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**FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CHANGES IN WOMEN'S ROLES
WITHIN THE FAMILY AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON WOMEN'S
STATUS: THE CASE OF KERALA, INDIA**

P. K. B. NAYAR and Sobha S. NAIR
Centre for Gerontological Studies
Trivandrum, India

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study aims at identifying the factors contributing to the deviations from the traditional role of women within the family and their influence on women's status. Specifically, the study attempts to answer the question: Does employment and/or access to an independent source of income contribute to increase the status of women within the family, measured in terms of alterations in the family power structure and authority relationship (which are traditionally male centred) in favour of women? The underlying assumption is that the male claim to superiority in the family inter alia is due to his role as the bread-winner and/or control over the family resources.

The study used both primary and secondary data from the State of Kerala in India - a State where women traditionally enjoyed better status than their counterparts in other parts of India.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

The traditional position of women in India is exemplified by the dictum of Manu, the great codifier of Hindu Law (circa 3rd century B.C.). This dictum is as follows:

- The father protects her in childhood;
- The husband protects her in adulthood;
- The son protects her in old age;
- At no time in life a woman deserves to be free.

The Kerala society was an exception to this rule. In Kerala, there was a unique institution called the "Tharawad", a peculiar variant of the Hindu Joint Family, where lineage was reckoned through the female and where matriarchal values prevailed. This is in contrast to the patriarchal and patrilineal system prevailing in most parts of India. The ideal type of the Tharawad prevailed among the Nayar community of Kerala, though some other communities, like the Ezhavas and Mappila Muslims, also followed this system. In the Nayar Tharawad, inheritance of property was through the female and a woman also had the freedom to choose and divorce her husband at will. This practice was called "Sambandham". Education of woman was a sine qua non of the Nayar family and it extended much beyond the three "R"s, well into literature, music, dance and rudiments of astronomy and Ayurveda (the Indian system of medicine). Upper class women also had to attain proficiency in the martial arts. Obviously, these talents equipped the Nayar woman with high functional skills which she could use with advantage outside the family.

Through the process of "sanskritisation" the values of education filtered down to other communities, so much so that when the State took up the promotion of education it was enthusiastically welcomed by the people. The higher status of women in Kerala enabled them to play the role of powerful change-agents in health care and family planning programmes in modern times. The high attainments of Kerala women on different indices of women's status, compared to other women in India, are mostly due to this advantage.

Table 18.1. – Selected indicators of status of women - India and Kerala

	Sex	India	Kerala
Birth Rate (1991) ‰		34.3	19.7
Death Rate (1991) ‰	M	10.7	5.9
	F	10.9	5.8
Growth Rate (1991) ‰		23.5	13.98
Life Expectancy at Birth (1991) years	M	57	68
	F	56	72
Infant Mortality Rate (1995) ‰		80	15
Effective Couple Protection Rate (1989-90)		30	55
Maternal Mortality Rate (1991) per 10,000		5.8	1.9
Deliveries in Hospitals (1987-88) %		14.2	46.2
Age at Marriage of Girls (1991) years		18.5	21.3
Literacy Rate (1991) %	M	63.66	94.45
	F	39.42	86.93
Physical Quality of Life Index (1984)	M	46.5	93.7
	F	32.1	89.7

THE SURVEY DATA

Much of the earlier social milieu that contributed to the status of women in Kerala in the past has disappeared due to legislation and cultural invasion from the North. The Tharawad, the bulwark of matriliney and matriarchy, was abolished by law in the 1920's. Patriarchy came in its wake and gathered momentum after independence (1947) and with this, the values fostered by women's equality received a setback. But the gains already made continued though with some handicaps. The ethos of the Tharawad system was control of women over the family property coupled with education. In modern times, education continued to be an asset of the Kerala woman and loss of control over Tharawad property was partly substituted by some form of employment or income. To what extent these new forms of power have enabled women to gain status is the purpose of the present enquiry. In this study, an attempt is made to measure the effect of employment or/and inherited property or income on the status of women through a change in traditional sex roles within the family.

An experimental sample of 100 married women in white collar employment and aged between 25 and 55 years and a control group of another 100 married women in the same age group but without employment but comparable education were chosen for the study. The samples of respondents were interviewed to collect the required information. The analysis of the data is given in the following tables.

AGE COMPOSITION

The age distribution of both categories of respondents is more or less the same except for a slight difference in the last category.

Table 18.2. – Age of respondents

Age	Employed	Not employed
25-35	25	22
35-45	53	49
45-55	22	29
Total	100	100

NUMBER OF CHILDREN

It is evident that employed mothers have fewer children than nonemployed mothers. The average number of children per employed mother is 1.94 and for the nonemployed mother it is 2.67. Of course, for both categories, the number is small and this is a reflection of the State's average. Though the knowledge about contraception among both categories is close to 100%, it is the employed women who have adopted birth control practices more. For them the problem of rearing an additional child while holding a job is more acute than for those without employment. Since procreation till nature put a stop to it was the accepted role of a married woman, the new practice of limiting the number of children is a deviation from established practice.

Table 18.3. – Number of children of the respondents

Number of children	Employed	Not employed
No child	6	2
1 child	22	19
2 children	48	26
3 children	20	36
4 or more	4	17
Total	100	100

Control over births brings status to women in at least five ways, as follows:

- Control over the desired number of children and the time for bearing them enables a woman to liberate herself from the frequent and lengthy preoccupations with pregnancies, childbirths and child care which immobilise her and deprive her of the ability to attend to anything else in life other than household chores;
- The time thus saved can be used for better management of the home including better care of children and better health and happiness of members. She can engage herself in more remunerative jobs and better social participation;
- Fewer children reduce the strain on family resources and the money saved can be used for a higher standard of living;
- Fewer births reduce the risk of maternal mortality which is a major killer of women where hospital facilities are few and superstitions on pregnancies and childbirth are abundant; and
- Finally, the knowledge that a woman can eliminate unwanted pregnancies removes from her the source of the greatest tension in her life, strengthens her self-confidence and develops her personality which is stunted by the

double disadvantage of subordination to man and having to bear children, possibly against her will and possibly also beyond her endurance.

EDUCATION

In the family situation, especially involving status of women, education of a woman has meaning only if it is contrasted with education of her husband; for, in many cases, status may be determined on the basis of who has the higher education. Hence we have given in Table 18.4 the education of our respondents in a comparative frame of reference.

Table 18.4. – Education of respondent vis-a-vis education of husband

Education	Employed	Not employed
Higher than husband's	28	24
Same as husband's	45	39
Lower than husband's	27	37
Total	100	100

In general, more employed women had a higher level of education than their husband's while the contrary was the case with nonemployed women. One reason for this phenomenon was that white collar jobs required higher educational levels. Also, a husband looking for a nonemployed wife may not be very much concerned with her educational attainment.

EMPLOYMENT

Table 18.5 gives the employment level of the respondents in relation to that of their husbands. Interestingly, around one-fourth of the respondents had higher jobs than their husbands. Also, only one-fifth of the respondents had lower jobs than their husbands. The implications of this for woman's status are described in two later tables (Tables 18.9 and 18.10).

Table 18.5. – Respondent's employment level vis-a-vis that of husband

Employment level	Employed
Higher than husband's	24
Same as husband's	48
Lower than husband's	21
Husband self employed*	7
Total	100
* In business or agriculture.	

INCOME

Since our assumption on woman's status in the family also involves her possession of an independent income (whether from employment or inheritance or other sources) and since this income could be available to all our respondents whether employed or not, we have given prominence to this aspect in our study. Again, this is contrasted with the income of the husband following the logic used earlier.

One more table will complete the picture on income, viz., the respondent's income as a proportion of the total family income. For assessing status, it is not enough if one knows whether the income of a woman is higher or lower than that of the husband. It is also necessary to know what is the proportion of this income in the total family income pool, which may consist of incomes of in-laws and others besides the husband and wife who are living in the family and sharing the family expenditures. It will be seen from Table 18.8 that only 38% of employed and 35% of unemployed respondents are living in nuclear families.

Table 18.6. – Income of respondent vis-à-vis income of husband

Income level	Employed	Not employed
Higher than husband's	26	20
Same as husband's	38	34
Lower than husband's	36	46
Total	100	100

Table 18.7 shows that in one third of the cases, the respondent's income constitutes more than 50% of the total family income. This is true of nonemployed women as well.

Table 18.7. – Percentage of respondent's income in the total family income

Percentage	Employed	Not employed
More than 75	8	14
50-75	26	21
Less than 50	66	65
Total	100	100

FAMILY TYPE

The type of family of residence is a possible contributor to the woman's status in the family. We have mentioned earlier that in the Tharawad, which was a joint family, women enjoyed high status. In nuclear families also, since responsibility is in fewer hands, the probability for the wife to have power is high. Of course, the dynamics of woman's status may not be dependent on the type of family alone though at times this may emerge as an important factor.

Table 18.8. – Family type of respondents

Family type	Employed	Not employed
Purely nuclear	38	35
With in laws	26	31
With parents and others	36	34
Total	100	100

HELP RECEIVED FROM HUSBAND IN FAMILY WORK

In assessing the changes in the role of a woman in the family, the extent of help received from the husband is critical. If the husband entertains the notion that it is beneath his dignity to do any household chores or to help his wife in her household work, he will not help even in genuine cases where she needs help. When both husband and wife are employed, the husband

would understand the problems of his wife who has to perform the double role of an employee and housewife. For a nonemployed wife, the problem may not be very serious.

Table 18.9. – Amount of help from husband

Extent	Employed	Not employed
Very much	30	4
Much	37	25
Little	33	47
Very little	0	24
Total	100	100

Employed wives get more help from their husbands than do nonemployed wives. This will be as much out of sheer need in a nuclear family as by the free will of the husband; in the nuclear family the wife cannot look for help from any source other than the husband, especially when a servant is not available. Whether by necessity or by choice, the effect is the same; the wife gets relieved of much of her tension and burden. From the point of view of role sharing some of the female roles get shifted to the male and, to that extent, the stereotype of gender-based roles becomes less categorical.

A further analysis of this data in terms of the level of employment and income of the wife showed the following relationships:

- Husbands whose wives have higher level employment or whose wives have higher income or whose wives' income forms a substantial proportion of the family income form a larger percentage of those who help their wives "very much" and "much" in household chores.
- Higher educational level of the wife is also a factor in this though it is not as strongly co-related as employment and income.
- Husbands in nuclear families help their wives more than those in other type of families.

DECISION MAKING

Share in family decision making is an important indicator of a woman's status in the family, since decision making is associated with the authority to make decisions and power to implement them. Because of this importance, we gave serious consideration to this aspect in our study. We divided family decisions into two categories - routine decisions, i.e., day-to-day decisions on everyday problems of home management including purchase of provisions, decision on menu, disposal of routine issues, etc. and critical

decisions, i.e., decision on the number of children including decision on sterilisation and those decisions that are taken occasionally and involve a sizeable portion of family income (purchase of consumer durables, property - moveable and immovable, education and marriage of children, etc.). The major areas of family decisions were identified and put in the two categories and questions were separately asked in these two clusters and their average scores were taken. These are shown in Table 18.10.

Table 18.10. – Decision making in the family

Who decides	Employed		Not employed	
	Routine	Critical	Routine	Critical
Mainly by self	58	11	57	3
Jointly	23	57	37	31
Mainly by husband	19	32	6	66
Total	100	100	100	100

While it could be accepted that the complexities of modern living required that many of the day-to-day decisions be taken by the wife because it is more pragmatic and because she is a better judge than the husband on such issues, the decisions on critical issues continue to be a male prerogative. The power of our respondents to enter this area both independently and jointly with the husband, therefore, should be considered as something revolutionary - in fact more revolutionary than the husband going to the kitchen and helping his wife in cooking. This is the case of both role sharing and role exchange.

Since this is also an important area of status gain, we analysed the data in terms of other significant variables. The findings are given below. Critical decision making by the respondent alone and jointly with husband was related to the following factors:

- Higher level of employment of wife;
- Higher level of income of wife;
- Larger proportion of wife's income in family income;
- Higher educational level (much above the threshold) of wife;
- Living in nuclear families.

In fact, all those variables which were related to the husband's sharing wife's household chores were found to be related to decision making also.

SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

We have identified some of the more critical factors that contribute to changes in women's role within the family and the consequent increase in status. In traditional Kerala, the matrilineal system and education of women contributed to the status of women. In modern times, the matrilineal system was replaced by patrilineality but education of women continued. In any case the advantage of education once established cannot be undermined. Education equips women for modern jobs. Some among those who did not go for jobs could inherit sufficient property/assets to have an independent income after marriage.

Both education and employment modified the roles of the woman in the family. Early marriage, unlimited number of children, spending of one's whole time in childbearing, child rearing and in household chores and subordination to husband and other male elders were the normative roles of a woman in the family.

Education modified a woman's role by keeping her in school for a longer time, delaying marriage and equipping her for a healthy married life and a professional career. The first gave her control over pregnancies with all the advantages that it brought. Education helped her to increase her worth to other members of the family. It expanded her mental horizon and increased her self-confidence, both of which helped her to remove her marginal status in the family.

Employment shifted her main activity from the hearth and home to office where she has to spend around one-half of her waking hours. To that extent, her role as cook, kitchen and home worker gets modified. Employment broke the male monopoly as bread-winner and the control that it helped him to exercise authority over the family members. In some cases, there would be given a complete role reversal as in the case of a woman-headed household.

Possession of income which employment permitted gave her a voice in its spending, i.e., a share in family decision making and this helped in many vital areas of family life.

A flow chart linking the different variables involved in our scheme of things is given below.

Determinants and dynamics of social status of women in the family

