that value the social status of men over women. But the extent to which individual households conform to ‘traditional’ ideas about the roles of men and women varies. The ability of family members to impose their own preferences in household decisions (bargaining power) is influenced by social attitudes and other, more tangible, factors. According to a study based on household decisions and gender, major determinants of influence in household decision-making include control of income and assets, age, and access to and level of education. Examining these factors across a wide range of countries offers insights into the distribution of bargaining power in individual households. Control of income and assets: The family member who controls the greatest share of household income and assets often has the strongest say in deciding whether those resources will be used to meet household needs. As the next chapter will illustrate, in both industrialized and developing countries, women continue to lag behind men in terms of income-earning opportunities and ownership and management of assets.

Age gaps: The distribution of household bargaining power is also influenced by a woman’s age at marriage and the age difference between a woman and her husband. Evidence from around the world shows that the age gap between husbands and wives can vary enormously among households. The average age at first marriage in Western Europe is estimated to be 27 for women and 30 for men. In developing countries, age differences are far greater. In South Asia, for example, husbands are approximately five years older than their wives; the gap rises to six years in sub-Saharan Africa (excluding southern Africa). In cases of child marriage (defined as customary or statutory union where one or both of the partners is under the age of 18 years old), when the age gap between spouses is most extreme, the burden of domestic work and childcare severely constrains the life choices available to married girls and child mothers. This, in turn, affects the power that women have over household decisions.

Levels of education: In addition to increased levels of knowledge, self-confidence and assertiveness, education confers social status and increases income-earning potential. As with age gaps between married couples, the levels of education of spouses vary among households. The findings of a study undertaken in 40 developing countries indicate that, on average, men tend to spend more time in education than women. The education gap is widest in South Asia, where men on average spend 2.5 years more in school than women, declining to 1.3 years in sub-Saharan Africa, and 1 year in Latin America and the Caribbean. Disparate levels of education between men and women may reinforce household gender inequalities, ensuring that women remain disadvantaged.

Domestic violence
Levels of education, earnings and asset ownership and age gaps are key in determining bargaining power between men and women within the household. Arguably of equal importance is the threat of domestic violence. While physical and sexual violence and other forms of abuse occur in different domestic environments and in different guises, there is substantial evidence to suggest that such acts are mainly perpetrated by adult men against women and girls. Domestic violence threatens the physical health and emotional well-being of its victims and often forces them to endure subordinate positions and economic insecurity within their households. Household gender inequalities foster a permissive context for abusive relationships. A UNICEF study indicates that women who marry at a young age are more likely to believe that it is sometimes acceptable for a man to beat his wife, and are more likely to experience domestic violence than women who marry at an older age. In Kenya, for example, 36 per cent of women who were married before the age of 18 believe that a man is sometimes justified in beating his wife, compared to 20 per cent of those who were married as adults. Violence against women and girls crosses the boundaries of race, culture, wealth and religion. Every year, thousands of women are maimed or killed by rejected suitors in many countries. A landmark World Health Organization multi-country study on women’s health and domestic violence against women reveals that of those interviewed, 37 per cent of women in a Brazilian province, 56 per cent of women in a province in the United Republic of Tanzania, and 62 per cent of women in a province in Bangladesh reported having experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner.

The pattern is broadly similar for industrialized countries. According to another key report from the same organization, the World report on violence and health, studies show that 40 per cent to 70 per cent of female murder victims in Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa and the United States were killed by their husbands or boyfriends – often within the context of an ongoing abusive relationship. In the United Kingdom, 40 per cent of female homicide victims are killed by their intimate partners.

Where women have a fair say, children benefit
The consequences of women’s exclusion from household decisions can be as dire for children as they are for women themselves. In families in which women are key decision-makers, the proportion of resources devoted to children is far greater than in those in which women have a less decisive role. This is because women generally place a higher premium than men on

---