not the key decision-maker, despite living in a joint family where he lives with his four sons and their families, and his brother and his family. When I asked the three women from that household why the father-in-law was not involved in major decisions, they said it had always been that way since they married into the family; the mother-in-law

and her eldest brother-in-law were the heads of the household. Interestingly, each 'other joint' decision-making pair consists of one female and one male, and in total, eighty-eight per cent of the households have one female 'head' decision-maker.

An important body of literature focused on the empowerment and autonomy of women, finds that in South Asia in particular, women opt for private forms of empowerment where they are more able to influence outcomes in their favour more discreetly, which in essence provides them with more autonomy than might be initially evident (Basu, 1996; Kabeer, 1997). These private forms of empowerment, through informal decision-making, retain intact the image and honour of the traditional decision-maker, who is often the husband (Basu, 1996; Kabeer, 1997). Consequently, the informal decision-making agency that women often exercise is not visible in statistical perspectives (Kabeer, 1999, pg. 447). On the other hand, it could be that the women's claims to be joint heads of household are optimistic or based on a misunderstanding of what I as the researcher meant by 'head of household.'

This might help explain why the Punjabi women in Punjab all claim to have equal decision-making power in family planning matters, which is of utmost importance for women's bodily autonomy, despite some of the same women's accounts of little decision-making power in other, sometimes less significant, family or household economic matters. This might be especially true for the women whose husbands are more dominant and controlling. To portray them as such, and for the women's own benefit, they credit their husbands as having more control over important decisions. These strategies reflect a degree of caution on the part of women, "a strategic virtue in situations where they may have as much to lose from the disruption of... relationships as they have to gain." (Kabeer, 1999, pg. 448).

In Punjab, Jameela, who is over 65 years old and one of the eldest women I interviewed, declared herself to be the main decision-maker in her household. She said she had always made the decisions in the household and her husband did not, and that the house and land were both in her name. When asked, she did not specify why her

husband was not an equal decision-maker but shrugged it off as “it’s been that way from the start.” Although land inheritance rules are not uniform within this region, Muslim women have always enjoyed the right to inherit property and to inherit as individuals<sup>5</sup> (Kabeer, 1999). It is perhaps the reason why the property is in her name, and why she has more decision-making authority, access to economic resources and is free to come and go as she pleases. I found this interesting as the literature indicates that men are the key decision makers in Punjabi households.

Other than her husband, Jameela also lives with her son and his family and said the son could not be trusted. She believed that her son and his wife were trying to get the family assets, including the house and land, into their name. Jameela said that she would not let that happen because if it did, they would kick Jameela and her daughter (who has two young children) out. The daughter had been staying with Jameela for the last couple of months because her husband was very abusive, and the mother did not want her to go back to him.

Although Jameela has autonomy in family decisions, access to resources and the community, she experiences violence at home, from the hands of her son. Jameela believes that her son’s wife instigates him and encourages him to beat the mother when they don’t receive what is asked for, generally money. The woman hasn’t kicked them out because she knows if she does, her two young grandchildren will not have a place to live.

In BC, 86% of women indicated to be the joint decision-maker in the family, along with their husbands. Two women indicated ‘other joint’, in both circumstances, the mother and father-in-law were the joint decision-makers. In BC, all of the women lived in households that had at least one woman involved in all key decisions.

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<sup>5</sup> Although Muslim men and women enjoy individual rights to inherit property, they are not by any means equal rights; for instance, men tend to inherit twice the share of women (Kabeer, 1999, pg. 443). Although Hindu inheritance laws were reformed after Indian independence, Muslim inheritance principles have been left untouched (Kabeer, 1999).

### 3.2. Questionnaire results

The questionnaire survey collected data on the four dimensions of women’s autonomy: family decisions, household economic decisions, freedom from violence, and community involvement.

#### Women in Punjab

**Table 2. Questionnaire results for women in Punjab**

<b>Family decisions</b>	<b>Not involved</b>	<b>Involved</b>	<b>Equally involved</b>
What to make for dinner?	-	47.1 (8)	52.9 (9)
The number of children to have?	-	-	100 (17)
Where the children should go to school?	11.8 (2)	47.1 (8)	41.2 (7)
When and to whom the children should get married?	35.3 (6)	64.7 (11)	-
<b>Household economic decisions</b>	<b>Not involved</b>	<b>Involved</b>	<b>Equally involved</b>
What food to buy for family meals?	-	47.1 (8)	52.9 (9)
Whether to purchase clothes for themselves, for children?	-	35.3 (6)	64.7 (11)
Whether to purchase small household items (small appliances, dishware, etc.)?	5.9 (1)	35.3 (6)	58.8 (10)
Whether to purchase medium household items (large appliances, furniture, undertake small scale renovations)?	11.8 (2)	41.2 (7)	47.1 (8)
Whether to purchase large items (vehicles, undertake large scale renovations, land)?	35.3 (6)	41.2 (7)	23.5 (4)
<b>(related questions from interviews)</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Do you have a say in how household income is spent?	11.8 (2)	29.4 (5)	58.8 (10)
Do you get spending money?	5.9 (1)	23.5 (4)	70.6 (12)
Are you able to spend it without having to consult with someone?	11.8 (2)	11.8 (2)	76.5 (13)
If you need money for something, are you able to get it?	29.4 (5)	5.9 (1)	64.7 (11)

<b>Freedom from violence</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Do you feel intimidated to question decisions made by other family members, elder family members, in front of others?	47.1 (8)	35.3 (6)	17.6 (3)
Do you feel intimidated to voice your own opinions in front of other family members, elder family members?	52.9 (9)	35.3 (6)	11.8 (2)
Has your husband ever beaten you?	76.5 (13)	-	23.5 (4)
Have other family members ever beaten you?	94.1 (16)	-	5.9 (1)
<b>Community involvement</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Require permission?</b>	<b>Can go alone?</b>
Can you go to a neighbour's house?	82.3 (14)	29.4 (5)	70.6 (12)
Can you go to a local temple?	94.1 (16)	17.6 (3)	82.3 (14)
Can you go to a local market?	94.1 (16)	41.2 (7)	70.6 (12)
Can you go to local community events like the fair, a parade, etc.?	94.1 (16)	41.2 (7)	64.7 (11)
Can you go to your natal home?	100 (17)	17.6 (3)	64.7 (11)
Can you go to participate or volunteer in political events, like campaigns or rallies, or support electoral candidates?	58.8 (10)	47.1 (8)	52.9 (9)
Can you participate or volunteer in school events, religious or neighbourhood festivities?	94.1 (16)	35.3 (6)	76.5 (13)

### ***Family decisions***

Some decisions have greater importance than other decisions because they have greater consequences for people's lives. Choosing the number of children to have is a critical decision because it allows people to live life within the parameters they want (Kabeer, 1999). All the women claimed that they had decided themselves and/or with their partners about the number of children they would have, including the women who had very little autonomy in other aspects. For instance, some women did not have access to resources, experienced violence or subjugation in their home and had limited participation in the community. Some of these women did not have very much autonomy in other family decisions either, for instance where the children would attend school. "Family planning" is perceived to be a controversial decision, more so than other decisions about the children, such as where the children will attend school (Agarwala &

Lynch, 2006). Yet, all of these women, some of whom admitted that they did not have much say in what would be prepared for dinner, claimed to have an equal say in the number of children they wanted to have. For women to have equal control over the number of children they wish to bear is of central importance in having control over their own body. This finding is important because evidence from other studies, broadly speaking, indicates that the decision for the number of children is usually made by males. This is illustrated by Sathar and Kazi (1997) who found in their data from Pakistan, that women did not have a major role in the decision relating to the number of children. It is possible that women are granted rights and privileges, generally by older women in the household, that are linked to their fertility, for instance having the right number of children, but are not necessarily provided greater autonomy in decision-making in other areas (Sen, 1993).

It is difficult to capture the reality of women's involvement through simple indicators, being 'equally involved', 'somewhat involved' or 'not involved,' in family decisions. As mentioned above, an important body of South Asian literature explains that women appear to opt for 'private forms of empowerment', which retain intact the public perception, honour, and the image of the traditional decision-maker, normally the husband, but nevertheless increases women's influence in decision-making 'behind the scenes' (Basu, 1996; Kabeer, 1997). It is possible that women are able to influence decision-making in private, yet, it still does not explain the four women who claimed to have experienced violence from their husbands but also claimed to be equally involved in family planning matters. According to the women, violence was not, is not a common occurrence. It is possible they experienced violence after they had had children and that their marital relationship evolved due to their particular circumstances, which certainly would be different for each woman. In any case, despite doing a survey questionnaire and an in-depth interview, it is difficult to understand how these women perceive their involvement in these decisions in the context of violence.

Two women were not involved in the children's school decision because their in-laws made the decision. The rest of the women either made the decision together with other family members or made it on their own with their husbands. Of the six women who were not involved in the children's marriage decision, three women would leave the decision to the children because they believed it would be better for the children's future if they could pick their own partners, and thus would be happier. The other three women in the not involved category means their children's marriage would be arranged by their in-laws. Eleven women believed they would make the decision together, with the children and elders in the household.

### ***Household economic decisions***

All of the women are involved, to some extent, in decisions related to purchasing food and clothes for their children and for themselves. All of the women, except one, are involved, to some extent, in decisions related to purchasing small utensils and other small items, and all of the women, except two, are involved, to some extent, in decisions related to purchasing medium household goods. In all of these instances, the women who were 'involved' to some extent are younger women, live in extended families, and have older women above them in the decision-making hierarchy. The women who were equally involved were older or lived in nuclear family arrangements.

Only four of the women indicated they were equally involved in major economic decisions in the household, including decisions to purchase land. These women also had equal access to and control over all household resources. Another seven women had some involvement in major decisions, but ultimately others, made the final decision. Two of the women in this category indicated their husbands would discuss major purchases with them, but they were not very interested in these matters, and told their husbands to 'do whatever they saw fit'. Six of the women were not consulted over major household decisions; three of these women belonged to the same household. These three women had little to no control over money, or access to money.

Furthermore, four of the six women who said they were not involved in major household decisions, are amongst the youngest of the respondents, live with their in-laws but have strong positive relations with their husbands. In order to display deference to elders (as explained in the next section), it is possible that these young women express their concerns or thoughts about major decisions to their husbands who enact them on their behalf. Interestingly, three of these women were about to experience a change in the structure of their household relations, in that they had plans underway to build separate homes in which they would live in nuclear arrangements. It is likely that the structural change in living arrangements would improve the autonomy of these women as they would most likely become equal decision-makers in their new homes.

The women who are able to access economic resources when needed appear to have autonomy across all dimensions, except only four have equal involvement in large economic purchases. Some women also have the option of obtaining economic resources from their natal families, when and if needed. The six women who are unable to access resources when needed are structurally powerless because they are not gainfully employed, and nor do they have ownership of property. Five of these women would be unable to access resources if needed because the household does not have very much income and the existing income is spent on household necessities, such as food, children's school fees, uniforms, etc. The sixth woman has an abysmal relationship with her husband and his household, therefore, is unable to access economic resources even though they are available.

Ironically, eight of the seventeen women declared themselves to be equal decision-makers in the household, meaning they have equal authority and decision-making power for all matters concerning the household, and yet only four women, were involved in major decisions, for instance, purchasing land. Land, in my experience, is considered to be the most economically and culturally important asset for a family in Punjab. For a woman to be an equal decision-maker in matters concerning land is telling

of her authority and ultimately her autonomy. However, to portray their men as the key traditional decision-maker on important matters such as land, some women might have downplayed the extent of their own involvement in these decisions. This highlights how some women understand and perceive their own autonomy. It could also be that their claims to be joint heads of household are optimistic or based on a misunderstanding of what I as the researcher meant by 'head of household'.

It could also be that household economic decisions are divided by subject area of expertise. For example, in large household economic matters, the examples I used to understand the women's involvement in these matters were: the purchase of a new vehicle or tractor, large scale home renovations, and land. As explained earlier, the roles of men and women in the Punjabi household are rooted in tradition and are segregated. Men generally take care of matters outside of the household, including matters related to farming, such as tractors and land. Since men are involved with all aspects of farming, including the machinery required to farm, such as a tractor and the land on which to farm, they have the subject matter expertise on the topic. Therefore, they make the decisions related to farming, including the purchase of new tractors or land. Conversely, women, who are the homemakers, make decisions about matters within the home, including major renovations, because household needs are their area of expertise. This does not make the women unequal 'heads' of the household. What it does, is divide the tasks into areas of expertise, or at a minimum, areas of interest.

Consequently, it is possible that many of the women who claim to be equal heads of the household (and who are also equally involved in family decisions and all household economic decisions) said they were not involved in large economic decisions because they do not have the expertise in those areas, and had also not experienced major renovations, so did not have the context for those. Of the four women who claimed to be equal decision-makers in major household economic decisions, one had experienced major renovations to her home, and one had recently built a new home, in which she had been equally involved. Furthermore, two women who declared

themselves to be heads of the household and were equally involved in all decisions except the large economic decisions, specifically said that they left those matters to their husbands (or their farm-related delegates), even though the husbands discussed the need for such purchases with the women because the husbands dealt with farming issues on a regular basis. In hindsight, it may have been better to ask about the purchase of gold, which is also a major purchase, and a purchase that in my experience, is usually made by women.

Despite being familiar with the social context of Punjab and formatting the survey and interview questions to suite the Punjabi context, the indicators and measures of autonomy used in the study, which were derived from existing literature focused on autonomy, still fall short in capturing the variation of women's experiences, and how these women understand and experience autonomy.

### ***Freedom from violence***

Five of the women interviewed had experienced violence. Four of them experienced violence at the hands of their husbands and one woman had experienced violence from her son. All of the women indicated that the violence was not a regular, ongoing occurrence. A 32-year-old woman said she had experienced violence when she hadn't listened to her husband and had gone out of the home several times without a specific reason. When I was leaving this woman's house after completing the interview, her neighbour had popped her head over the fence and asked her to come over for tea. The woman I had just interviewed invited the neighbour over to her house instead, to which the neighbour promptly replied, "why must I be the one coming over? Can't you ever leave your house?" Then, tellingly, the woman I had interviewed, said "what can I do? *Majburi ah* (meaning it is an obligation, or necessary [that she stay home])." It is possible her controlling husband thought she would dishonour him by being out and about for no reason or be enticed to get involved in extra-marital affairs. This lack of trust and possible *behzti* perceived by controlling husbands is also the reason why two of the other women, Ranjit and Manpreet (discussed in the next chapter) had

experienced violence from their husbands. Sultana, the fourth women who experienced violence, believed it to be due to her husband's show of control and dominance.

Sultana, of all the women interviewed, appears to have the least amount of autonomy in that she is the least involved in decision-making in family and household economic matters, has experienced violence (although mostly in the past, as her children are now older), and is very much constrained to the household.

Manpreet experienced physical violence once but also experienced trauma that could possibly be worse than the slap. She was more regularly subject to emotional and verbal harassment by her mother-in-law and sister-in-law. Yet, she reported that she had only experienced violence once. It is possible other women, in other studies, too have experienced similar situations where they experience abuse from the husband and extended family, but do not articulate violence as a regular occurrence.

The rest of the women had never experienced violence. Three of the women did not question the decisions by elders in the household or by their husbands, due to fear of violence from their husbands. Nine of the women expressed concern about being labelled disrespectful for not displaying deference to older family members in the household, including in-laws. These women would voice their concerns through their husbands, who would relay them on the women's behalf, or would voice their concerns themselves when they really believed that it was required or would make a difference. Five of the women felt they could freely question the decisions made by elders or their husbands. Nine of the women felt they could freely express their own opinions to their husbands as well as other family members. Four of the women felt concerned about voicing their opinions, especially in front of the elders in the household. Two women felt they could not openly express their opinions in front of their husbands or elders in the household.

### ***Community involvement***

All the women are able to visit their natal home, however five need to first ask permission to go, and six of them either need to be picked up or dropped off by family members – they cannot go on their own. All but two women are able to go to various places, such as a neighbour's house, the local temple, the local market or attend other community events. Depending on where they are going, most women, more than half for all instances, are able to go by themselves, although some need to ask permission to go. All except one woman are able to participate in local religious events and neighbourhood festivities, but only seven of the women are able to attend by themselves, and another seven require permission before going.

Many women indicated they could always go, but 'asked permission' of an elder if home or told their husbands that they were stepping out as a courtesy. 'Asking permission' and 'requiring permission' are quite different in the Punjabi context. Asking permission does not mean that these women require permission to leave the house, it is done as a courtesy, and purely out of respect for elders. If an elder is not home, these women inform their husbands that they are stepping out, very similar to how one might inform another member of the household before stepping out, in the North American context. There is a high likelihood that this stepping out of the house and 'asking permission' is misconstrued in the North American context, and thus this measure of autonomy is misconstrued as an indicator as devised by scholars.

All of the women mentioned they could vote, but many did not. Thirteen women could participate in political events, but they did not want to due to a lack of interest. A couple of the younger women said political participation was a waste of time because the whole process was corrupt. None of the women indicated a desire to participate and being denied the opportunity. One woman did participate in campaigning but asked permission before going, out of respect to her husband. Three women volunteered in some aspect of the electoral process, including door to door campaigning, and they all told someone in the family or their husband before going, as a courtesy.

## Women in BC

**Table 3. Questionnaire results for women in BC**

<b>Family decisions</b>	<b>Not involved</b>	<b>Involved</b>	<b>Equally involved</b>
What to make for dinner?	-	-	100 (14)
The number of children to have?	-	-	100 (14)
Where the children should go to school?	-	-	100 (14)
When and to who the children should get married?	92.8 (13)	7.1 (1)	-
<b>Household economic decisions</b>	<b>Not involved</b>	<b>Involved</b>	<b>Equally involved</b>
What food to buy for family meals?	-	-	100 (14)
Whether to purchase clothes for themselves, for children?	-	-	100 (14)
Whether to purchase small household items (small appliances, dishware, etc.)?	-	-	100 (14)
Whether to purchase medium household items (large appliances, furniture, undertake small scale renovations)?	-	-	100 (14)
Whether to purchase large items (vehicles, undertake large scale renovations, land)?	-	14.3 (2)	85.7 (12)
<b>(related questions from interviews)</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Do you have a say in how household income is spent?	-	-	100 (14)
Do you get spending money?	-	-	100 (14)
Are you able to spend it without having to consult with someone?	-	-	100 (14)
If you need money for something, are you able to get it?	-	14.3 (2)	85.7 (12)
<b>Freedom from violence</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Do you feel intimidated to question decisions made by other family members, elder family members, in front of others?	64.3 (9)	35.7 (5)	-
Do you feel intimidated to voice your own opinions in front of other family members, elder family members?	100 (14)	-	-
Has your husband ever beaten you?	78.6 (11)	-	21.4 (3)
Have other family members ever beaten you?	100 (14)	-	-

<b>Community involvement</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Require permission?</b>	<b>Can go alone?</b>
Can you go to a neighbour's house?	100 (14)	-	100 (14)
Can you go to a local temple?	100 (14)	-	100 (14)
Can you go to a local market?	100 (14)	-	100 (14)
Can you go to local community events like the fair, a parade, etc.?	100 (14)	-	100 (14)
Can you go to your natal home?	100 (14)	-	100 (14)
Can you go to participate or volunteer in political events, like campaigns or rallies, or support electoral candidates?	100 (14)	-	100 (14)
Can you participate or volunteer in school events, religious or neighbourhood festivities?	100 (14)	-	100 (14)

### ***Family decisions***

All the women are equally involved in all family decisions. All women except one indicated that they would leave the decision of who and when their children should marry to the children themselves as “nowadays, the norm is for children to find partners on their own”. All these women’s children were born and raised in Canada, and the women and their husbands felt their children should have the freedom to choose who they want to marry. This applied to the women who lived with their in-laws as well. Furthermore, the women believe their children could find more suitable partners for themselves, with shared interests and outlooks, than they could. One woman indicated that it should be a joint decision, made with her in-laws, her and her husband, as well as the children.

### ***Household decision-making***

All the women were equally involved in all household economic decisions. Many of the women indicated they often purchased food, clothing and small household items by themselves without any consultation with anyone else. All except one woman were equal decision makers concerning all large purchases. In one of the households, the father-in-law and the woman’s husband made the final decision concerning larger

assets, such as land in India; however, the woman was involved in purchasing major assets, for instance their new home, in Canada.

### ***Freedom from violence***

Three of the women interviewed had experienced violence from their husbands. Two of these women, aged 64 and 52, believed the violence was due to instigation by other family members living in the household. These women were the oldest two interviewed. For 64-year-old Sarb, further discussed in chapter five, it was a single occurrence from a few years ago, after her husband's extended family moved in with them. For the twenty years of their marriage before her in-laws moved in, she and her husband had a few serious disagreements, but she never thought he would ever raise his hand on her. All of the arguments – according to her – were over sending money to the in-laws in India, before the in-laws eventually migrated to Canada and moved in with them. The 52-year-old, Darshi, now lives in a nuclear household arrangement, but she described the twenty-one years of living with her in-laws as 'hell' mainly because of her mother-in-law. Darshi experienced violence many times over from her husband during the years of living with her mother-in-law, but never after they started living in a nuclear arrangement. The third woman who is 40 years old, experienced violence on two separate occasions. She believed it be over issues of control and the husband feeling the threat of *behzti* or being dishonoured. This woman was in her first year of marriage and had a love marriage (rather than an arranged marriage). She claimed that she had reported her husband to the police the second time it happened, and that she had told him she would leave him if it ever happened again.

Nine of the women felt free to question decisions made by their husbands or elders in the household, although five women expressed concern about being labelled disrespectful for not displaying deference in front of the in-laws or other extended family members. These women would channel their concerns through their husbands, who would relay them on the women's behalf, or would voice their concerns themselves when they really believed that it was required or would make a difference.

All the women felt they could freely express their own opinions to their husbands as well as other family members.

### ***Freedom to participate in the community***

None of the women volunteered at religious events at the local temple because they were too busy with their households. All the women could attend or help at religious events but normally didn't for the same reason. None of the women had the desire to participate in political events, although they all believed they could if they wanted. All the women voted. All the women were involved in local community events, such as weddings or other celebrations or services in the community and helped out at functions of close friends and family with food and other arrangements.

### **3.3. Summary discussion**

Literature depicts Punjabi women to have what is seen as a lack of autonomy, meaning that they are thought to have relatively little freedom to make their own choices; yet, all the women in my study indicate some autonomy in at least one or more of the dimensions of autonomy – family decisions, household economic decisions, freedom from violence and community involvement. The data indicates that Punjabi women have varying levels of different dimensions of autonomy; however, all the women do appear to have some autonomy in at least one of the different dimensions.

“Autonomy” however, is not a coherent concept. How these women understand autonomy might not be the same as how I or other researchers conceptualize it. This affects the women's self-perception of their own autonomy and how they explain their perception to me. In addition, as some decisions have greater importance than others, as they have greater consequences for the women's lives, some dimensions which indicate autonomy for some women, may not be as important for them as other dimensions in which they have little to no autonomy. Consequently, the dimensions that might depict a woman to have autonomy on paper, might be meaningless for the woman, and for researchers and policy makers, if they bear no importance to the

women. Yet, these inconsistencies are not accounted for in any of the indicators or measures used in the dimensions of autonomy, which have been conceptualized and operationalized using research previously done by many scholars.

What the survey has shown, through my attempt to organize and portray these women in the variables of “not involved”, “involved” and “equally involved” and the subsequent attempt to understand where these women would position on the spectrum of ‘low’ to ‘high’ autonomy, is that autonomy is really very messy and difficult to understand because there is so much variation and inconsistencies in how these women perceive their own autonomy. Women cannot simply be labelled with a measure indicating they have ‘low’, ‘medium’ or ‘high’ autonomy. For instance, how do women who claim to have experienced violence and are intimidated and subjugated by their husbands, but also claim to have an equal say in matters of family planning, feel autonomous? In this context, what does being fully involved in family planning actually mean to these women, and to what extent was their actual involvement in these matters really? The four dimensions of autonomy used in the study, derived from existing literature, do not capture these details, which indicates that the results in the survey may in fact be misleading.

South Asian literature indicates women opt for private forms of empowerment where they are more able to influence outcomes in their favour more discreetly, which in essence provides them with more autonomy than might be initially evident. These private forms of empowerment, through informal decision-making, retain intact the image and honour of the traditional decision-maker, who is often the husband. Consequently, the informal decision-making agency that women often exercise is not visible in statistical perspectives (Kabeer, 1999, pg. 447) because women may not convey as much in response to surveys, and researchers may ask questions which are inadequate as indicators and measures of autonomy. It is possible that the women conveyed their equal involvement in family planning decisions, a very private matter, to me because I was able to relate to them as a Punjabi women, also as a wife of a (former)

truck driver. Or, it could be that because of that reason, they overcompensated their involvement to show that they did in fact have some control over their lives. As the next two chapters aim to explain, expressions and experiences of autonomy are very messy, nuanced and inconsistent, especially in Punjab. I draw attention to the severe limitations of attempts to compress perceptions and experiences of autonomy into quantitative measures – which is what is attempted in much existing research.

The women in BC to a greater extent appear to have the ability to determine the course of their lives. On average, women enjoy more decision-making power in family decisions, household economic decisions, are more willing to freely express their own opinions, and are more involved in the community and have the ability to go about on their own, than the women in Punjab. But it is important to note that, nonetheless, many women in BC, regardless of their age, still feel intimidated about questioning elders, because of the fear of being perceived as disrespectful. Three women have experienced violence, and although they know that they have options for help (calling trustworthy authorities, requesting legal assistance in filing for divorce or financial assistance through various programs) only two women expressed that they would pursue those options if the need came to be. Unfortunately, these options are not available to the same extent, if at all, in Punjab, as all five of the women who experienced violence felt “stuck”, “helpless” and “without options”.

## Chapter 4.

### Women's autonomy in Punjab

#### 4.1. Truck driver families in Punjab

The women in my sample from truck driving households in Punjab are from rural villages in the outskirts of the main city of Jalandhar. Their husband's truck driving income is the primary source of livelihood for the family, except for one family where the husband's *Chacha*, uncle, is the notary of the village. In this household, his income is the primary economic source. Additionally, in this household, the husband keeps his own income and other than occasional grocery items, he does not financially contribute to the household.

Fourteen of the families own land which is used for agricultural purposes by other members, generally men, of the household. The family farm provides grains, vegetables and dairy for subsistence, but for most families, the production is not substantial enough to generate enough income to sustain the household. In the husband's absence, the household and farm chores are divided by gender amongst the family members, where women are responsible for meal preparation, cooking, cleaning and often help with milking the cows and buffaloes, and other family men tend the fields and provide fodder for the animals.

Literature suggests that Punjabi men and women have predefined roles that normally are not interchangeable, yet in my study, I find that more than fifty per cent of the women interviewed assume the role of their husbands in their absence. Literature also suggests that men are typically considered the 'head' of the household and are involved in wage work and provide for the family. They also represent the family in the community and public at large, and in legal, commercial or religious transactions, and women provide emotional and social support and manage most of the housework

chores and child rearing (Gill & Matthews, 1995). In the husband's absence, fieldwork is normally handed off to other men in the family or is leased out. However, in some nuclear households, and in households with extended family members where the wife of the truck driver is the oldest person left in the household, the wife *will* step in and assume her husband's household duties of representing him in the community and the public at large.

In my study, eight out of seventeen women claim to be joint 'heads' of the household with their husband, and four of these women live in nuclear households. An additional woman claims to be the head of her household and she lives with her husband, son and his family. Even women who claim to be joint heads of the household with their husbands, still portray their husbands as the 'head' outside of the family home in the community because it is "just the way it is." However, when the husband is away, these women assume the husband's position in the community, in legal transactions, and in religious events. This is significant because Punjabi women are presumed to be homebound with limited mobility to preserve their reputation and chastity from other males in *purdah* (Gill & Matthews, 1995; Saiyid, 1998; Mooney, 2005) and men are "focal in most cultural spaces, and certainly those in the public realm" (Mooney, 2020, pg. 11). For a woman to be present in the place of her husband in the public realm and represent the family is important in and of itself because it represents change – in conjugal role relationships and in social norms. Furthermore, and importantly, it appears that Punjabi society has accepted these women fulfilling the part that has come because of the change in gender role.

The women shared experiences of engaging in formal conversation with other men at community and religious events. The other men, sometimes extended family or family acquaintances inquired about their husbands and when they could be expected to return from work and made other general small talk. This 'small talk' is meaningful because it occurs in public, despite the observations and 'surveillance' by others in the community, normally other women who believe it is their job to uphold a household's

and man's *izzat* (Mooney 2010, 2011) by way of monitoring women's movement and dealings with other men, and in women's mannerisms and use of body language. Older women especially, enjoy making their rounds around the village and sharing what they perceive to be 'juicy gossip' especially (and unfortunately) if it involves other women – I have witnessed this myself, in addition to hearing it about it from the younger women interviewed. However, the men engaging in the talk must also be aware of these social norms as the general small talk they engage in is what is perceived by the women, and society, to be 'appropriate'. If someone were to overhear their conversation, the conversation would be deemed proper because it is about legitimate topics. If they engaged in deeper discussions, the women especially might be perceived as 'inappropriate'. This indicates that although social norms in this respect might be changing, albeit very slowly, there remain very real structural constraints, about what are "appropriate" or "legitimate" topics of conversation, that limit women's autonomy.

In Punjab, 45-year-old Paramjit represents this conjugal role switch when her husband is away. She has a grade 10 education, her in-laws have passed, and there are no elders in the household who could otherwise assume these duties. She fulfills several duties that normally would be attended to by either her husband or them both as a couple, for instance religious services, weddings and funerals. She does have a younger brother-in-law who is a part of the household, but because she is the eldest in the family and her brother-in-law is usually busy with the family farm, she attends on his behalf. Her husband can be away from three to six weeks, and in his absence, she ensures that the family is represented at these occasions.

Paramjit declares herself to be equally involved in all family and household economic decisions, and often makes these decisions on her husband's behalf independently in his absence; however not major economic decisions, like purchasing a new tractor. Her husband normally makes those decisions with his younger brother. Yet, Paramjit was one of the women who declared herself to be an equal head of the household with her husband. The disconnect between her declaring herself the head of

the household and not being involved in major purchases such as tractors, could be because of some or all of the following: Paramjit is not as familiar with farming needs and requirements as her brother-in-law who is the major care-taker of the farm; or because she wants to portray her husband's image as the major decision-maker in roles that are perceived as traditionally 'male' in the community and maintain the working relationship with her brother-in-law, which ultimately helps her and her husband; or that her husband contended with issues of breadwinning and traditional work, such as providing sustenance from the land, while on the road, similar to what some drivers experience in North America (Zvonkovic et al., 2005) and to help him feel more connected to household needs in his absence.

Paramjit has a good, open relationship with her husband which is free from violence, dominance and intimidation. She is also involved in the community to the extent of her liking and does not need permission to leave the house. Paramjit appears to be quite autonomous in all four of the dimensions, yet when her husband returns from work, he resumes his position as the authority of the household and in the community. While he is home, Paramjit normally joins him in community celebrations and neighbourhood events and assumes more household duties to help her younger sister-in-law.

There are some truck driver wives who do not assume their husband's role in their absence; if and when they do, it will be on a rare occasion. Most of these women either have a poor relationship with their husband and or live with the husband's extended family from which another male, or the eldest female assumes the role as the head of the household. In these households, the autonomy of the truck driver's wife is not significantly impacted, or more likely, is negatively impacted in the husband's absence, if there are constrained relations in the household between the wife and other members in the family.

Ranjit is 50 years of age and also has a grade 10 education. She lives with her husband and son. She only steps out of the home for specific events in his absence,

events that are normally discussed with her husband beforehand. During these events, Ranjit's autonomy is temporarily increased because she becomes her husband's delegate for work considered to be of an urgent nature or that is typically performed by her husband, including making decisions on his behalf or representing him in the public. These situations are not a normal occurrence - for instance, making a down payment for a land deal.

One time, Ranjit's husband called her while he was away for work because he wanted to purchase some land a few houses down from their current home, an opportunity which he had been made aware of while he was on the road, by one of his friends. Since he believed the land would sell quickly, he didn't want to wait to act on the opportunity when he returned, and therefore advised Ranjit to go and give the previous owner a large sum of money that was to be used for the down payment. He also told her to take her nephew, who lived nearby, for 'support' so she would not have to go alone. Having someone from the family accompany a woman is a common occurrence in Punjab because it removes the chances of rumors or allegations surfacing about the woman being out and about without purpose, which might ruin the woman's, her husband's, or his family's honor and reputation. As a result, women can feel more confined to the home in the extended absences of their husbands. Regardless, although the decision to purchase the land was solely made by her husband, in his absence, Ranjit was responsible for making an important transaction involving a large sum of money on behalf of the family, with another man, a rare situation that may have superficially and ephemerally empowered her.

Although older women generally lose the fear of their reputation being maligned and have increased freedom of movement, some women remain more confined based on the relationship with the husband. Ranjit hardly ever steps out of her home without reason because her husband has accused her of having affairs in the past while he is away for work. On a day to day basis, the only time she leaves unaccompanied and without having to ask his permission to go, is if the vegetable seller is making his rounds

outside of her door, or to go to the village *gurdwara*, the local Sikh temple. When she does leave, she always ensures that she has her phone, so she doesn't miss her husband's call, if he calls at all. Ranjit's relationship with her husband was less than ideal since their (arranged) marriage but grew miserable after he started making accusations against her. He "only talks to me when he's drunk or if he needs something... like a glass of water. Sometimes he gets it himself." In the past, her husband had been physically abusive towards her on a number of occasions, but as her son grew older, the beatings stopped.

Yet, Ranjit's autonomy has improved in some respects more permanently. Her in-laws passed about seven years ago and Ranjit finds the days pass a bit more easily since her mother-in-law, in particular, has been gone. The mother-in-law would go to odd lengths to ensure that Ranjit kept working on household chores without pause. She never consulted with Ranjit on any decisions big or small while her husband was away for a month at a time. All groceries, household items, even clothes for Ranjit's son, were selected by her mother-in-law. She used to say, "use whatever is in the household [referring to groceries], there is no need for other things." Since then, Ranjit can make household decisions about the meals she wants to prepare and the clothes she wants to purchase for herself, and about infrequently required small and medium household items, such as linens, tableware, etc. Her husband normally accompanies her to purchase these items or sends along their nephew or son. He also gives her a monthly allowance for such household expenses including groceries which she claims, 'is enough'.

In extended families, if the wives of the truck drivers are younger, they will often visit their natal families while their husbands are away. Some of these younger women prefer to stay home so their young children can play with their cousins, who also live in the household. Two of the women, Jasmine and Zoya, who are sisters and sisters-in-law, prefer to stay at their marital home while their husbands are away because the time spent with their husbands' large extended family is more enjoyable compared to the

environment at their natal home. When the husband is home, he generally divides his time between helping with farm chores and spending time with his wife, children and the rest of his family.

The husband's absences do not appear to make a permanent impact on women's autonomy because there does not appear to be much change in the level of the women's autonomy after the husbands return. In the husband's absence, the women who appear to be more autonomous across the different dimensions, do appear to experience more freedoms in their husband's absence, such as Paramjit. The women who appear to be less autonomous across the different dimensions, may also experience increased autonomy in some dimensions. However, the increased autonomy is only on a *temporary and ephemeral basis*. Their autonomy does not appear to last or impact them on a more permanent basis, and the women resume their 'normal' levels of autonomy upon the return of their husbands.

Through the personal experiences of seventeen women from Punjab, the rest of this chapter explains how nuanced autonomy can be. Autonomy is not a coherent concept, and this becomes clear in how women report their perceptions and experiences of autonomy to a researcher. The chapter importantly illustrates how misleading readings of survey data may be. The levels of women's autonomy, which can appear quite similar in the survey data, can actually be very different due to a multitude of other factors such as a difference in age and past experiences, a difference in the quality of marital and household relations, a difference in the woman's or her husband's position in the family hierarchy or even just a difference in personality. These causal relations need to be understood with more nuance, as this chapter will attempt to explain.

## **4.2. The impact of family relations on women's autonomy in Punjab**

As women age and acquire daughters-in-law, they climb the hierarchy in the family structure and gain autonomy as well as authority over more junior members

(Dyson & Moore, 1983; Gill & Matthews, 1995, Sabherwal, 2014). In households with multiple women, the eldest female will generally have the most autonomy (Bloom, Wypij & Das Gupta, 2001). If she is the youngest in the household, she will generally have the least autonomy (Bloom, Wypij & Das Gupta, 2001). The nature of women's relationships, with each other and with men in the household, are directly related to the husband's position in the family hierarchy (Bloom, Wypij & Das Gupta, 2001). It appears that these causal relations need to be understood with more nuance. As the experiences of Punjabi women from Punjab show, there are always exceptions to the rule.

#### **4.2.1. Sarabjit – The power of personality**

Studies suggest that women living in joint families are more oppressed than women living in nuclear families (Dyson & Moore, 1983; Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Mooney, 2005; Khan, 2014). Yet, as evident in the case of Sarabjit, this is not always so.

Sarabjit is a 45-year-old woman from Punjab who has a grade five education (half of Paramjit's level of education who is also 45, but the same level as another woman of the same age), yet, the manner in which she presents herself could deceive one of her lack of formal education. Her personality conveys confidence, charisma and social awareness.

When asked about her background and why she didn't pursue further education, she laughed and said, "I was more interested in skipping school and swimming in the *nehar* (small rivers) with my brothers." Her parents had always encouraged education to her and her brothers, but she explained that "...in those times, girls weren't going to do anything with their education. The end result [marriage] was going to be the same, girls

just stayed [in their married] home... Nowadays, it's different... girls apply for IELTS<sup>6</sup> [and go abroad] or start working..."

At 18 years of age, she had an arranged marriage with her husband, who she learnt that she had to marry a week before the actual wedding. As was the social norm at the time, she met her husband for the first time on the day of their wedding. Their relationship is built on honesty, trust and respect, and according to her, they are equal partners in every aspect of life. She and her husband are actively involved with the local *gurdwara* (Sikh temple) in the village and with the community in general. She gets involved in local elections and campaign rallies and gives small scale political speeches to support "whoever is worthy of being supported... because everyone should be given a chance and if the previous people didn't resolve *pind* (village) issues, then someone else should be given the opportunity to fix it." When her husband is away, she attends campaign events by herself and often gets involved in door to door campaigning. Perhaps due to her own and her husband's faith in Sikhism, they uphold the egalitarian values of the religion and treat each with equality.

It is also quite possible that the values of equality and ways of being that she learned from her natal family have stayed with her after marriage. Either way, Sarabjit appears to have maintained a high level of autonomy across all four dimensions after marriage, even while living with her mother-in-law. She is equally involved in family decisions, household economic decisions, lives free from violence, intimidation and subjugation, and is free to participate within the community. Even while her mother-in-law was alive, Sarabjit claimed to be an equal decision maker in her family. If she didn't agree with something or felt wronged in any way, she would say so, even if it meant that her husband or mother-in-law might be upset, frustrated or angry with her at times. Her ability to speak her mind, equal ability to make family and economic decisions, association with the *gurdwara* and participation in the community indicate a

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<sup>6</sup> IELTS is the International English Language Testing System which a majority of new graduates, male and female, in Punjab are applying for in hopes of going abroad to countries considered to be a part of the global north, like Canada, US, Australia, etc.

relatively high level of autonomy even though she doesn't have very much in the way of formal education.

While it is possible that she intrinsically absorbed the importance of changing norms and expectations about gender roles and gender equality in her tender childhood and primary years of education, these important gains of education were likely learnt through informal education, taught by parents who raised her as an equal to her brothers. The norms and values that she learned in her upbringing likely had a substantial effect on shaping her personality and her current views on her place in her household and the community.

#### **4.2.2. Charn Kaur – Change from extended to nuclear family**

Charn Kaur was 19 years old when she married into her husband's family thirty-seven years ago. Like Sarabjit, she too was raised by parents who treated her and her brother as equals, and claimed that in fact, she was the '*laadli*' or the favourite, doted upon child. She married into a household that, at the time, consisted of an old-fashioned father-in-law, a kind and caring mother-in-law, and a younger brother-in-law. Her husband started driving a truck shortly after their marriage and would remain out of the house for six to seven months at a time. This was at a time when cell phones were not commonly available. In her husband's absence, the in-laws were the main decision-makers in the family, but her mother-in-law would consult with her on some household matters, for instance purchasing wedding gifts or clothes and would take Charn Kaur to the market with her. When her husband was home, she was able to 'get her way' more because she would relay her concerns through him.

Although her father-in-law was old-fashioned, he didn't want her to partake in the common tradition of '*khund*' (covering the face with a veil), because "how was she supposed to get anything done if her *dupatta* (veil) was constantly hanging in her face?" However, he also didn't want her to watch television while he was there, despite the rest of family enjoying the shows. So, one day, when she was visiting her maternal

home, she demanded her parents gift her a television, and they did. When she brought it home, her father-in-law was pleased because it was another asset for the household. He did not mind if she watched it in her own room, he just did not want her sitting and watching with him as that was seen to be 'not proper'.

Charn Kaur grew accustomed to her new world, but then it changed. Charn Kaur's family experienced new additions as well as losses to their family, which led to a change in their household living arrangements, but also increased Charn Kaur's autonomy across all dimensions. Charn Kaur's family built another home closer to their fields, into which her younger brother-in-law moved in with his new family after his marriage. Over time, and three grandchildren later, the mother-in-law passed, and the father-in-law moved in with his younger son. Although Charn Kaur was always the main decision maker for concerns relating to her children, which helped increase her autonomy, she assumed equal responsibility over all family and household economic matters – and the freedom to do as she pleased – when she became the eldest female in the household.

Nowadays, at age 56, she 'does whatever she wants.' She explained that she recently bought a new washing machine because the previous one made her back ache when she pulled the wet clothes from the bottom of the barrel. She also laughed and mentioned that her husband had initially hummed and hawed about the large expense, but then was fine. When asked about her relationship with her husband, she describes a companionship. "We don't have the same outlook, but everything else is fine", further elaborating that they didn't really have a chance to develop their relationship when they were younger because her husband was always on the road. For the last couple of years, he goes on shorter trips and is home more often, but she has realized that they have different interests and little in common. Although she has the trust and respect of her husband and has become an equal partner in household affairs and decision-making, she wishes she had had the chance to spend more time with him when they were

younger, so they could have built a stronger, closer relationship with shared thoughts and interests.

Although she has a similar background and was raised with similar values as Sarabjit and a slightly higher level of education, her autonomy in most dimensions appears to have been restrained after her marriage. This could be due to a number of aspects including her father-in-law's patriarchal influence in the household, a difference in Charn Kaur's personality, or a difference in the personality of others towards Charn Kaur. It is difficult to define or measure the extent of the influence an authority figure has on an individual's persona or behaviour. However, it appears that moving from an extended family to a nuclear one, increased Charn Kaur's involvement in family decisions, household economic resources, and increased her community involvement. There is also no one to intimidate or subjugate her under their authority which allows her to openly and freely speak her mind with her husband.

#### **4.2.3. Manpreet – Navigating terrible family relations and a husband's perception of *behzti***

Social cleavages and often simple benightedness drive some household members to manipulate other family members against the wife. Manpreet had a wonderful relationship with her husband before everything drastically changed. A few years ago, her husband gave 6,00,000 rupees (about 10,000 USD) to her maternal family because her brother was getting married, and he wanted to help her parents, whom he very much respected. He made this decision on his own accord and didn't share it with his family: his mother, brother and brother's wife. Manpreet's husband is the family's main income earner and his family thought that her parents might convince him to leave them and live in a nuclear household with Manpreet and their children, and no longer provide for them. Since then, her husband's family has consistently advised him to leave and divorce her. Her mother-in-law stopped giving milk to her children and said they are not her kin. She also tried to convince her husband that they're not his children. The

husband started doubting Manpreet and started believing his family and their numerous accusations. Since then, her life has been very difficult.

Manpreet recalled one particularly horrible evening: “It was a dark and stormy night. My daughter was just 15 days old. One of the young farm helpers accidentally caused the wires to melt at the motor [on the farm] and my sister-in-law went and said something to my husband [essentially blaming Manpreet]. My husband came in and fought with me. He was drunk and kicked me out of the house and locked the door. He said he would beat anyone who opened the door. I was locked out for the whole night in the rain. My breast milk was leaking because my baby daughter was crying in hunger.”

Manpreet believes that, “you should take care of your parents, I'm not saying that you shouldn't. But the thinking here [in India], for some people, is that parents are everything. The siblings are important, but the position of the wife is considered nothing.”

Unfortunately, patriarchal traditions are systemic and have displaced the value of women in some households. It is common to hear the Punjabi population in Punjab preach about their ‘modern’ values and the need for equal education for boys and girls, yet the reality in many households is quite different. If Manpreet’s husband was not a truck driver, perhaps he would have been home more often to see the poor treatment of his wife and children before it became a problem. It is possible that his being a truck driver amplified the effects of poor family relations on Manpreet’s autonomy<sup>7</sup>.

After Manpreet’s husband started driving on longer routes and would be away for a month or so at time, Manpreet moved into their farmhouse with her children. Since then, she has found it a bit easier to manage on a day to day basis because she

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<sup>7</sup> I provided Manpreet with the contact number of the Chairperson of the Punjab State Women’s Commission (who I was scheduled to meet but was unable to due to scheduling restrictions) as part of their mandate is to “inquire into unfair practices affecting women and for the matters connected therewith or incidental thereto” (Punjab Act No. 4 of 2001).

doesn't need to face her in-laws and is able to make her own decisions about what to eat, where to purchase food from and going outside of the home on her own will. She has a scooter and can run her own errands or visit her aging parents. Her now teenaged children help her around the house and with chores. Although they have access to food and dairy through their family farm, Manpreet is ultimately dependent on her husband's income for the children's school fees and other expenses. Sometimes her husband provides her with some money, but sometimes he doesn't and gives it to his mother. She is structurally powerless because she has no independent earning power or ownership of property. She feels at age 38 and with her grade 8 education<sup>8</sup> she is unable to get any type of meaningful job that could provide for her and her children, so is unable to leave him. She thinks her husband could 'come around' if her in-laws stopped interfering and hopes he will in the near future.

Perhaps if Manpreet's parents had been able to access funds such as a loan, she may have been able to further her education which may or may not have provided her with more options career wise. However, unless an individual has some collateral in the form of land or other significant assets, it is very difficult for the poor to secure a loan. Her parents did however, according to Manpreet, raise her and her brother as equals and tried to educate them to the financial extent that they could. Possibly it is these values and what she learnt at school as an eager student that have encouraged her to defend herself against her mother-in-law, brother-in-law and sister-in-law, and even her husband when they accused her. But, there is power in numbers and she is alone. Manpreet feels more encouraged lately because her daughter who is now a young teenager is assertive and openly defends her mother if her father wrongfully blames her for something.

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<sup>8</sup> She wanted to further her education, but her parents were financially unable to continue her tuition fees.

#### 4.2.4. Surjit – The conditional affects of family relations on education

Autonomy is fluid and contextual. Most of the women recall having many freedoms in their natal homes in the years before their marriage. The older women recalled providing input for the food for the day, helping their mothers or elders select household goods from the cyclist who would make rounds around the village, and even providing input into what was considered large purchases back then, like the purchase of a scooter. They were also more free to play with other boys and girls from their village, as “in those days, it was more innocent” and “all the children played together”. They were also given spending money (to the extent that it was available) to buy treats and small personal items at local fairs while in place. The younger women provided accounts of having decision-making power in most family and household affairs, even in major decisions such as household renovations and the purchase of new scooters or vehicles, access to economic resources (to the extent they were available in the family) to purchase personal items for themselves, the freedom to speak their mind while being mindful of elders, and to some extent, the ability to visit their neighbours and go to the local temple.

Many of the women described premarital life as ‘*mauja hi mauji*’, a common phrase that literally means, ‘enjoyment after enjoyment’ but in this context also means “without worries”. Most of the women went from this sort of lifestyle in their natal homes to figuring out their place and position in their marital homes, with men that fifteen of the women (who had arranged marriages) barely knew. After marriage, women can experience barriers to autonomy, across some or all dimensions, earlier in their marriage, but over time as family relations and or living arrangements change – and consequently their position within the family – so can the effects of education on their autonomy.

In Punjab, younger women who have a more ‘modern’ outlook because of their higher levels of education and experienced ample autonomy in their natal homes sometimes find themselves in what to them is an oppressive climate while living in a

joint family with their husbands' kin, even when they choose their own husband. Surjit is a 25-year-old housewife and met her husband through social media. She is one of the two women who had a love marriage at the age of 23 (everyone else interviewed had an arranged marriage). In search of more positive relationships, love marriages (frequently orchestrated to look like arranged marriages<sup>9</sup>) are becoming increasingly common with the younger generation; however, arranged marriages are still the norm and tradition in Punjab. Surjit had a love marriage that was orchestrated to look like an arranged marriage<sup>10</sup>. She has a bachelor's degree in computer applications which she obtained from two different universities, one in Punjab and the other in Chandigarh. She lived on campus at both schools and made all of her own decisions, was provided funds by her family when needed and was free to go as she pleased. Her husband completed his plus 2 (equivalent to high school graduate) at the local village school.

After marriage, Surjit found employment as an elementary school teacher at a local private school because she wanted the experience to build her resume, in order to go abroad as a nanny. Both Surjit and her husband dream of joining other family members abroad, in Canada, Australia or England. They have both tried, separately and together, to apply for different visas that would permit them to leave the country, but so far it hasn't worked. Surjit eventually convinced her husband, who was unemployed at the time of their marriage, to start working. He now drives a taxi for one of the newer hotels in Jalandhar city and takes tourists on short and long trips to Delhi, Shimla, Rajasthan and other popular travel destinations<sup>11</sup>. After her husband started working,

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<sup>9</sup> An arranged marriage is a marital union of a bride and groom who are selected for each other by individuals other than the couple themselves, often relatives or friends. A love marriage is a marriage which is solely decided upon by the couple, as opposed to an arranged marriage.

<sup>10</sup> Love marriages orchestrated to look like arranged marriages are arranged for the family to save face in front of extended family and the community by 'showing' their son or daughter are within parental control and are obedient and respectful children. These weddings are becoming the norm for the younger generation.

<sup>11</sup> Surjit's husband, a long-distance taxi-driver, was included in my study because his work is very similar to that of truck drivers, in that he is gone from home for extended periods on a regular basis and is required to drive at all hours of day and night. The difference is that truck drivers

Surjit quit her job. According to Surjit, she quit teaching for the following reasons: 1) after her husband got a job, he wasn't available to drop her off and pick her up from work anymore and she was not keen on taking public transport because of its inconvenience, 2) her husband felt public transportation was below his family's social position but also unsafe for young women, and 3) she found out that she was expecting. Although she indicated the decision to quit was hers, it is likely that it was influenced by her husband's perception of public transport.

Her husband's income<sup>12</sup> is enough to let them lead a lifestyle they enjoy. When her husband is home, they go out to eat, go to the movies or go shopping wherever they like, because her husband gets to keep the company car even while he's home. Since he started earning an income, they don't need to ask anyone for money and feel much more independent. Inside their marriage, Surjit makes most decisions concerning their finances, and is an equal decision-maker in personal matters, including what to purchase, where to eat, what to watch in the theatre, etc. However, Surjit and her husband live with his extended family, and in larger family matters and decisions, neither of them has much say in important household decisions.

In the family home there are her in-laws, her husband's *Chacha* (father-in-law's younger brother), who is the village *lumbardar* (notary), and *Chachi* (father-in-law's younger brother's wife), and their recently married son (but not his wife, as she is in Canada and is in the process of sponsoring her husband to join her in Canada) and her husband's grandmother, *Bibi*. Although Surjit and her husband make all decisions concerning themselves together, *Chacha*<sup>13</sup> and *Bibi* make all household decisions<sup>14</sup>. For

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haul cargo and he carry's passengers, likely requiring him to be more focused and alert to dangers on the road.

<sup>12</sup> He keeps his work income and does not contribute financially to the household.

<sup>13</sup> In households with more than one son, if one brother has a higher level of education or is in a position of power because of his work, that brother often assumes more authority and power in the household, even if he is the younger brother.

<sup>14</sup> Although as *Bibi* is getting quite old, *Chacha* will still run all decisions by *Bibi*, out of respect, and then ultimately make many decisions on his own. For instance, whenever a crop is sold at

instance, wedding preparations for the recent marriage in the family included renovations to the kitchen and bathroom and new paint in some parts of the family home. At the time, Surjit's husband requested their room to also be painted, but were refused by *Chacha* because it would become "too costly".

Surjit finds this challenging as she grew up in a household where she was consulted on most household matters. She is the only girl at her maternal home and normally got her way with her parents, her *Bibi* and two brothers. Surjit finds it difficult to pass time in her husbands' absence because *Bibi* and *Chacha* are passive aggressive towards her. They are quick to convey negative commentary on food she makes, the clothes she wears and her lifestyle habits, for instance sleeping in, even though she has nowhere to go. What bothers her the most is their remarks about her father, accusing her of being arrogant about his work (he is employed in Punjab's public service, a government position). Her father hardly ever visits her at her marital home and has only ever shown kindness towards her in-laws, so Surjit finds it very frustrating that they use him to irritate her. If Surjit knows beforehand that her husband will be gone for a few days, she will often arrange to stay at her parent's house for those days.

Perhaps in frustration with their treatment of her, Surjit's husband, likely with some persuasion from Surjit, asked his parents to speak to *Bibi* and *Chacha* about building a separate home on their unused land across from the house. It is possible that Surjit's expectations about autonomy (at least partly a result of her education) resulted in her being more proactive about asking for more, and then, also getting more; however, it is also possible that her husband and his parents felt the need for more space due to their expanding family. After much discussion and *Bibi* and *Chacha's* disappointment, his family agreed. Now, Surjit and her husband are building their new *koti*, a modern type of home made of cement, tiles, etc. that is being paid for by the

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the mandi (the market), *Chacha* always deposits the income from the sale into *Bibi's* lap, before explaining all of the expenses that were required for the crop, and asking for most, if not all, of the money back.

family's account. His parents will stay with her on the nights that their son is working out of the home, so Surjit will not be alone.

After two years of feeling like she had less autonomy, Surjit is now at the verge of regaining some autonomy as one of the main decision-makers in what is becoming her new home. In the two years after her marriage she lost some of her autonomy because of the constrained family relationships within her new household and the lack of decision-making power that she (and her husband) held, and from being more confined to the household (unless her husband was present). It is possible that she felt she had to 'sacrifice' her career due to social pressures, as her husband felt it was 'below' their social position to use public transportation but also because he felt it was unsafe, and perhaps because she was expecting, that it was not safe or becoming for a pregnant woman to be out and about without her husband. Yet, Surjit's main reason for working was to gain experience which would help her leave the country, not because she wanted to make teaching a career in Punjab. She believes there are "...no suitable jobs in Punjab. The jobs that are desirable and do become available are impossible to obtain because you have to work through layers of corruption to get through, and the only way of getting an application in is if you know someone in the inside. That's why everyone wants to leave Punjab, there is no future here." It is possible that Surjit's search for 'suitable jobs' is geographically restricted to parameters that are in close proximity to her husband's village, due to reasons similar to those guiding her decision to quit her current job. Or, it could be that she too is genuinely having a difficult time finding decent work, as are millions of other graduates across India.

It is difficult to determine whether she felt oppressed because she was no longer working outside of the home or felt oppressed, possibly more so than other Punjabi truck-driving housewives because despite having a higher level of education, she was ultimately confined to the home while her husband was away. Regardless, her level of education likely was a key factor in helping her obtain the teaching position and what

allowed her to qualify for IELTS in the first place which could offer the possibility of an alternative future abroad, even though she has not been successful with it thus far.

Positive family relations, with the husband and with extended family members can make a significant difference on the level of women's autonomy, across all dimensions. Positive relations, such that Surjit experienced in her natal home, and with her husband, provide women with household decision-making power; access to economic resources (if they are available); freedom from violence, intimidation or subjugation; and the ability to go to particular locations alone and without consent.

However, and importantly, Surjit is not one of the women who claimed to be the 'head' of the household, nor did she claim to be equally involved with all family and household economic decisions. So, through the four dimensions of autonomy used in the survey, Surjit would appear to have autonomy that is in the 'medium' range. Yet, she clearly has more autonomy across all dimensions, than many of the other women who claimed in the survey to be equally involved in the above decisions and those who claimed to be heads of the household. This inconsistency draws attention to the severe limitations of attempts to compress perceptions and experiences of autonomy into discrete, quantitative measures which do not reflect women's lived experiences – which is very much the case in much existing research.

#### **4.2.5. Jasmine, Zoya and Sultana – The youngest does not always have the least autonomy**

The marital relations of many Punjabi women are similar to ideal western perceptions of marriage based on love, even though they have arranged marriages. Twenty-five-year-old Jasmine had an arranged marriage at the age of eighteen and is very much in love with her husband. She has a grade 10 education, the highest of her siblings. She is the youngest of four daughters-in-law in her household and the youngest child in her maternal home. Her husband is also the youngest son in the family and the most educated of four brothers. They have two young children and despite having an

arranged marriage, are in a loving and respectful relationship. Jasmine feels very comfortable sharing everything with her husband, and they make all decisions concerning themselves and their children together.

However, Jasmine does not have direct access to resources through her husband's household or through her natal family and her only means of accessing money is sharing her husband's small allowance, when they are out together. She is also not consulted over household economic decisions by the family, but her husband is. If she feels strongly about the matter on hand, she will relay her concerns to him who will advocate on her behalf, which in a way increases her autonomy in family and household economic decision-making. Jasmine also mentioned that she did not need permission to go to their local place of worship while her husband was at work and that she 'just goes' when she feels like it. This is in contrast to what her older sisters-in-law said about their own mobility; they do not set foot outside of the household without permission from their husbands, mother-in-law or *Chachi*. It is possible that Jasmine has this additional freedom because of her relationship with her husband and, or because she feels that her older sister Zoya, who is also one of her older sisters-in-law and her *Chachi*, who is also her paternal aunt, will defend her if need be.

Jasmine's household consists of three other families (her husband's brothers and their families), her parents-in-law and her husband's *Chacha* and *Chachi*. The *Chachi* is also her father's sister. Furthermore, her sister Zoya is married to her husband's second oldest brother, who is also a truck driver. However, Zoya appears to have less autonomy than Jasmine even though they have similar involvement in family decisions and very little involvement in household economic decisions, but she said that she always asks permission before leaving the household. In addition, Zoya's husband is not as close to the oldest brother – one of the main decision-makers – as Jasmine's husband is and isn't always asked his opinion in household affairs<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, even if Zoya expressed her

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<sup>15</sup> Although, by Zoya's account, he would rather be at work on the road or out in the fields than deal with financial business or other obligations within the household.

concerns to her husband, or wished to alter the outcome of certain decisions, the likelihood of her concerns being passed on to the older brother through her husband are slim with less chances of being heard than Jasmine's concerns.

The eldest brother and Jasmine's mother-in-law are the main decision-makers in the family. Jasmine's husband is quite close to his oldest brother and will provide input into decisions whenever he feels is appropriate. The family is in the process of building three new *kotis* (modern homes made of concrete) on their land, in the next lane from the main house and next to each other, and each brother will soon have his own home. Jasmine didn't know which brother the in-laws would live with; however, it would likely be the eldest brother, as he and his mother make all important household decisions together. She is looking forward to the change because according to her, it would give her more privacy in the home, beyond her bedroom, but will miss everyone constantly being together.

Although Jasmine is less educated than Surjit, it is possible that she too, in private, persuaded her husband to speak to his older brother, the main decision-maker, about building separate homes, likely with the understanding that a separate home for her nuclear family would provide her with increased autonomy across all dimensions. It's also possible that the family felt the need for more space due to their large extended family and growing children and hence started construction on three new homes.

The oldest brother, who is the main decision-maker in the household along with his mother, is also a truck-driver, and his wife Sultana is the oldest daughter-in-law. She never attended school. Despite being the oldest daughter-in-law, she appears to have the least amount of autonomy of the three women mainly because of the poor relationship with her husband. She is afraid to question his decisions or provide her own opinions, and he has also beaten her in the past. Sultana has no access to money through her husband or through her natal family, as they do not have the means to provide it. Yet, she appears to have some say in family matters as the decision for the number of children she wanted to have was her's and her husband's, similar to the

situation with her younger sisters-in-law; the decision was solely theirs and their husbands. But other decisions concerning the children, such as where they would go to school, the purchase of their clothes and the purchase of Sultana's clothes are mostly taken by her mother-in-law.

Sultana appears to be a soft-spoken woman who speaks slowly and carefully, and yet when I went through the questions with her, the one response she conveyed with clear confidence was when I asked her about family planning. She confidently stated that it was her and her husband's decision for the number of children they wished to have. Across all dimensions, Sultana appears to have the least amount of autonomy of all the women interviewed. Yet, she claims to be equally involved with an important decision, one that other studies perceive to be more 'controversial' than other family decisions and is more equal in importance to, for instance, women's control over money (Agarwala & Lynch, 2006). Referring back to an earlier point, it is possible that Sultana has slightly more autonomy in private, which retains intact the public perception, honour, and the image of her controlling husband, but nevertheless increases her influence in private behind closed doors (Basu, 1996; Kabeer, 1997).

Most literature states that as women move up in the family hierarchy and other younger women move into the family, the elder women's position rises in status and that the oldest daughter-in-law enjoys more autonomy than the youngest (Bloom, Wypij & Das Gupta, 2001). The situation appears to be reversed in this household mainly due to the type of relationship the women have with their husband, but also likely because both Jasmine and her husband are the most educated in the household, and through her husband who shares a very good relationship with the eldest brother, they can influence the outcome and add value to important decisions.

The transformation in family configuration and household living arrangements will likely increase the autonomy of the three women soon to live in a nuclear arrangement. Jasmine, and to some extent Zoya, with her grade 7 schooling, may be able to reap more benefits of their education in a nuclear arrangement, which were

previously being cancelled out due to their extended household. The new configurations may positively or negatively affect the autonomy of the woman who gets placed with the mother-in-law, depending on their relationship. Likely, the woman who ends up living with the mother-in-law will be Sultana as her husband and his mother have a close relationship as the key decision-makers, resulting in even less autonomy for Sultana as she would likely be burdened with additional household duties, which are currently being shared with the other women.

It is important to note that all three of these women were raised in conservative homes where they were mostly told to stay quiet in front of male family members, stay indoors, and were not provided with further education as there was believed to be no need for it. Before marriage, they probably had similar levels of autonomy, as they do now. All three of them have low levels of autonomy in that none of them effectively has control over or access to economic resources, very little say in household matters directly, other than providing input into what to have for daily meals, and very little freedom to be out and about in the community, except for Jasmine. Although this may or may not change with their new family configuration, in the conceptualization of autonomy used in this study, all three women appear to have low autonomy, across all four dimensions.

### **4.3. The impact of social conditions on women's autonomy in Punjab**

As in Surjit's and Manpreet's case, women who seek employment in Punjab are often unable to find work where they feel safe, are fairly compensated and are considered to be in socially acceptable positions. The 2014 India Labour and Employment Report indicates over half of India's working population is below the \$2 per day poverty line (Rukmini, 2013). The report further finds that the incidence of poverty is higher among the employed than the unemployed due to low wages, and among workers poverty is highest for casual workers (Rukmini, 2013). The employment

situation has been deemed grave, if not a full-out crisis according to the most recent Periodic Labour Force Survey (Balakrishanan, 2019). Unemployment numbers rise steadily with the level of education and are higher still among women who are educated (Rukmini, 2013).

Some women do find suitable work, in which they believe they will be fulfilled, safe and fairly compensated, but are unable to attain it because of social norms. The next example illustrates this unfortunate incident.

#### **4.3.1. Wadana – The conditional affects of ‘backward’ social norms on education**

Some women push through multiple barriers in the social system and fight for their rights and increased autonomy. Wadana is the other woman in a love marriage, also an inter-caste marriage, which is still uncommon in Punjab. In India’s caste system, her husband’s caste is considered to be higher than her birth caste. She also lives with her in-laws, but she and her husband are the main decision makers in the family. Wadana and her husband met at college and fell in love. They married soon after but were unable to continue college as they could not afford tuition or the fees for Wadana’s weight-lifting training – she was the state and national gold medalist for weight-lifting in her weight category. Her husband has always been very supportive of her, including her entrepreneurial ideas (one of which was a tiffin service, where she would deliver tiffins on her motorcycle, but it didn’t prove to be cost effective, so she stopped). Lately, she has been leasing some space in the nearest market, where she operates the equivalent of a dollar store. She does this so she has a reason to get up, get dressed and go somewhere to pass time. She often feels disheartened and melancholy because she feels unfulfilled. She desires a government job where she can be respected and paid a decent salary, like most of her school classmates.

In the past she applied for a position with Punjab Police, where she was one of four thousand applicants, and was selected as one of the 22 required candidates.

However, she was unable to pay the requested bribe (in exchange for the post), and accordingly lost the chance at the position. She told the officials requesting the bribe that she would complain at the highest levels and take the complaint to Badal<sup>16</sup>. However, the officials just laughed and said part of the money was going to Badal himself. Nowadays, she passes time at the shop when her husband is at work on the road. She is waiting to be 'reborn'<sup>17</sup>, so she can start over and recreate the life that she was meant to have. She feels there are more options available now to garner support and raise funds, mainly through social media. "In other countries, if you have education, you can stand on your own two feet. In India, even if you have a master's degree, your in-laws will hold you back, or the 'system' will."

Although Wadana's education, sports abilities, determination and confident personality provide her with autonomy on all four dimensions, she feels helpless. Many women in Punjab who do have higher levels of education are unable to do anything with it because family relations or social norms, like corruption and the requirement to pay bribes in Wadana's case, prevent them from reaping the potential benefits of their education. In these cases, education and qualifications do not matter. Those who do break the traditional barriers, like Wadana, are held back by the corrupt 'system'<sup>18</sup>, which impacts their household economic situation, and ultimately their autonomy.

Women like Wadana are struggling to move up to the next level of the social, political and economic hierarchy, only to be sucked back into despair. Her situation is

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<sup>16</sup> Referring to Prakash Singh Badal, the Chief Minister of Punjab at the time.

<sup>17</sup> Many religions in India hold a belief in reincarnation.

<sup>18</sup> The 'system' refers to the Indian government and its institutions responsible for creating and delivering economic and social policies and their benefits to the people. Policies that address the provision of basic necessities of life such as education, health, nutrition and welfare for the people have been drawn up in Punjab and in India generally. Everywhere, however, the implementation of these policies remains a problem (Harriss, Jeffrey & Brown, 2020). The state of the delivery of these requirements, for the majority of India's population, is one of protracted adjournment. It is especially unfortunate for a democratic state to fail so miserably at providing these essential services to its people. In addition, when an already frail system is steeped with corruption at every possible level, it makes for a desperate situation. These failures of governance affect women the most.

not caused by a lack of autonomy, as she appears to have great autonomy on all four dimensions, especially compared to some of the other women in Punjab, but if she was earning her own substantial income, her autonomy would likely have increased. Wadana has been suppressed by the 'system'. First, when she wanted to continue her education, but was unable to because government assistance, student loans or otherwise, is not available for students. Banks only provide loans to people who already have money or assets and micro-finance options are not widely available. Second, and more frustratingly, Wadana could not 'afford' the highly coveted job offer, which would eventually provide her with money, despite being selected on merit and qualifications. She could not gather enough money to pay the corrupt officials the required bribe which unfortunately has become a social norm in Punjab and broader India.

Wadana is 45 years old and applied for the position at Punjab Police at age 34. Since then and for the rest of her life, she will live with knowing that she qualified for a position that would have significantly changed her and her children's future, but she did not get it because she did not have enough money. The effects of Wadana's education on her autonomy were canceled out by the social norm of having to pay the bribe. Despite having her education, she still could not get the job. Although Wadana has full autonomy across all four dimensions, she does not *feel* that she has autonomy because she is unable to access funds through other means, for instance through a loan. She feels a bit lost and helpless; but, these 'feelings' are not captured in the survey. It is perhaps for these reasons – and not just due to patriarchal norms which literature suggests requires women to stay in the household – that Punjab has the second lowest rate of female labour force participation across major states (Labour Bureau India, 2016). Had Wadana been in a different social context, for instance in BC, she would have had more options to obtain funds, and more importantly, she would not have had to pay a bribe in exchange for a job that she was offered.

#### **4.3.2. Jameela – A woman as the head of the household and owner of the land**

An early study conducted on the kinship system in Punjab found that there was no question of a woman owning land: “if she should insist on her right to inherit land equally under civil law, she would stand a good chance of being murdered” (Das Gupta, 1987). Although much time has passed since Das Gupta’s work, other more recent literature in the South Asian context suggests that due to patriarchy, men own all of the land and major assets. Even for this steadfast conviction, my study found an exception.

Jameela is the one woman who declares herself to be the head of her household and the legal owner of all significant financial assets in the household including the land and the house. She is one of the oldest women interviewed, and believes she is well over 65 years, but does not know how old exactly. She has no formal education and uses her thumbprint as her signature.

She said she had always made the decisions in the household and her husband did not, and that it had been that way from the start. Likely because the land is in her name, Jameela has decision-making authority in most family decisions and equal decision-making power in household economic decisions. She is able to come and go as she pleases and generally walks to the local temple on a daily basis. She does however, experience violence from her son, who lives in the family home with his family. Jameela also experiences intimidation and subjugation on a regular basis from her son and his wife. She said they do that because she will not transfer the property into his name. She is hesitant to ask her son to leave because he has two small children whom she loves very much and does not want to leave her grandchildren homeless. Jameela also fears that if she transfers the property into her son’s name, that he will immediately evict her daughter – who has been living with her two young daughters at Jameela’s house because of her violent husband – and send her back to her abusive husband.

In major household decisions, Jameela has the most autonomy of all the women interviewed, as she alone has full control of economic resources. However, she

experiences emotional abuse regularly and sometimes even violence. She has the power to correct the situation, for instance by evicting her son and his family, but she is emotionally caught in a difficult place because her son and daughter-in-law are unemployed and have no financial means to support themselves or importantly, their children, if they left the house.

If Jameela had been educated, it is possible she might have had a bit more agency to consider other options to her problems.

#### **4.4. Summary discussion**

The autonomy of truck driver wives in Punjab is not substantially impacted by their husbands extended absences; however, the women do experience an increase in some dimensions of autonomy on a temporary and ephemeral basis. Their increased autonomy does not last or impact them on a more permanent basis. In addition, the women who live in nuclear arrangements but do not have a marital relationship built on trust can experience a decrease in their autonomy as the perceived threat of being dishonoured makes some husbands subject their wives to intimidation and subjugation and in three instances, violence. Had their husbands not been on the road and present at home, or if they had extended family living in the household available to 'surveil' the women, they may have had fewer concerns about their wives dishonouring them by having extra-marital affairs.

Despite the small data sample, the study found exceptions to widely understood determinants of autonomy. Literature widely suggests that Punjab is very patriarchal, and men are the heads of the household. The data illustrates that more than half of the women perceive themselves to be the head of the household with their husbands, and in the rest of the households, at least one of the 'heads' is a woman. Yet, when the survey results are examined more closely, there are inconsistencies in the way women portray their involvement in the household. For instance, many of the women, who claim to be 'heads' are not equally involved in all household decisions. Furthermore,

literature assumes that if a woman is the head of household, she holds a certain degree of autonomy, as in the case of Jameela. Yet, despite having the label of head of the household and being the sole owner of the land, Jameela is still not fully autonomous, which indicates that using that measure is not very meaningful. The study illustrates that women who are, or perceive themselves to be, the head of the household can *still* be constrained in their autonomy.

Other 'determinants of women's autonomy' commonly cited in literature include individual indicators such as age, education, children (especially male children in the South Asian context) and a nuclear living arrangement. The study found multiple exceptions and inconsistencies for these indicators. For instance, Ranjit is 50 years old, lives in a nuclear arrangement, has a grown male child, but is still mostly confined to her house. Sarabjit lived with her in-laws and has a grade five level of education, both normally considered to be indicators of 'low' autonomy. Yet, she appears to be quite autonomous on all four dimensions. On the other hand, Surjit's measures across the four dimensions of autonomy indicate that she is somewhat involved in family and household economic decisions, experiences a bit of intimidation and subjugation (from *Chacha* and *Bibi*), and must ask permission before being involved in the community. Yet she has quite a bit of autonomy, especially when compared to the other women in Punjab. These findings are inconsistent with how these women would be portrayed using commonly cited indicators of autonomy. Quantitative measures would compress their experiences of autonomy into discrete labels.

Women who have similar backgrounds, similar levels of education, or similar family relation situations can have very different levels of autonomy in some or all the different dimensions for many different reasons. In fact, as the study shows, sisters who are born and raised in the same house and then are married to two brothers, who also live together, can have different levels of autonomy, where the younger sister, Jasmine has more autonomy than her older sister Zoya. The study shows that existing measures

and indicators of autonomy do not adequately capture how women understand and experience autonomy.

What the data does show is that “autonomy” is very nuanced and women’s experiences and expressions of autonomy are unique and inconsistent. This suggests that perhaps the conceptualization and operationalization of autonomy used in this study, which is based on measures using indicators devised by many different scholars, are not particularly accurate in providing insight into women’s lived experiences and understanding of autonomy. Furthermore, the conceptualization and operationalization of women’s autonomy, as used in this study, does not capture the women’s subjective experience, or the emotional and cognitive impact of women’s experience of autonomy. The subjective experience of autonomy for the women in Punjab is *greater than* the objective measure, or the tangible and actual events of women’s experience of autonomy as depicted in the survey.

## **Chapter 5.**

### **Women's autonomy in BC**

#### **5.1. Truck driver families in BC**

Many new immigrant Punjabi men in BC choose truck driving as a profession because of the ease of entry into the trucking industry, and no formal education or previous experience is required. Their wages provide a decent life for them and their families in BC's increasingly expensive environment. Among the truck driver wives I surveyed and interviewed in BC, some chose not to work outside of the home when their children were younger, and they did not have the help of extended family, such as a mother-in-law, who could tend to the children. Women who do have help at home are often gainfully employed to assist with the financial obligations of the household and to increase their own disposable income for material goods. Six out of fourteen women are employed full-time and seven of the women are employed part-time or on a seasonal basis. This employment, however, is in addition to household responsibilities that women are also responsible for, such as cooking, cleaning and assisting the children with homework or taking them to extra-curricular activities. As a result, many Punjabi women who work are often overloaded with tasks and do not have very much spare time.

Interestingly, families migrating from Punjab are already familiar with the social construction of gender in BC. All individuals, including elderly parents and the husband, know and often expect the women to find gainful employment outside of the home. Most families learn these norms through their kinship relations who are already established in Canada. Nevertheless, social norms of BC have slowly normalized conditions for other family members to be involved with some of the housework and assist with child-rearing while the husband is away. Elderly grandparents, who no longer must manage fieldwork and milk cows and water buffaloes, are available to some

degree to walk children to school, help with meal preparation and sometimes with yard work.

Ten out of fourteen women live with extended families of which nine are in-laws and one is the woman's natal mother. Most of the extended families contribute financially, but two do not. Elderly in-laws also contribute in other ways, for instance by providing childcare at home for their grandchildren. None of the women with children have had to rely on childcare service outside of the home because the children were cared for at home either by grandparents or other extended family. None of the women financially compensated the grandparents or extended family for their childcare services.

In BC, living arrangements and the social context are slowly changing women's traditional role as the housemaker. When the men are on the road for extended periods, the women step in to complete work and often make important decisions on their behalf. In extended families, women are the delegate for the husband even if other men, such as the father-in-law or brother-in-law, are present in the household. This is mostly due to the women being educated, the in-laws being older, unable to read, write or speak English or being completely illiterate, unfamiliar with BC's social and cultural environment and unable to drive. The geographical and urban environment in BC is not as 'walkable' as the villages in Punjab, so most women learn how to drive. Whether dropping the children off at school or going to the local supermarket, all of the women in BC drive because of the physical distance between locations, except for one because of health reasons. Driving enables women to be more involved in the community which increases their autonomy.

Despite the level of change and progress towards equality and western ideals of modernity in many of these families, when men return from the road, many of them assume their place as the 'head' of the household. The men become the family's representative in the outside community even though twelve of the fourteen women declared themselves to be equal heads of the household. The presentation of the

husband as the 'head' of the household is done for the same reasons as in Punjab, which is to portray a patriarchal image of the man as the main traditional decision-maker in the public and community at large. Yet, why this representation still happens in BC is more difficult to explain because all the women are much more openly involved in decisions rather than behind closed doors as some are in Punjab.

Women in BC generally have more autonomy than women in Punjab across all dimensions. For the most part, women are equally involved in family decisions, household economic decisions and are free to be involved in the community as they wish. There are five women who don't portray their husbands as the heads and present themselves as equals in the public. These women are more educated and younger, ranging from 30 to 40 years of age, except for one. This woman, Darshi (further discussed below), has the equivalent of a grade 12 education, is the second oldest woman interviewed and has lived in Canada for 34 years. There was a time earlier in her life, where she too portrayed her husband as the head of the household, but not anymore. Three of the women who present themselves as equals in public have master's degrees and the other woman has a bachelor's degree.

Women who were unable to use their high levels of education in Punjab in a meaningful way found it much easier to find entry level positions in BC. Often these jobs are stepping stones that help improve English skills and pave the way to higher level positions. Furthermore, some women choose to update their skills and training through part-time education while working in minimum wage jobs. Many of the younger women are driven to find better paying jobs and more meaningful employment because they understand the need and number of years they must work in BC. They recognize that more meaningful and better compensated employment will provide a more enjoyable and higher quality of life<sup>19</sup>. Conversely, women with lower levels of education often neglect developing their English-speaking skills because they are intimidated, lack

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<sup>19</sup> In Punjab, women working within the home is the norm, so many women, especially older women do not actively seek employment outside of the home.

confidence, are unaware of social assistance programs, and unable to manoeuvre through the system. Consequently, less educated women often do not have a choice and opt for lower skill level labour work in farms and nurseries. These labour-intensive jobs usually require little interaction with the public and are often done by similar people, uneducated and sometimes elderly, new immigrants. The jobs, and consequent income, women are able to attain as a means of their education lead most women to be more involved, if not equally involved in household economic decisions, which increases their autonomy, as this has conventionally been understood.

A lack of basic education and living in a foreign country and not knowing how to read, write and speak the main language can be restrictive. It can lead to women not being fully informed about family decisions concerning children, for instance different schooling options, or about household economic decisions, if they do not know about alternative choices, which can decrease their autonomy. Some women have lived in Canada for a quarter century yet are unable to communicate openly with their children's teachers, apply for jobs where the interview will be conducted in English, or understand written information on their own without getting translation assistance. Furthermore, they generally have lower levels of confidence and higher levels of insecurity, qualities that might make women feel like they have less autonomy.

Rani has a grade eight education and her husband completed grade ten, both in Punjab. However, the education system in India is largely deficient and the quality of education in most schools is very poor (Dreze & Sen, 2013). Many high school students and graduates are often not able to decipher a paragraph in English (Jeffrey, Jeffery & Jeffery, 2008). Rani needs English translation assistance. She is unable to make independent decisions for matters involving most English correspondence, oral or written, which she often receives from her children. Since she arrived in Canada in 1995, and her husband in 1997, they have experienced hardship due to language barriers.

Her husband started driving a truck soon after he arrived, to earn enough so they could save for a down payment on a house. Although they managed to save and buy a

house, they had to sell it a few years later to cover her husband's gambling debts. Rani was involved in the decision to sell the house; she felt that they had no other choice because they could no longer afford to keep the house. She is often hard on herself and feels guilty for not having paid closer attention to her husband's actions. Many times, when Rani thought he was on the road, he was at the casino. The situation went unnoticed by Rani, as she was unable to detect the differences in their accounts. She feels that if she been more educated, she would have been able to detect the imbalances in the account activity. Her husband has now sought help and no longer has a gambling addiction. He has also started working as a truck driver again. The family, however, has lost all its earnings and equity. They currently live on rent and their grown children, born and raised in BC, are working part-time, in addition to attending university, to help save for a home. Their son is in a serious relationship but doesn't want to bring his girlfriend to meet his parents, until they've saved enough to purchase their own home. Rani constantly stresses the importance of education to her children and hopes they will graduate with professional qualifications.

Rani is equally involved in family and household economic decisions, and she lives free from violence, intimidation and subjugation, and she is actively involved in the community, indicating that she has a high level of autonomy across all dimensions. Yet, Rani does not feel that she has much autonomy because of the effects of her low level of education, which she feels impede her ability to make sound family and household economic decisions.

If less educated men return to India for marriage, they generally can choose one of many women who are eager to come to Canada. Many times, these women are significantly more educated and sometimes from a different social class. Yet, because of the social and economic considerations in marrying someone who has returned from a foreign land, many families eagerly marry off their daughters to relatively unequal partners. There are many instances where the person is seeking upward mobility and

returns to Canada with a partner who is of higher status, more educated, physically attractive and sometimes much younger in age.

Consequently, when educated young women migrate to Canada to join their often less educated husbands, many of them quickly become an equal decision maker in the household and have considerably more autonomy than before, in Punjab. Conversely, when the roles are switched, that is when a less educated woman sponsors a more educated man from India, she too can choose one of many men who are also eager to come to Canada. Sometimes, however, women's quest for upward mobility can decrease their autonomy if the husband arrives in Canada and assumes full responsibility of the household as the more educated of the two. In these circumstances, a women's autonomy can be reduced if the husband becomes the main decision-maker in family and household economic decisions, or if he is disagreeable and intimidates or subjugates his wife or if his other family members are also in the household and they become the major decision-makers on family and household economic matters.

For some women, family values, customs and traditions have remained the same despite having immigrated to Canada more than a quarter century ago. Gurmeet was raised in a traditional Punjabi home and has a fifth-grade education from Punjab. She immigrated to Canada in 1999 before sponsoring her husband who arrived in Canada in 2003. Her husband has a Bachelor of Arts<sup>20</sup>. His family arrived a few years later and they now live together as a joint family. Gurmeet's role is primarily of a housewife and involves childcare and household chores. She only steps in to fulfill other duties when her father-in-law, who is literate and able to drive, is in India, and the task cannot wait

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<sup>20</sup> Similar situations arose from other interviews, indicating a pattern of less educated women returning to Punjab to marry and sponsor more educated men. Possible reasons for the men to marry less educated women are the social and economic considerations of marrying someone returned from Canada, knowing that they too, and their families, will have the opportunity to go abroad. For women, reasons for marrying more educated men might include an improvement in social status and upward mobility.

for her husband to return, and when he is unable to complete it via his mobile phone, while on the road.

In some ways, women like Gurmeet have not progressed too far from their lifestyle in Punjab, yet in other ways, mainly through their increased mobility and their earning potential in BC (as seasonal workers or more) most women have more autonomy. All the women interviewed, except one (who arrived much later than her husband in Canada and is unemployed due to health reasons) are listed as owners on the deed of the house. Therefore, even though women may not display their autonomy, they know that Family Law in BC entitles them with equal access to all economic resources, in the event they divorce their husbands. Even if the women are not listed on the deed, but their husband is, the laws in Canada grant the spouse equal benefit to all assets, ensuring the women receive an equal share. Therefore, women in BC – in principle - have significantly more autonomy than their counterparts in Punjab because they would not be 'structurally powerless' if they made the decision to leave their husbands. Since women have this right, if they are aware of it they have the capacity to be equally involved in all matters of family decisions, household economic decisions, and to be fully mobile within the community. Women who experience violence also have more options than women in Punjab, through different helplines that are available to assist them. These laws and social benefits that ensure gender equity are what truly empower women in the social context of BC.

Educated women who are sponsored to Canada by less educated husbands can quickly elevate their autonomy in the household. Mandeep is 29 years old and has a Bachelor of Arts and a Hospitality Management Certificate from Punjab and a Medical Assistant Certificate from BC. She is currently employed as a dental assistant and is upgrading her education to become a certified dental hygienist. Her husband is eight years older than her and has a plus two level of education and an electrician certificate from Punjab. He was already working as a long-haul truck driver when he returned to

Punjab to marry Mandeep. They were introduced through family acquaintances two weeks before the marriage.

Mandeep arrived in BC in 2014 and immediately became an equal decision maker in the family, along with her husband. Her husband respects her and consults with her on all household and personal matters. He has “given her a lot of freedom” and she is very appreciative of it. Her household consists of her in-laws and a younger brother-in-law. She and her husband often consult with the in-laws over certain matters when appropriate; however, his parents feel that the younger generation, meaning Mandeep and her husband, know “the ways of Canada”, and generally do not interfere in household affairs. Mandeep’s autonomy further increased in her husband’s absences because she began to make small to medium household economic decisions on his behalf and became much more mobile within the community. Her husband’s parents visit Punjab for a three-month period every year, which is another reason for why they limit their involvement in household matters.

One woman, who migrated to Canada after her marriage to a truck driver, explained that because her husband was only home for several days over the course of a month, she had quickly to learn to manage household affairs on her own terms. She might call her husband to confer over important decisions, but mostly makes decisions on her own. As she explains, “the roads from BC to Alberta (his normal truck route) are quite treacherous; I’m not going to bother him over small details or leave these tasks for him to complete on his one day off. I’d rather have him spend that time with the children and us [referring to herself and her mother-in-law]”. Many women shared similar examples, indicating that these women experienced an increase in their autonomy as they made many family and most household economic decisions on their own.

However, for the women who were already in Canada before marriage and married their husbands in Canada or sponsored them after their marriage in India, their

levels of autonomy can vary depending on family relations and social norms impacting them after marriage.

Kuljinder has a sixth-grade education and assumes her husband's role in his absence. She and her mother migrated to BC in 1998 when Kuljinder was 25 years old. Five years later, she married and sponsored her husband from Punjab. His parents passed in India and Kuljinder's mother has remained living with them after the marriage. Living with her mother has been a source of comfort and support to her since arriving in Canada. When her husband arrived, his first job was in a local lumber mill. During that time, Kuljinder worked as a housewife, taking care of her two young daughters and the family home with the help of her mother. Her husband managed all the household paperwork and legalities, often without consulting Kuljinder on such matters. Together, they attended special events such as services and celebrations at the local temple or in the community and when visiting family and friends. Her husband started truck driving in 2006 because it was a better paying job.

Since then, Kuljinder has stepped in to assist with household obligations outside of the house so the family can spend time together when he is home. She has also started working seasonally to have a bit more disposable income. Although she and her husband made all family and household economic decisions together since his arrival, she feels more independent knowing she too can manage all the paperwork and legalities and having extra income, despite having full access to all of their accounts. Her husband schedules time off from work, so they can still attend important family and community events, usually held on holidays and weekends in BC, together. Although they attend together these events together, Kuljinder believes her husband to be the head of the household, as traditionally it is the man who represents the family.

Kuljinder had full autonomy across all dimensions before her husband started driving a truck and she began working on a seasonal basis (possibly because her children were older). However, although Kuljinder's autonomy in the dimensions of family decisions and freedom from violence remain the same, she felt she had increased her

autonomy in household economic decisions and in community involvement following the change in her husband's occupation and after she started earning an income herself. This increased autonomy could be a function of the increased time she had, and thus was able to work, or it could be a function of her husband's absence. This is another weakness of the conventional indicators and measures of autonomy as they do not allow for differentiation between the factors that might have increased Kuljinder's sense of autonomy. The measures also do not account for Kuljinder's feelings of independence which made her feel more autonomous than she did before she started working, yet the dimensions used in the survey would portray her as having the same 'full' autonomy across all four dimensions, before and after.

In the husband's absences, living configurations, employment opportunities and the necessity to learn how to drive, lead to different power relations within the family, which, together with higher social expectations of gender equality, can impact women's autonomy. Although most of the women in BC are more autonomous across all dimensions than the women in Punjab, family relations – whether it is the relationship with the husband or with other members of the household, such as the mother-in-law – and social norms can still impact women's sense of autonomy in BC. Three of the women in BC have experienced violence from their husbands. Five women expressed concern about being labelled disrespectful for not displaying deference in front of the in-laws or other extended family members and often feel too intimidated to question elders in the household. Even women who claim to have full autonomy in all dimensions have experienced violence, intimidation and subjugation due to family relations and social norms, and consequently experienced lower levels of autonomy at the time. This includes one woman who lives in a nuclear arrangement and had a love marriage.

Through the personal experiences of the women in BC, this chapter explains how family relations and social norms that are often intertwined can still make a difference to women's autonomy in the context of BC.

## **5.2. The impact of family relations on women's autonomy in BC**

For some women, husbands and other extended family members, normally the in-laws can influence the level of women's autonomy, especially in important family and household economic decisions. Moreover, intimidation and subjugation and sometimes violence can be used to oppress the women. Punjabi women in BC may know they have legal rights, but it can be difficult for them to act on these rights. Many women, especially those who have been living in Canada for a long time and have well connected kinship relations within surrounding communities, have a fear of being disgraced or bringing shame to themselves and their natal families when faced with considering separation or divorce. Some women would rather face the terrors of being in an abusive relationship than ruin the reputation, the honour and *izzat* of their fathers.

### **5.2.1. Sarb – Living with the fear of losing everything**

Many women go through different phases of autonomy. Sarb came to Canada in the late '80's with a grade ten education and was unmarried. She worked long hours in a greenhouse to save enough for half of a down payment for a house, which she bought with her relatives. She then went to India and got married to a more educated man. Her husband came a year later, and together they worked and saved more money with the hope of buying their own home one day. The couple got along well and made all family and household economic decisions together. They had a new baby daughter and needed additional space because her husband's parents and sister were going to migrate from Punjab and move in with them. To prepare for the new family members, they took out Sarb's 50% share of the house she had purchased with her relatives and bought their own home. After the family from Punjab arrived, the way decisions were made began to change. Her husband consulted his parents first and then would share the decision with Sarb. It continued this way for many years, during which the family arranged a marriage for her sister-in-law to a man in Canada. Sarb felt obligated to help her husband pay for the wedding expenses.

In this situation, according to the dimension of household economic decision-making, Sarb still had 'full' autonomy; however, she felt less in control because there was more to worry about, for instance more mouths to feed and more concerns about her finances. Yet these subjective concerns and the change in her financial situation, as a result of feeling obligated to pay for his family, are not captured in indicators and measures of autonomy as conceptualized and operationalized in the study.

Sarb's autonomy has slowly diminished since the arrival of her in-laws. She no longer is an equal decision-maker in family matters or household economic matters because her husband, influenced by his family (according to Sarb) often makes important decisions without her. She has even experienced violence from her husband because of an argument she had with the in-laws. About five years ago, her husband's brother and his family also arrived from India and have been living in Sarb's home since their arrival. Sarb is quite distraught because the father-in-law suggested that they change the name on the house deed, from Sarb and her husband, to his newly arrived son, so he and his family can get a Canadian permanent residency sooner. This is probably an excuse to remove Sarb's name from the deed of the house because owning property does not appear to expedite permanent residency applications. Sarb claims if that were to happen, she would fight it in court, if necessary, because she and her daughter are entitled to the home. The daughter supports her mother and has encouraged her father to support her and her mother with the incentive that she (the daughter) will take care of him for the rest of his life. For now, the husband has denied his father's request to change names on the deed. This situation has caused more strain on Sarb's relations with the other household members.

Sarb finds comfort in her daughter, and although she still has some control over her economic resources, she feels trapped on a day to day basis because her money is being used to meet the needs of everyone in the household, and ultimately affects her family and household economic decisions. Again, this dynamic is not captured in any of the dimensions of autonomy. She experiences a passive aggressive relationship with

everyone in the house, her house. The in-laws do not contribute financially in any way to the home but feel entitled to everything within it. Although Sarb knows her rights in Canada, which is empowering, she finds it very difficult to live with her husband's family but also to fight back because she is one against five. She still loves her husband so does not want to leave him, but according to her, he will never ask for any of them to leave. Moreover, she is 64 years old now and on disability leave, and she does not want to go through a lengthy court process of filing for a divorce as her in-laws would encourage her husband to fight for every possible penny. She also feels that if she were to separate, everyone (family, friends, acquaintances) would blame her for not making it work and for making it difficult for the other family members. She believes such action would also have a lasting impact on the rest of her life through additional stress, poor health and possibly financial difficulties in supporting herself and her daughter. Despite having a relatively 'high' level of autonomy, especially when compared to some of the women in Punjab, Sarb too, like some of them, feels 'stuck'.

### **5.2.2. Darshi – Going through hell and back**

Many Punjabi women face similar trials and tribulations when living with extended family members. Darshi and her husband lived together by themselves for the first two years of their marriage and were happy. Shortly after she had her son, her in-laws arrived from Punjab. Her father-in-law, she said, was lovely and never interfered with her personal matters. Yet, the mother-in-law seemed to despise her, and Darshi had no idea why. Soon after their arrival, her husband's older sister also moved in with her husband and their three children. There was constant bickering and fighting in the home, unprovoked by Darshi, but aimed at her. Many arguments were provoked by the sister-in-law. Her husband started driving a truck, so he could be out of the house. When he came home, he would leave the house for extended periods and drink heavily. Often in drunken stupors, he would beat Darshi after being provoked by his mother. Darshi worked 12 hour shifts 6 to 7 days a week to save money to buy their first home. A year after the in-laws arrived from India, Darshi and her husband had saved enough to

purchase a home. She thought that would make her mother-in-law happy because they had their own home, but the fighting didn't stop. Darshi describes the next nine years as a 'living hell'. The mother-in-law picked fights over any little thing, often making things up. She started accusing Darshi's parents of casting black magic spells on the house. When Darshi bought her home, her elderly parents, who used to live close by, moved to another town, about an hour's drive away, because they thought it might help improve the toxic environment in their daughter's home. Unfortunately, their move did not help.

It was a very emotional experience for Darshi to share these parts of her life. She recalled one particularly traumatic ordeal. Her son, who was about eight years old at the time, had made a scarecrow at school for the forthcoming Halloween. He couldn't find any tape at home, so he used a thumb tack to stick the scarecrow to the front door. Unfortunately, because of the autumn winds, the paper scarecrow blew away, but the thumb tack remained in the front door. While Darshi was at work, the mother-in-law caused an uproar at home and accused Darshi's mother of doing black magic on the house, knowing that her parents had to rely on bus transportation, and the buses didn't provide service to their town. When Darshi came home, her husband asked her to follow him to the front door and inquired about the thumb tack. When she said she didn't know, there was a huge fight at the house. Later the same evening, her son asked her why she kept crying. Upon his persistence, she told him what had happened. He started crying and told her what had actually happened.

Darshi experienced this sort of psychological violence on a regular basis. Although at the time, Darshi had autonomy in family decisions and household economic decisions, these types of emotional ordeals likely weighed heavier on her than the need for equal involvement in family and household economic decisions. But the dimensions of autonomy do not allow for the significance of such feelings.

Often, women have a difficult time explaining deeply engrained and systemic patriarchal values to their Canadian born children. Darshi's son and three daughters eventually grew to hate their grandmother because of her persistent stream of foul

language and hatred towards their mother and maternal grandmother. They would constantly ask why they couldn't live with the other set of grandparents, to which Darshi would flatly say, "we can't." When her son was eleven, he asked if she could divorce his dad, to which she said, "never say that again." Darshi's explanation of why she would never leave her husband was similar to Sarb's in that she would be blamed for 'wrecking household relations', and not getting along with her in-laws. She said that whenever family came to visit, her mother-in-law acted like an angel to her and the guests, so no one would ever believe her to not be at fault. In addition, she was raised in a context where cultural values constrain women's ability to make strategic life choices, like filing for divorce or leaving to live with her parents - both of those actions would be against patriarchal norms and values. She would be blamed and labelled as a 'divorcee' and that too with four young children, at a time when divorce was still uncommon in the Punjabi circles in BC. Although public perception on divorce even with the Punjabi community is very different now, for Darshi and her natal family, it would be equivalent to social suicide as in addition to the woman, her parents would also be maligned and blamed as failures for not raising a respectable and cooperative daughter.

When differences between family members cannot be resolved, living arrangements are sometimes changed; normally they benefit the women. When Darshi, her husband and children eventually separated from his family, upon the children's insistence, the household environment, the children's progress in school, and Darshi's mental, physical and emotional well-being, significantly improved. She has never had a major argument with her husband again and he has never again raised his hand on her. He apologized for the previous years of violence and maltreatment and has quit drinking. Darshi is now an equal decision maker in family and household economic affairs, in fact makes most small to medium decisions on her own, now free from violence and intimidation (and fully supported by her children who are grown and very protective of her) in addition to being free to come and go as she pleases.

### **5.3. The impact of social conditions on women's autonomy in BC**

In my experience, the Punjabi community in BC has changed its norms and values over the last two decades, mainly through adopting more liberal, western values especially when dealing with divorce and separation. Nowadays, it is socially more acceptable if someone opts for separation or divorce, perhaps because it is no longer uncommon. Yet, if an individual needs to make the decision to get a separation or divorce herself, then similar fears and concerns arise as they did two decades earlier – family will be disappointed, dishonoured, what will people think of me, etc. However, these fears and concerns are not limited to the Punjabi community. Apart from concerns about dishonouring the family name, many people, Punjabi or not, might wonder whether family would be disappointed or what others' perception of them as a divorcee might be.

Possibly due to the large Punjabi diaspora currently residing in BC, compared to two decades ago, people for the most part are preoccupied in their own lives and, therefore, have less time to focus on other people's problems. Perhaps for this reason, as I have observed it, new immigrants, especially younger people who have no previous kinship relations already settled in BC, seem to assume 'Canadian' values almost overnight. This younger generation is not often concerned by what others think of them, and do not hesitate to use the laws to enforce their rights to their advantage.

#### **5.3.1. Poonam – Educated but affected by social norms**

A high level of education has enabled some women to find good positions soon after migration, and then move up the career ladder. Poonam is 40 years old and currently works as a dispatcher for a long-haul trucking company and is paid handsomely for her wide contact base. She first arrived in Canada in 2003 with a Master's in Economics and soon after started working in the trucking industry. In the past 15 years, she has built a broad base of contacts with whom she has secured regular loads for multiple trucking companies. She has a good reputation in her current position

in the company and met her husband there, a driver in same company. The couple bought their first home together just before their recent marriage in 2019. They are equal decision-makers in the household; however, because of her education and experience, he leaves many decisions to Poonam.

Even before their marriage, Poonam began to doubt her decision to marry him. He had been physically abusive towards her on two separate occasions. The first time was before they married. By then, her family knew about him and their decision to marry. Her father's sister had called Poonam from Toronto and said, "make sure you don't disappoint us, and call it [the wedding] off". After a wedding date had been decided, Poonam's mother had come from Punjab on a visitor visa, issued for her daughter's marriage. Poonam and her husband had been living together before their marriage, so when her mother came to Canada, she stayed with them before the wedding. After witnessing the fiancée's behaviour towards her daughter, Poonam's mother told her not to marry him. Yet, due to social pressures, Poonam felt it was too late to cancel the wedding and obligated to go through with it because otherwise, "what would people say?" It is also possible that she felt pressure to go through with the wedding because her extended family had been encouraging her to get married for the past several years as she was "getting old". Despite having a high level of education, Poonam's decision to marry her husband was influenced by conservative social norms. Even in the social context of BC, women's autonomy can be influenced by family relations and conservative social norms.

Despite notions of modernity and indifference towards traditional patriarchal values of 'staying with the husband through whatever may come' and 'disgracing the family name and honour', many people who have been living in BC for a while consider these values very seriously before making important decisions.

### 5.3.2. Mannu

When Mannu arrived in Canada, she joined her husband and mother-in-law who were renting the basement suite in his sister's house. She was the first person from her family to live in Canada and had no other close ties or kinship relations in BC. They had only been together for a few months before her husband was incarcerated while trying to make a 'quick buck' across the American border. Unfortunately, he was incarcerated in California, so Mannu was unable to visit him because she had not received her permanent residency in Canada at that point. Mannu also found out that she was expecting. She felt very constrained within the home because she did not know how to drive, nor did she know her way around the town very well, so she did not leave the house often. She also had a difficult time living in his absence with his mother, who Mannu felt was overbearing and interested in everything Mannu did and who she communicated with, and his sister who would come downstairs into their space on a daily basis.

Her husband was incarcerated for two years. In that time, Mannu had her daughter and started working part-time at a fast-food restaurant in order to get out of the house and earn a bit of income. Although she graduated in India with a master's degree in science with honours, she found it was not very helpful in finding her a decent paying job in BC. In efforts to do something more meaningful for work she decided to go back to school to earn a certificate as a Health Care Aid. Due to the financial constraints of the family, she applied for and obtained a student loan from the Canadian government. Subsequently, she completed the certificate program at a local college to be able to work as a Care Aid in a nursing home, and then eventually, hopefully work in the local hospital. Mannu's daughter was very young when she started the Care Aid program and she found it very difficult to work part-time at a fast-food restaurant and take night classes simultaneously, while trying to carve out a bit of time for her young daughter. She recalled that "it was a very difficult time, and I would often have to leave my daughter crying at home to go to school, but, I had to do it.... I'm going to be working

for many more years, but at least it will be in a job that pays me well... My daughters will have a better life.”

The household relations got difficult to the point that Mannu moved out into a friend’s basement suite and continued to drop her daughter off with her mother-in-law on some days and leave her with a friend to look after on other days. The situation became very difficult for Mannu to maintain because of the early morning drop-offs and late-night pick-ups, but also because her daughter hated being dropped off with her mother-in-law, who thought very lowly of Mannu. Accordingly, Mannu made the decision to take her daughter to India to her natal home. After helping her daughter familiarize herself with the surroundings and with Mannu’s parents and younger brother, Mannu returned to Canada after two months without her daughter. She felt that her daughter would be much better cared for by her parent and that she herself would be able to complete her school without worries and distractions. In the meantime, she also made the decision to leave her husband.

A year later when her husband returned home, she also returned to India to bring back her daughter, so she could meet her father. For the next year, she dropped off her daughter to stay with him and his mother on the days that she had to work. Then after a year, she decided to get back together with her husband with the condition that they would never live with his sister again. Eventually, they were able to purchase their own home, in which they live together with her mother-in-law who looks after her two granddaughters<sup>21</sup> while Mannu and her husband are at work. Now, even if her husband is at home, Mannu makes most family decisions in the household and makes all of the household economic decisions. She also is not afraid to voice her opinion to either her husband or his mother and is free to go about as she pleases.

Much of what Mannu was able to do on her own was due to the social context of BC. She was able to further her education because of government loans, and she was

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<sup>21</sup> Mannu and her husband had a second daughter.

able to move out and create a life for herself because that was possible in BC. Moreover, and importantly, Mannu did not allow family relations or social norms to affect her autonomy. She did what she thought was necessary for herself and her child on her own accord, on her own terms.

Mannu's decision to move out, that is to make the family decision, find the economic resources to do so, have friends in the community to support her and not be subject to violence for doing so, indicates a high level of autonomy. However, her lived experience is not, and cannot be captured by the existing indicators and measures of autonomy, again proving how inadequate they really are. Mannu would have appeared to be autonomous on all four dimensions according to the conceptualization and operationalization of autonomy that is used in this study, based on existing literature, yet she certainly did not *feel* autonomous at all. The indicators and measures of autonomy do not capture the details of the ordeals that she went through to make the decisions that she did in order to provide her and her daughter a more comfortable life in the future (which is how she thought her future would be before she made the decision to get back together with her husband). The measures do not capture: the tough family decisions Mannu had to make, of leaving her sobbing young daughter with her mother-in-law who despised Mannu, or leaving her with her parents in India, so she could finish her school; or that she financially was so constrained that she barely had enough economic resources to maintain her household: or the toll her mother-in-law's emotional abuse had on her even though she moved out; and nor do they capture Mannu's difficult arrangement of managing her work, school and her daughter's pick-ups and drop-offs from different places. These nuances are precisely what can inform a researcher about a women's lived experience of autonomy and provide more meaningful input into policies and resources dedicated to women, yet they are widely overlooked in survey data.

## 5.4. Summary discussion

Punjabi truck driver wives in BC have higher levels of autonomy than the truck drivers' wives in Punjab because they live in a social context where gender equality is upheld through Canadian laws and women have equal opportunities which significantly improve their autonomy in all four dimensions and especially in household economic affairs. In the extended absences of their husbands, women in BC do appear to increase their autonomy in family and household economic matters, and in community involvement.

Although most of the women in BC appear to have high levels of autonomy on all four dimensions, some of the women do not at all feel that they have 'high' levels of autonomy. Many of the women in BC experience different phases of autonomy during different periods of their lives, yet at all different phases, their autonomy – measured against the four dimensions – remains more or less the same, even though their lived experiences show otherwise. The inability of current indicators and measures of autonomy to capture the variations of women's lived experiences is reflective of the limitations of attempts to compress perceptions and experiences of autonomy into quantitative measures.

Even in the context of BC, the study found that individual indicators which are deemed to be 'determinants of women's autonomy' for instance, age, education, and a nuclear living arrangement, are not necessarily reliable. For instance, Poonam has a master's degree in economics, a well-paying job, married by her own choice at the age of 40, and is living in a nuclear arrangement. These indicators would assess Poonam to have 'high' autonomy. Yet, her family decisions are influenced by her extended family's thoughts and opinions, and she has experienced violence and feels subjugated by her husband. In addition, Sarb, who is 64 years old, owns her house with her husband, and has a grown child, also would measure as having 'high' autonomy. However, she feels that she is losing control and her ability to be equally involved in family and household economic decisions. Furthermore, although she defends herself the best she can in the

face of intimidation and subjugation used by her in-laws, she finds it exhausting and believes it has taken a toll on her mental well-being. In a survey based on indicators devised by scholars, both of these women would probably be labelled with a discrete measure indicating 'high' autonomy. However, the discrepancies between how these women understand and experience autonomy, captured as a result of having in-depth conversations through interviews, are inconsistent with how these women measure up in the survey. This suggests that the measures and indicators as conceptualized and operationalized in studies of autonomy are misleading.

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews revealed additional details about the women's lives and experiences and provide data that is in many ways inconsistent with the survey results. For instance, twelve of the fourteen women claim to be equal heads of the household, along with their husbands. However, even in the social context of BC, seven of the twelve women portray their husbands as the 'head' in public to maintain the image of the man as the main traditional decision-maker, even though they make all family and household economic decisions together. In fact, some of the women make many of these decisions on their own accord. This presents an inconsistency in how women, despite living in BC, perceive their own autonomy.

Furthermore, as evident in the case studies presented in this chapter, women like Mannu who appear to have 'high' autonomy in the survey, can in fact feel constrained in all four dimensions of autonomy. Mannu felt that she did not have any other options, and under those conditions had to make the decisions that she did; she moved out because of difficult household relations (the emotional abuse from her mother-in-law), made a family decision to leave her child in India, and struggled to make ends meet in attempts to complete her education while working, which she hoped would improve her household economic situation in the future. Throughout this period, she did not feel 'autonomous' as per the definition of autonomy used in the study, derived from existing literature, despite being labelled so in the survey.

On the other hand, women like Kuljinder who also has 'high' autonomy across the four dimensions in the survey, revealed that she felt an increased level of autonomy in family decisions and more in control of household economic decisions, as a result of her employment and her husband's change in employment. However, this additional incremental autonomy is also not captured in the survey results.

The empirical experiences of these women show how inadequate existing indicators and measures of autonomy are for capturing the lived experiences of women. The conceptualization and operationalization of women's autonomy in the study, which are based on measures using indicators devised by many different scholars, does not capture the women's subjective experience of autonomy. The subjective experience of autonomy for the women in BC is *less than* the objective measure of autonomy as depicted in the survey.

## Chapter 6.

### Discussion and conclusion

The study illustrates that “autonomy” is nuanced and that conventional objective indicators and women’s subjective experiences and expressions of autonomy can be inconsistent with each other. My findings reveal at least two issues. First, the various dimensions of women’s autonomy included in the composite measure of women’s autonomy each take on very context-specific meanings, and do not always vary consistently with each other. This means that it is not only difficult to compare readings of the same measure applied *across* different contexts, but also difficult to interpret the composite measure even *within* the same contexts, since some women may measure as having high autonomy on some dimensions and not others, and other women vice versa, and existing literature does not give clear guidance on how to adjudicate between the relative weight of the various dimensions included in the composite measure of women’s autonomy. Second, the level of autonomy that Punjabi women claim to have and their personal experiences of it are not always the same, which suggests that conventional measures and indicators of autonomy may not capture how women understand and experience autonomy. This study shows how limited current understanding of autonomy really is and that women’s experiences of autonomy must be understood beyond discrete quantitative measures.

Using conventional measures of women’s autonomy, Punjabi truck driver wives in Punjab experience lower levels of autonomy as compared with their counterparts living in BC. Among this group, those who experience higher levels of autonomy across all or some of the different dimensions retain this autonomy in the extended absences of their truck driving husbands. The husbands being away for prolonged periods of time appears to increase the women’s autonomy in some dimensions, mainly in family and household economic decision-making, but only on a temporary and ephemeral basis.

Women with poor marital relations appear to experience reduced autonomy because they can be limited in their mobility in the husband's absence.

Punjabi truck driver wives in BC experience higher levels of autonomy as compared with their counterparts living in Punjab, using conventional measures of women's autonomy. In the extended absences of their truck driving husbands, women in BC do appear to increase their autonomy in family and household economic matters, and in community involvement, on a more permanent basis.

This thesis started with two hypotheses: first, literature on the family lives of truck drivers would suggest that the extended absences of Punjabi truck drivers would generate emotional burdens for their families, thus adding to the oppression of their wives. Second, literature on household relations in Punjab would suggest that the extended absence of Punjabi truck drivers could change the structure of relations within their households, thus improve the autonomy of their wives. The findings from this study partially support the first hypothesis. My data shows that, in the context of a lack of trust, sometimes accompanied by intimidation or the threat of violence from the husband towards the wife, the wives of some Punjabi truck drivers are further oppressed by concerns about (dis)honor and behzti arising from their husbands' extended absences. If the men remained home and were not away for extended periods, the chances of them perceiving their wives in this way would be less. This is true for the women in Punjab and BC.

The findings from this study also partially support the second hypothesis. I find that, in the context of positive marital relations, often enabled by women moving up the family hierarchy over time, or by a transition from an extended family living environment to a nuclear family living environment where women experience, or expect to experience, increased involvement in making family and household economic decisions, the extended absence of Punjabi truck drivers seem to improve their wives' autonomy. This pattern seems to hold in Punjab as well as in BC. The seeming discrepancies in empirical evidence supporting two opposing hypotheses highlight the

need to understand women's autonomy *in context* and illustrate the inadequacies of standardized measures of women's autonomy designed for universal applicability.

My findings raise multiple concerns with existing measures of autonomy. First, they do not quite capture the "subjective" experience of women's autonomy: my findings show that, in the context of Punjab, women often do not feel as oppressed as they are objectively measured to be, and in the context of BC, women often do not feel as autonomous as they are objectively measured to be. Rather than impose a standardized conceptualization of autonomy which is articulated by scholars for scholars, it may be more productive to study women's autonomy by asking open-ended questions and allowing women to articulate autonomy in their own terms. Second, it is not clear how the different dimensions of autonomy are to be weighed in relation to each other. For instance, how should we compare the autonomy of a woman who is involved in making family and household economic decisions but faces intimidation at home to that of a woman who does not face intimidation at home, but does not partake in making family and household economic decisions? Third, it is not clear that the four dimensions of autonomy exist as distinct from each other. For instance, would freedom from violence not have bearing on whether or not women are truly able to be equally involved in family or household economic decisions?

Although the subjective experience of women's autonomy is consistently different from their objective measurement across Punjab and BC, it is important to note that the way in which subjective experience diverges from objective measures are different between the two settings. This indicates that there is a reliability problem in the "objective" measure of autonomy, and points to the importance of context: the objective measure of autonomy does not necessarily transport well from one place to another. For instance, in Punjab, being able to go on one's own to the market to shop for groceries could be a meaningful indicator of autonomy, whereas in BC it is quite 'normal' and, indeed, necessary for one to be able to get groceries at the market. Expanding the dimension of 'community involvement' from political participation to

community participation may have been appropriate for the context of Punjab, but it may have led to the inflation of the readings of autonomy in BC.

This study urges us to rethink our understanding of autonomy and the ways in which it can be measured. One approach that needs further consideration is individualistic versus relational autonomy. Whereas an individualistic understanding of autonomy is underpinned by the idea that people are independent, self-determining and rational decision-makers, the idea of relational autonomy takes account of people's identities, needs and interests based on their relations to others. Although an individualistic concept of autonomy appears to be clear about how and by whom decisions should be made, and appears to be much easier to measure, it does not seem to be a realistic approach given that the identities, lifestyles and interests of all of the women interviewed, in Punjab and BC, are influenced by their relations and connections to others in the household, and sometimes also outside of the household.

A second approach that requires consideration is a universalistic versus a particularistic, or contextual method. In a universalistic approach, all the women would be asked the same questions, without modification, and thus allow for more standardized analysis. However, in the context of measuring autonomy, universalism would lead to illogical conclusions, as highlighted in this study. A particularistic, context-specific approach would allow for and incorporate modification of the questions, based on specific circumstances. Such an approach would acknowledge the unevenness in how autonomy is conceptualized and operationalized across time and space, and seek to understand autonomy in local contexts.

Finally, a third approach for consideration is a variable-based versus a political economic approach to measuring women's autonomy, which considers factors such as education and labour force participation. My findings show that political and socioeconomic factors must be considered in assessing women's autonomy in addition to the individual attributes of each woman, and that the individual attributes of women may well be structured by political and socioeconomic factors.

Integration of these three approaches would likely lead to a clearer conceptualisation of autonomy and the operationalization of relevant, and much more meaningful measures than the indicators and measures currently being used to understand and assess women's autonomy.

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## Appendix A.

### Punjabi Women Full Chart

	Women 1	Women 2	Women 3	Women 4	Women 5	Women 6	Women 7	Women 8	Women 9	Women 10	Women 11	Women 12	Women 13	Women 14	Women 15	Women 16	Women 17
<b>Age</b>	65	65	56	54	50	45	45	45	44	40	39	38	38	32	25	25	25
<b>Education</b>	No school	No school	Grade 8	No school	Grade 10	Grade 5	Grade 5	Grade 10	Plus 2	No school	Grade 10	Grade 8	Grade 7	Grade 8	BA	Plus 2	Grade 10
<b>Family decisions</b>																	
What to make for dinner?	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Involved	Equally involved	Involved	Involved	Involved	Involved	Involved	Involved
The number of children to have?	Equally involved																
Where the children should go to school?	Equally involved	Involved	Involved	Involved	Not involved	Involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Not involved	Equally involved	Involved	Involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Involved	Involved
When and to whom the children should get married?	Involved	Not involved	Involved	Involved	Involved	Not involved	Involved	Involved	Not involved	Not involved	Involved	Involved	Not involved	Involved	Not involved	Involved	Involved
<b>Household economic decisions</b>																	
What food to buy for family meals?	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Involved	Equally involved	Involved	Involved	Involved	Involved	Involved	Involved
Whether to purchase clothes for themselves, for children?	Equally involved	Involved	Equally involved	Involved	Involved	Involved	Equally involved	Involved	Involved								
Whether to purchase small household items (small appliances, dishware, etc.)?	Equally involved	Not involved	Equally involved	Involved	Involved	Involved	Involved	Involved	Involved								
Whether to purchase medium household items (large appliances, furniture, undertake small scale renovations)?	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Involved	Involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Not involved	Equally involved	Involved	Involved	Involved	Not involved	Involved	Involved
Whether to purchase large items (vehicles, undertake large scale renovations, land)?	Equally involved	Involved	Involved	Involved	Not involved	Involved	Equally involved	Involved	Equally involved	Not involved	Equally involved	Involved	Not involved	Involved	Not involved	Not involved	Not involved
<i>(related questions from interviews)</i>																	
Do you have a say in how household income is spent?	Yes	No	Yes	Sometimes	Sometimes	Sometimes	No	Sometimes	Sometimes								
Do you get spending money?	Yes	No	Yes	Sometimes	Sometimes	Yes	Yes	Sometimes	Sometimes								
Are you able to spend it without having to consult with someone?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Sometimes	No	Yes	Sometimes	Yes								
If you need money for something, are you able to get it?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Sometimes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Freedom from violence</b>																	
Do you feel intimidated to question decisions made by other family members, elder family members, in front of others?	Yes	No	No	No	Sometimes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Sometimes	Sometimes	Yes	Sometimes	Sometimes	Sometimes
Do you feel intimidated to voice your own opinions in front of other family members, elder family members?	No	No	No	No	Sometimes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Sometimes	Sometimes	Yes	Sometimes	Sometimes	Sometimes

	Women 1	Women 2	Women 3	Women 4	Women 5	Women 6	Women 7	Women 8	Women 9	Women 10	Women 11	Women 12	Women 13	Women 14	Women 15	Women 16	Women 17
Has your husband ever beaten you?	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No
Have other family members ever beaten you?	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
<b>Community involvement</b>																	
Can you go to a neighbour's house?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Require permission	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Require permission	Yes	Yes	Require permission	Require permission	Require permission	Yes	Yes
Can you go to a local temple?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Require permission	Yes	Yes	Require permission	Require permission	Yes	Yes	Yes
Can you go to a local market?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Require permission	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Require permission	Yes	Yes	Require permission				
Can you go to local community events like the fair, a parade, etc.?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Require permission	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Require permission	Yes	Yes	Require permission				
Can you go to your natal home?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Require permission	Yes	Yes	Require permission	Yes	Yes	Yes	Require permission
Can you go to participate or volunteer in political events, like campaigns or rallies, or support electoral candidates?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Require permission	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Require permission	Yes	Require permission					
Can you participate or volunteer in school events, religious or neighbourhood festivities?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Require permission	Yes	Yes	Require permission				

## Appendix B.

### BC Women Full Chart

	Women 1	Women 2	Women 3	Women 4	Women 5	Women 6	Women 7	Women 8	Women 9	Women 10	Women 11	Women 12	Women 13	Women 14
<b>Age</b>	64	52	47	47	47	43	42	40	40	40	36	33	30	29
<b>Education</b>	Grade 10	Plus 2	Grade 10	Grade 6	Grade 8	BA	Grade 5	MA Economics	Grade 12 (USA)	Plus 2	College, Care Aid	MSC 1st Division	MA Commerce	BA + Care Aid
<b>Family decisions</b>														
What to make for dinner?	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved										
The number of children to have?	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved										
Where the children should go to school?	Involved	Equally involved	Involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved							
When and to whom the children should get married?	Not involved	Involved	Not involved	Not involved	Not involved	Not involved	Not involved	Not involved	Not involved					
<b>Household economic decisions</b>														
What food to buy for family meals?	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved										
Whether to purchase clothes for themselves, for children?	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved										
Whether to purchase small household items (small appliances, dishware, etc.)?	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved										
Whether to purchase medium household items (large appliances, furniture, undertake small scale renovations)?	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved										
Whether to purchase large items (vehicles, undertake large scale renovations, land)?	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Equally involved	Involved
<i>(related questions from interviews)</i>														
Do you have a say in how household income is spent?	Sometimes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes									
Do you get spending money?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes										
Are you able to spend it without having to consult with someone?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes										
If you need money for something, are you able to get it?	Sometimes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Sometimes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Freedom from violence</b>														
Do you feel intimidated to question decisions made by other family members, elder family members, in front of others?	Sometimes	No	No	No	Sometimes	No	Sometimes	Sometimes	No	No	No	No	No	Sometimes
Do you feel intimidated to voice your own opinions in front of other family members, elder family members?	No	No	No	No										
Has your husband ever beaten you?	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
Have other family members ever beaten you?	No	No	No	No										

	Women 1	Women 2	Women 3	Women 4	Women 5	Women 6	Women 7	Women 8	Women 9	Women 10	Women 11	Women 12	Women 13	Women 14
<b>Community involvement</b>														
Can you go to a neighbour's house?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes									
Can you go to a local temple?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes									
Can you go to a local market?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes									
Can you go to local community events like the fair, a parade, etc.?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes									
Can you go to your natal home?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes									
Can you go to participate or volunteer in political events, like campaigns or rallies, or support electoral candidates?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes									
Can you participate or volunteer in school events, religious or neighbourhood festivities?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes									