Family Structure, Women’s Education and Work: Re-examining
The High Status of Women in Kerala

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Introduction

Kerala has drawn considerable attention in recent years due to its paradoxical pattern of growth, characterized by high social achievements on a weak economic base, often referred to as the ‘Kerala model of development’. The dramatic decline in fertility since the seventies and the process of demographic transition in the state is one such achievement. Attempts to understand the determinants of fertility decline in Kerala, as also in other regions

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1 We would like to thank Vanita Nayak Mukherjee and K. Saradamoni for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. N. Meera for research assistance.

2 A comprehensive case study of Kerala’s development experience (UN 1975) highlighting the fertility decline since the early seventies, drew a more general and significant policy inference for countries in the early stages of industrialization: “It could be that the more proximate factors responsible for decline in fertility in the now advanced countries were educational and health developments which happened to take place together with increases in per capita incomes, industrialization and urbanization. Much the same results could be achieved in less industrialized societies by giving higher priority and precedence to the development of these services.” While this study itself did not project this as a Kerala model, pointing out in fact that such development should also lead fairly rapidly to all-round advances in agriculture and manufacturing industry, it has come to be popularly described as the Kerala model of development (see Raj 1994).

of the developing world, yielded a strong negative association between female literacy and fertility rates. ‘Women’, during this time (the ’70s), were emerging as a recognized constituency in the development effort and this relationship helped in strengthening the conceptual links between women’s issues and economic development (Kabeer 1999). Literacy, together with non-domestic employment, which gave women access to independent sources of income, came to be regarded as important components of women’s ‘status’, which affected fertility and mortality outcomes (Mason 1985). Since Kerala women have on average, been among the most literate compared to women in other states of India (though the same can not be said of female work-participation rates), much was written about the ‘high status’ of women in Kerala (see Table 1) and their central role, historically, in social development (Jeffery, 1992). Later research questioned this straightforward
relationship between girls’ education and fertility, emphasizing the need to focus on the social context within which women make decisions (see Heward and Bunwaree 1999). For instance, how is a macro outcome like the decline in fertility negotiated at the micro level of the family, riddled by gender differentiated authority, roles and responsibilities, giving younger women, particularly, very little power to make decisions?

The growing uneasiness with Kerala’s social development outcomes, with the rising visibility of gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence, mental ill-health manifested increasingly as suicide, and the rapid growth and spread of dowry and related crimes, reinforced the need to study family structures and practices. It might be suggested that the growing dowry demands and the visibility of domestic violence, indicated that women had internalized subordination, sustaining inequitous gender relations within the household. We attempt to understand the contradictions in social development in contemporary Kerala by focusing on families (used interchangeably with households) as microcosmic sites of such contradictions, where unequal relations of power between men and women are shaped. Changes in the structure and practices of families in Kerala in the past century, themselves shaped by wider social processes, had wide-ranging implications for gender relations. We will attempt to show that the dominant persuasion of families today, particularly in terms of their role in regulating access to material and social resources is patrifocal,

TABLE 1
Development Indicators: Kerala and India


(one that gives precedence to men over women). While on the one hand alterations in marriage, inheritance and succession practices, changing dramatically the practices of erstwhile matrilineal groups, have weakened women’s access to and control over
inherited resources, on the other, the changing levels of female employment and persistence of a gendered work structure have limited their claims to “self-acquired” or independent sources of wealth. At the same time, it is in the norms of masculinity and femininity taking

\[\text{\textsuperscript{3}}\text{This is a term used by Mukhopadhyay and Seymour (1994). They distinguish “patrifocal” from “patriarchy” which tends to imply a monolithic system in which males always predominate in all settings and socio-economic contexts and at all stages of the life-cycle. The patrifocal concept is more “flexible” and adaptable creatively to both internal/external pressures for change.}\]

shape in the context of emerging consumer practices, that the details of a patrifocal ideology are being consolidated and reinforced. Importantly, this consolidation of ‘conservative’ change also invests men with forms of control over property/resources and over women’s sexuality.

This essay is divided into five sections. In Section 1 we discuss the concepts of patrifocality, bargaining power and fallback position, status, autonomy, agency and empowerment, used to understand gender relations and discern the need to focus on families and their social contexts. Changing family structures and practices and their implications for gender relations are analysed in Section 2. The indications emerging from the non-conventional indicators, domestic violence and mental distress are presented in Section 3. In Section 4 we explore the less known aspects of the relationship between literacy/education, conventional indicators of the high status of women in Kerala, and employment linked to patrifocal family practices. We conclude with the suggestion that education and employment have not played the transformative role so generally expected of them, a ‘discontinuity’ that is shaped by their mediation by patrifocal families on the one hand and that is evident in non-conventional indicators on the other. The study is based on secondary, published material and is exploratory in nature and underlines the need for more research. It also draws insights from ‘reconstructing the past’ through life histories of 15 ‘ordinary’ women, that is, women not marked by any level of social visibility in the state. We have categorized these respondents into three age groups: five were elderly (60 years and above), two were middle aged (in their 40s) and eight were young (roughly between 25 and 40).\[\text{\textsuperscript{4}}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{4}}\text{The life histories were documented and compiled by Dr T.K. Anandi, a sociologist based in Kozhikode, with contributions from Sandhya Chandrasekharan, Geetha, and Bindu in Trichur; Deepa Shankar and N. Meera in Trivandrum. The names of our respondents have been changed. Not all of them were able to recall their age accurately. The elderly respondents, P. S. Nair, 72, and Uma Antarjanam, 76, had not worked outside the home and lived in middle class households; Mariamma, 60, (Christian) is a nurse; Karthiyayini amma, 65, (Nair) stopped working as a domestic help recently and lives with her daughter and husband; Pathumma, 65, (matrilineal Muslim), manages her household in Malappuram district, while her husband and three sons (of four sons and four daughters) run}\]
Concepts

Families regulate gender differentiated access to and control over resources, both material and social, including education, health and property rights and are an important arena where gender relations are structured. Mukhopadhyay and Seymour (1994: 3) use the term patrifocal to understand a family that is in important aspects focussed on the interests of men and boys. ‘As in most intensive agricultural, socially stratified, state-level societies, there have evolved in India a set of predominant kinship and family structures and beliefs that give precedence to men over women — sons over daughters, fathers over mothers, husbands over wives, and so on’. These male oriented structures and beliefs, they argue, constitute a socio-cultural complex that profoundly affects women’s lives. The structural features of patrifocal families include patrifocal residence; patrilineal descent; patrilineal inheritance and succession, all of which emphasize the centrality of males to the continuity and well being of families. In association with this is the relative marginality of females centered in the expectation that upon marriage they will shift residence and affiliation to the family of their husband. Importantly, when speaking of Kerala, these structures were not so clearly given even as far as the early twentieth century. The different regions of Kerala sustained diverse forms of matrilineal and patrilineal families, that with the exception of the Nambudiris

a provision store in Mysore. The middle aged respondents Fathima, 40, (patrilineal Muslim) whose husband sells fish for a living doesn’t go out to work; Chandrikakumari, 43, is from a middle class Namboodiri household. Of the younger respondents only two are from middle class households, Kala, 33, (matrilineal Nair) employed in a government welfare scheme and Arifa, (matrilineal Muslim) in her thirties, unemployed and married to a Gulf migrant; Shanti, 35, (matrilineal Nair) recently joined a self employed women’s scheme and depends largely on the proceeds of coconut and cashew on 50 cents of land and livestock; Nafissa, 26, (patrilineal Muslim) works irregularly as a domestic help; Anitha, 28, (patrilineal Ezhava), is a wage labourer; Lakshmi, 38 (Ganaka, a backward caste) is a domestic help, Omana, 35, who converted recently to Christianity, works as a sweeper; Sindhu (patrilineal Hindu) in her twenties and the only never married woman among our respondents, works on a daily wage in a tile factory. (Life Histories).

(Brahmins, mostly patrilineal), clearly excluded some of the more extreme forms of discrimination against females.

Following Sen’s (1990) exposition of the household, it is suggested here that gender relations within the family are characterized both by cooperation and conflict and their hierarchical character is maintained or changed through a process of bargaining between men and women with differential access to and control over resources. We will also draw upon his analysis of the household in terms of bargaining power, fallback position and perceived interest response. Gender disparity is maintained in the household through the association of men with ‘productive’ work and the ‘outside’ and women with the ‘inside’ or ‘reproductive’ work. A member’s
bargaining power is defined by a range of factors, in particular the strength of his/her fallback position (outside options which determine how well off he/she would be if cooperation ceased) and the degree to which his/her claim is seen to be legitimate. Since women’s perceived interest is so intimately linked to the family’s welfare, it could influence bargaining outcomes such as making a perceived interest choice, weakening their individual well-being.

Given such a social context, defining women’s ‘status’ in terms of schooling and labour force participation, is at best partial. No doubt the two are important variables as potential sources of ‘autonomy’ for women. Together they enhance choice and opportunity in women’s lives; provide an independent source of income, strengthen the fallback position, the perception of individual interest and help to raise their perceived contribution to the household. However, indications are that education alone does not enable women to challenge gender relations; much depends on channeling education towards engendering critical attitudes. Crucially, domestic violence and dowry deaths went alongside rising levels of education. Nor did work by itself ensure women’s control over earnings or their ability to take ‘self interested’ decisions. Importantly, ‘status’ here, was not necessarily distinguished from women’s position in society reflecting the values of the community and evoking some idea of esteem (Dyson and Moore, 1983; Mason, 1985; Mason, 1993; Jeffrey and Basu, 1994). In this sense, it could also go against women’s ability to make independent choices, against societal values (Kabeer, 1999). There may sometimes be a strong rationale for women to make choices which are disempowering. Deeply entrenched social rules, norms and practices, which shape social relations within households as one arena, influence behaviour and shape choice (Kabeer, 1999).

Clearly, there was a need to focus more broadly on socio-cultural institutions such as family and kinship, which regulate gender relations. Sociological studies using kinship systems across India as proxies for autonomy, found that south India, including Kerala, represented ‘greater freedom for women’ (Karve, 1953) or greater female autonomy defined as ‘the ability to manipulate one’s personal environment’ (Dyson and Moore, 1983). The prevalence of matrilineal kinship among sections of the population in Kerala with its patterns of inheritance, marriage and post-marital residence seemed to indicate greater decision-making power for women vis-a-vis women in patrilineal families of north India. It appeared therefore that Kerala women enjoyed not only a high status but also a more egalitarian gender regime. However, studies, which use access to land (women’s rights to land under specific kinship systems) as a measure of autonomy or empowerment, reflected a simplistic relationship (Kabeer, 1999). It was seldom demonstrated how such access translated into actual control and hence the power to make decisions. Moreover, that autonomy, not easily measurable, could be severally constituted and indications that more direct measures of autonomy could yield different results, were being thrown up (Visaria, 1996; Rajan et al., 1996). Visaria’s (1996) measure of economic autonomy in terms of women’s access to and control over household income, suggested that women in Gujarat had higher levels of autonomy than those in Kerala despite much lower levels
of literacy. The recent National Family Health Survey, 1998-99 (IIPS 2000), which incorporated measures of autonomy for ever-married women for the first time, also revealed that Kerala trailed Gujarat in terms of all the measures of autonomy — household decision-making, freedom of movement and access to money. However, these studies relied on understanding empowerment through a number of questions on decision-making by women, some strategic to their lives and some not so relevant. Such ‘statistical’ perspectives on decision-making should be taken for what they are: simple windows on complex realities, revealing very little about the subtle negotiations that go on between men and women (Kabeer, 1999). In fact gender empowerment measures (GEM), like the UNDP’s measure (1995) and the alternative measures developed by Hirway and Mahadevia (1996) for the Indian states, which did not include the household dimension due to non-availability of data on gender inequality within the household, continued to place Kerala women at or near the top.

The concepts of ‘autonomy’ and ‘empowerment’ were expected, nevertheless, to shed critical insights on power relations (Batliwala, 1994, Kabeer, 1999). Differential access to and control over resources, reflecting constraints imposed by the extant social order, deprives women of the ability to make decisions/choices and exercise agency. Agency or the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them tends to be operationalized as decision-making (Kabeer 1999), but it is important to note that it may take other forms like bargaining, negotiation or manipulation or the more intangible cognitive process of reflection. Empowerment alludes to a recognition by women of the ideology that legitimizes and sustains male domination (Batliwala 1994). However, if rights in property customarily enjoyed by women get eroded over time and women’s work expands only slowly or into selective and relatively lower paying occupations, their control over resources is weakened and so also their relative position within the household.

**Changing Family Structures and Practices**

In the last few decades there has been a gradual but concerted shift in the understanding of women’s property rights in Kerala. The shift, which has involved the major social groups in the state — patrilineral and matrilineral — has been towards a convergence on property practices usually associated with patrilineral forms of families. Conventionally and very generally women’s property rights in patrilineral societies tended to be organized around marriage, in a range of practices including the transfer of women and change in their kin identity, residence, dowry, exchange of gifts, and obligations at childbirth. These practices framed the denial virtually of inheritance rights for women. Though not uniformly, this combination of practices went along with a preference to transfer to women movable rather than immovable property. This is perhaps most sharply delineated in north and north western India where village exogamy was observed and close kin marriages prohibited. In sharp contrast to this picture, women’s property rights in
matrilineal societies in Kerala were clearly delinked from marriage, emerging instead from a birthright in the family property not unlike (though distinct from) the manner of males in the Hindu Undivided Family. However it is notable that the convergence on a set of practices usually associated with patrilineal groups has involved changes in women’s property rights among the dominant patrilineal groups as well. That is to take one instance, if dowry (otherwise associated with patrilineal groups) is becoming a very general practice, it has failed to retain its characteristics (linked to social sanction and regulation) of the mid-twentieth century even among the patrilineal groups. It is in this sense of a convergence of practices that we speak of the dominant persuasion of families in Kerala today being patrifocal. However, this section is limited to examining the basis of changes in gender and property relations in families through alterations, broadly, in the organization of marriage and linked to it, of the contours of masculinity and femininity, in the latter part of the twentieth century. Though it is conceivable that family practices have seen important changes across social groups, this section will focus on the major matrilineal social groups, the Nairs and Ezhavas\(^5\) and the major patrilineal groups, the Christians and Muslims. This choice is dictated as much by availability/scarcity of material as the visibility of these groups.

**Social and legal reform**

Processes of reform of matrilineal and patrilineal families leading to legislation in the first half of the twentieth century established the basis of patrifocal families in Kerala.\(^6\) Until 1986 when the Supreme

\(^5\)The Nairs are a forward and the Ezhavas a backward caste and both were conventionally associated with land holding and cultivation. Besides the Ezhavas were associated, widely in colonial narratives, with toddy tapping as an occupation.

\(^6\)As many as 20 legislations were enacted between 1896 and 1976 which marked the gradual revocation of a legal framework for matriliny. The processes of reform however were of two kinds — (a) legislative reform and (b) reform of caste/social practices involving local level mobilization and campaigns — and were crucial in terms of their implications for gender relations within the family. Legislation in the early twentieth century also set forth property rights among patrilineal social groups, the Christians and the Nambudiris. Court held that the Christians of Travancore and Cochin were to be governed by the provisions of the Indian Succession Act, 1925, they were governed by highly gender discriminatory laws, which came into force in the early twentieth century.\(^7\) In fact, the Travancore Christian Succession Act, 1916 has been described as an outcome of the expression of fear and anxiety on the part of the Christian community over certain decisions by the courts in Travancore applying the British Indian law for Christians to adjudicate on the rights of widows. The denial of women’s rights to property rested on ‘fears’ of domestic disharmony and ruin arising from frequent litigation and
fragmentation of property. Under the Travancore Act, women were eligible to receive one fourth the son’s share or five thousand rupees whichever was less as stridhanam (dowry) and did not inherit paternal property. The Indian Succession Act, 1925 does not discriminate between the sexes in matters of intestate succession.

A series of legislations in the early twentieth century introduced measures ‘recognizing’ the conjugal family (as against the matrilineal family which did not centre conjugality) and defining relations of protection and dependence between husband and wife and father and children, facilitated a patrifocal family among the matrilineal Hindu groups. Hindu women now had individual rights over their share of family property but this right was achieved within a legal framework of dependence on men as husbands. The Hindu matrilineal social groups today come within the ambit of the Hindu civil code, with some special provisions such as their exclusion from the mitakshara (Hindu Undivided Family) coparcenary. The Kerala Joint Hindu Family (Abolition) Act, 1976 eliminated the legal conception of joint family property among the Hindus by replacing joint tenancies with ‘tenancies in common’ as if partition had taken place among members on a per capita basis.

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7 The state of Kerala was constituted in 1956 of territories from the princely states of Travancore, Cochin and the erstwhile British district of Malabar.

8 "If daughters are given share along with their brothers and the widow is allowed to have any claim whatever, except maintenance in the property of their husband, it would destroy the domestic tranquility, throw open the flood-gates of litigation, bringing all sorts of calamities and eventually ruin the community” (Tharakan, 1997: 125 citing ‘Original Appendix No. 1’, Dissenting Minute to the Christian Committee, c 1916).

Legal changes went alongside ritual and material reorganization of marriage. Marriage was streamlined and consolidated in one rite, where earlier there were two, that established its sacred aspect. It is not without import that marriages among the matrilineal groups today emphasize the tali rite (rite investing women with a small gold ornament worn around the neck and considered symbolic of marriage) and considerable thought has gone into the fashioning of the tali (the Ezhavas have also incorporated the caste Hindu rite of kanyadanam which symbolizes the gift of the virgin) (Osella and Osella, 2000: 105).

In phases Islamic law was made to apply to descent of property among the Mappillas of north Malabar. The Mappilla Marumakkatayam Act, of the late 1930s provided individual rights to partition of the taravad (matrilineal joint family) and a Kerala amendment in 1963 brought the share of any member of a Mappilla taravad under the purview of Islamic law, while also substituting Muslim for Mappilla (Agarwal, 1994: 233). Muslim women’s inheritance rights among the patrilineal groups of south Malabar, Cochin and Travancore were generally on the lines of Islamic law, moderated by local custom as anywhere else in India.
Matriliny and women’s rights

A question that inevitably arises in the context of discussion of matriliny is whether the system allowed women effective rights (as in control) to property. Matriliny under colonial law was unabashedly patriarchal, investing the right to manage and regulate property in the senior male. This has led to the easy dismissal of matriliny as affording little by way of effective property rights to women. In this context, it is imperative to ask whether property rights could ever be complete without descent of property and lineage. There has also been no engagement with the cleavage or ‘tension’ emerging from vesting descent/lineage in the female members of the taravad and significant management rights over property in the male members. Even at the risk of a degree of generalization, it needs to be stated that property rights, characterized by descent/lineage on the one hand and managerial powers on the other, flowing among different sets of people — senior and junior male members and mothers and daughters respectively — should not be confused with patrilineal forms of family in terms of their implications for women. The implications of the cleavage or ‘tension’ for the distribution of authority were completely ignored in colonial law, more concerned with identifying and enforcing a rigid set of rules. Besides, the tendency to dismiss matriliny, on the grounds that authority was gendered in favour of males, masks from view the less dramatic but equally important gains resting in greater sexual choice, positive attitudes towards girl children, and social support and security from residence in the natal home. Positive factors emerging from matriliny may be grouped into three: (a) emerging from differences in regulation of women’s sexuality, (b) from positive attitudes towards girl children, and (c) in terms of kinship (social) identity.

Greater sexual choice If matrilineal societies in Kerala had come in for shocked, surprised and even exaggerated comment historically for affording an unusual degree of sexual freedom to women (Fuller, 1976), its distinct organization of marriage and property made for very real differences in social attitudes towards women. It has been pointed out that Nair and other matrilineal women seemed to have had greater space for making decisions on marriage and sexual relations (Menon, 1996, Ramachandran, 1997: 279). However pressure could be brought to bear upon women to establish or continue marriages that were beneficial to the taravad or to discontinue those that

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9 Among the Nairs and Tiyas and Ezhavas, it was in a pre-pubertal rite called the tali kettu kalyanam that the tali was tied. While this rite was in several aspects symbolic of marriage, it did not lead to cohabitation. After attaining puberty women could enter into sambandham (one of several terms used for conjugal relations) following customary ceremony. The tali rite was the more elaborate and expensive one as also the rite targeted for elimination by social reformers. Gradually the ‘tying of the tali’ came to be observed as part of one consolidated marriage rite, and to be invested with the sense of ‘wifehood’.

10 A large majority of Muslims in Kerala are Sunni and are governed by the provisions of the Hanafi school of Islamic law.

were frowned upon (Puthenkulam, 1976, Gough 1961, 1993). This was evident from one of our elderly Nair respondents who felt forced to enter into a sambandham at the age of 15 but was able subsequently to get a divorce. “After four years, I took him and went to the Registrar’s office and nullified the marriage”. Given this constraint, the institution of marriage provided women with greater security. Notably, women’s ability to walk out of a marriage was shaped by their permanent and uncontested right to subsistence in their natal home. Besides, women could remarry on termination of a prior connection or on the death of their husbands. Importantly, in comparison with patrilineal societies the oppressive edge of widowhood was absent. An absence of the more stringent forms of sexual control made possible greater mobility and greater exposure of girls to locally available forms of literacy among women of matrilineal castes (Gough, 1961).

**Security of girl children** The birth of a girl was a welcome event in matrilineal families. This eliminated at least the more extreme forms of discrimination (Alexander, 2000, Jeffery, 1992). It also made available to girls even in the mid-nineteenth century, a level of education that was not to be found elsewhere (Jeffery 1992). However in recent years there are indications that the earlier advantages, reflected for instance in Kerala’s favourable female sex ratio, cannot be taken for granted anymore (Rajan et.al., 2000).

**Familial (kinship) identities** Inheritance and lineage were through women, which underlined their importance to family or kin identity. Hence women were members of their property group by survivorship, their maintenance and residence rights in their natal home were achieved directly, i.e., they were not mediated by marriage or derived from their husbands. More importantly, these rights marked a sense of continuity and security rather than rupture and vulnerability. It followed that senior women, particularly of competence, in the bigger taravads had an important role in making and/or influencing decisions regarding the household and property (Gough, 1961).

On the other hand, among patrilineal groups marriage (expressed through several ritual observations) marked the severing of a woman’s ties with the natal house/family. Among the Christians

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11Menon (1996) gives more recent instances of women who chose break off their marriages and to live with men of their ‘choice’.

12Even as post marital residence and property transfers are central indicators in a material sense of a woman’s disinheritance and fractured identity; their symbolic expression is to be found in some of the key rituals of the marriage service (Visvanathan, 1993: 108). Visvanathan’s study is based on ethnographic work in of Kerala, this severing of ties (and sense of fractured identity) is expressed in the payment of stridhanam, affiliation to husband’s family and church, and the specific character of her incorporation in the husband’s family. That is, upon marriage though a woman’s affiliation is to her husband’s family, she is not ever ‘fully’ incorporated, by which we mean that she is not incorporated as an individual with rights equal to
her husband. Rather she is incorporated as a wife, which is to say that she does not even have control over her stridhanam, not to speak of a substantial right in her husband’s family property. A wife’s rights are restricted to the right of maintenance from her husband’s estate (Visvanthan, 1993). A separated woman had no place in Syrian Christian society (ibid, 112, Roy, 1999: 210, 213).

**Family practices**

Changes in the organization of marriage provide indications of changes in gender relations and erosion of property rights. Particularly since the 1970s these changes have been shaped in important ways by consumer practices and identities. With outmigration, specially to the Gulf countries and the inflow of remittances, Kerala has been in the vanguard of consumer trends (Osella and Osella, 2000, Kurien, 1994). Osella and Osella (1999: 992) argue that the characterization of consumption as an empowering and ultimately egalitarian act is severely limited. In our context they point to caste status and income levels as constraints; that lower castes cannot hope to attain an entirely new identity by adopting new consumption patterns and that income levels exclude participation in specific kinds of consumption. Hence inequality is built into the politics of consumption. However, inequality can also be transmitted through the very act of ‘enforced’ consumption as against the process of exclusion. Gender-based inequality in the context of marriage practices emerges not by excluding women but by norming specific kinds of consumption — jewellery, consumer durables most visibly. By generating expectations on a wide scale through lavish marriages, expensive jewellery and large dowries, women are objectified in dangerous ways.

**Marriage, female roles and family status** Two recent studies focusing on consumer practices in the context of ‘Gulf migration’ found that marriage formed a priority item of spending of remittances (Ibid, 1999, 2000, Kurien, 1994). ‘Marriages are
occasions for dramatic staging of public performances of a family’s wealth, status and style. They were also occasions when consumer goods change hands’ (Osella and Osella, 1999). This emphasis on marriage, as a consumer practice that provides access to social mobility, has had two kinds of effects. One, it effects changes in the idiom of marriage, both in terms of celebration — through ritual and feasting — and in terms of organization that is, preference to avoid pre-existing practices of matrilineal social groups such as village endogamy and cross cousin marriages. Linked to sustaining ties that already exist by marriage, these practices helped keep marriages at close distances, giving women and men constant recourse to their natal kin; called for less formality and expense (Aiyappan cited in Puthenkulam, 1977). It is significant then that cross-cousin marriages do not find favour anymore. Puthenkulam (1977: 93) also notes that the growing practice of demanding a dowry at marriage has led to a decline in cross-cousin marriages ‘as it is delicate to demand or receive a dowry from the mother’s brother’. If Puthenkulam (1977) records this trend among the Nairs, Osella and Osella (1999: 1010) note a ‘recent wholesale
disdain for village endogamy, and an increasing preference for marriage conducted outside the village’. Large dowries, dominant norms of femininity and extravagant celebration, which characterize the preferred forms of marriage make them inaccessible to poorer families (ibid, 2000: 89-97).

Two, marriage, raised to the level of a social imperative, mediates gendered interest and identity. Notably, families ‘husband’ scarce resources so as to achieve the best possible marriage for women, hence ‘family decisions’ regarding education and employment of women are specifically targeted towards marriage. Here dominant norms of femininity dictate that women use their education in the interests of marriage — as accomplished wives and better mothers (ibid, 2000: 41-46). In contrast while marriage is not unimportant for men, masculinity is not centered on it as it is on work. When a man goes to the Gulf it is to work, earn and gain social mobility, even if Gulf migrants are reckoned as preferred bridegrooms. One of our respondents indicated the dimensions that ‘masculinity’ could take in this context. She was considered old at the time of her second marriage at 23 years to a Gulf migrant, who already had a wife and three children. The marriage was arranged at his behest, because he thought he could ‘afford’ it. He told her that, ‘earlier, I never had money to buy even a beedi. But now I am in the Gulf and have got money. I can take care of two families’.

Post-marital residence of women In Kerala, perhaps more than anywhere else, changes in family practices are underwritten by comprehensive change in family structure across the spectrum of communities. Kerala has a very low incidence of joint families. It is in this context that we have to understand changes in post marital residence over the last half century. The general trend is towards adoption of

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14 Osella and Osella (1999, 2000) are concerned focally with the Ezhavas, a backward caste, and their data is based on study of a village in the Kuttanad area of south Kerala. Kurien (1994) has studied three villages, a predominantly Muslim village in north Kerala, Christian in central Kerala and Ezhava in south Kerala.

15 It is in this context that we have to understand changes in post marital residence over the last half century. The general trend is towards adoption of
nucleated residence (where a married couple sets up a household). We will denote this form of residence as patrifocal, informed as it is by gendered power relations. Mencher (1965)

Kolenda (1987) estimated from Census 1961 data for all states and territories from a 20 per cent sample of households, that Kerala’s 9 districts came within the 62 districts showing the lowest incidence of joint families. Kerala was also a state with a low proportion of married sons and/or other married relatives in the sample households. Kolenda also points out that higher proportions of joint family could be associated with land ownership and forms of kinship and that most of the joint families in Kerala were of the Nairs.

found in her south Malabar village that 50 per cent of Nair households were small matrilineal branches (an average of 3.5 persons per household), 15 per cent were nuclear family units living in houses that were received by women from their taravad, 15 per cent lived in houses established by men and women after marriage and 20 per cent comprised an assortment of related persons. She noted that there was a great deal of flexibility in residence patterns among Nairs, whether poor or wealthy, in the villages. From a sample survey of 403 matrilineal households across Kerala, Puthenkulam (1977: 107) found that the general pattern was patrifocal residence (where a married couple moves to a new house). However this pattern was more dominant in south Kerala (85.7 per cent) followed by central Kerala (61.8 per cent) and north Kerala (59.7 per cent). The largest proportion of matrilocal residence was in central Kerala (29 per cent) and residence in either the natal or husband’s home while waiting to move to patrifocality was highest in north Kerala (16.9 per cent).

A casual comment made by Puthenkulam (ibid: 109) is insightful regarding gendered power relations and the division of roles. ‘[T]he common residence pattern now is generally virilocal. Today no self-respecting person [male] attaches himself to his wife’s house and lives on her wealth like a drone. Such husbands are derisively described as “Koil Thampurans”, the consorts of royal ladies who lived by their wives. There are cases however of the husband shifting to the wife’s home to assume the management of her and the children’s property’ (emphasis ours). The dice, it would seem, is heavily loaded against the woman-subject! Yet, rather than resorting to extreme characterization Puthenkulam’s (109) findings indicate a state of continued mediation of earlier forms of matriliney with the contemporary emphasis on conjugal residence. It is important here that the natal home continues to provide refuge and security greatly to women in north and central and considerably in south Kerala. On the death of the husband, more than 90 per cent (of 398 respondents) of wives

Puthenkulam (1977) uses virilocal. We have preferred to use patrifocal for two reasons — to prevent confusing this with our earlier use of virilocal to mean ‘residence in the matrilineal home of the husband’ and because in the post reforms period (social reform and land reforms of the 1960s) the male-headed conjugal household has gained visibility.
returned to their natal homes in north and central Kerala and about 50 per cent in south Kerala. In south and central Kerala more than 70 per cent and in north Kerala more than 50 per cent of widows lived with married sons.

Inheritance rights Mid-twentieth century, Gough (1952) found that the taravad (matrilineal joint family) houses were inherited matrilineally but sons and daughters inherited other property. In Fuller’s (1976) study village in central Travancore, a distinction continued to be made between (i) taravad land inherited matrilineally, the alienation of which required the consent of all adult matrilineal descendents of the person holding it and (ii) separate land which was freely alienable. Recent research in central Travancore has shown that women continue to inherit a house but are less likely to receive agricultural land (Osella and Osella cited in Agarwal 1994: 177). More importantly, Osella and Osella (2000: 106), while not commenting directly on the inheritance rights of women, note that the transfer of their share of land is recorded in the community register of the Nair Service Society (NSS) and Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) for the Nairs and Ezhavas respectively, suggesting that inheritance has been replaced in a substantial way by transfer at marriage or dowry. It is also significant that this land is often sold and the cash equivalent given to the husband and that the dowry is not usually under the control of the girl. ‘While a newly wed bride living with her husband and his relatives is in no position to refuse to relinquish control over her dowry, her contribution may give her some leverage in the family’ (Osella and Osella, 2000: 102). It is possibly an effect of cumulative change that they (Ibid, 101) note that many women no longer have land to pass on to their daughters and mother-daughter inheritance is becoming rare.

Before the 1986 decision of the Supreme Court on Syrian Christian inheritance, women’s rights to paternal property were exhausted by the stridhanam. Given the evidence of resistance from entrenched social interests, church and community, there does not seem to have been a dramatic departure from existing custom, (Agarwal, 1994, Roy, 1999) though high rates of stridhanam go alongside the exercise of testation to safeguard patrimonial interests (Roy, 1999, Visvanathan, 1993: 146).

Stridhanam, dowry or disinheritance of women? An important indicator of the direction of change of women’s property rights is the very general visibility of dowry and the signs of its growing presence, including among groups that did not conventionally observe dowry. Yet empirical evidence of this is limited to a few micro studies. The practice of giving stridhanam at the marriage of a girl was customary among the patrilineal communities — the Christians, Muslims, Ezhavas and Nambudiris — and has been recorded among specific matrilineal groups as well — the Tiyas, Mappillas, and Ezhavas (Gough 1961). Importantly in the case of the latter, dowry did not exhaust women’s inheritance rights. However the custom varied widely among different groups and regions. Given this, village studies indicate that, across the spectrum of communities, the customary understanding of these practices is giving way to what Visvanathan (1993) terms a more ‘market’ approach. Among the matrilineal Hindu groups, there has been over the past century a very general shift to dowried virilocal monogamous marriages, conventional of the Christians (Osella and Osella, 2000: 85). Puthenkulam’s (1977: 104) survey recorded a fairly even presence
of dowry in north (32.7 per cent), central (29.8 per cent) and south (24 per cent) Kerala among the matrilineal groups, which is somewhat contrary to the prevailing view that dowry is less prevalent in north Kerala.

To get a sense of change, customary regulation is fast giving way to ‘competition’. An agreement on the stridhanam ‘due’ to the husband and/or his family was an essential part of the conventional arrangement of marriage among the Christians. Customary regulation was evident in its ‘public’ character. At a ritual event before the marriage, the amount of stridhanam was announced publicly among other details of the marriage. Also the marriage was solemnized only after the girl’s family gifts four per cent of the stridhanam amount to their church and a share to the bridegroom’s church (Visvanathan, 1993: 112). If stridhanam was understood

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17 If Visvanathan’s informants pointed out that it was not unusual for people to ‘trick’ the church by stating a much smaller amount than is actually paid, Kurien (1994) notes complaints by the church that with the influx of Gulf money people have tended to turn away from it. Could this be an indication of the ‘tightness’ of the marriage market, the need to concentrate all resources on ‘getting the best’ even at the risk of former community ties? as a woman’s share of her father’s property, indications are that it is lending itself to a process of disinheritance of women. Visvanathan (1993: 111) argues that its manipulative aspect has become dominant empirically and money is used to contract marriages with desirable families. Hence, the resemblance to a form of groom price in that a) only on payment of stridhanam is it possible to agree on a marriage, b) the money or property that changes hands is not controlled by the woman but by her husband and/or his kin, prominently his father, c) consequently a woman has only a right to maintenance in her conjugal home (Ibid: 113). The need to pay stridhanam is frequently a financial strain on a girl’s parents leading sometimes, particularly in middle class families, to sale of property and the pressure is such that the stridhanam sometimes (though not usually) exceeds what the son/s receive. The rate of stridhanam varied according to socio-cultural factors including educational qualifications and the employment status of men and women, and factors of considerable importance such as a woman’s complexion and ‘beauty’ (Visvanathan 1993: 111, Osella and Osella 2000: 101). 18

Kurien (1994) found that dowry was a major head of expenditure in two of three villages, studied in the context of migration-induced spending. In a Muslim village, where migrants were from the lower income groups, she finds that ‘the value placed on the purity and seclusion of women manifested itself in several ways in the expenditure patterns of this area’. This had led to a tremendous increase in dowry rates as well as the use of taxis, considered the more appropriate mode of travel for women. In the second, an Ezhava dominated village, while dowry is not mentioned, the major heads of expenditure were life cycle rituals and festivals. ‘Marriages were the biggest of such celebrations and migrants spent a good proportion of their Gulf money on the weddings of their sisters, daughters and close relatives’. In a relatively affluent Christian village, the largest heads of expenditure were education (donations to professional colleges) and dowries. ‘Status in this community accrued from having
a large bank balance, professionally educated family members (the large dowries were often ways of securing such

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18Notably dowry and education (or employment) are posed as competing demands for cash within families (Morrison, 1997).

sons-in-law) . . .’. Our elderly Christian respondent revealed that at her marriage in 1970 (between a nurse and a government employee) her dowry was Rs 3,000 ‘a big amount then’. More recently she paid Rs 3 lakhs as her elder daughter’s dowry.19

There are indications of significant escalation in dowry rates in the state. Dowries for mid-status middle class marriages (as between children of Ezhava primary school teachers or local factory workers) were up to Rs 200,000 in 1996 and rising. Besides, dowries include a combination of cash, gold, land and consumer durables. A high prestige, high wealth dowry could include up to 101 sovereigns of gold, a preferred form of dowry (Osella and Osella 2000: 101). Among the Ezhavas, the bulk of the dowry consisted of land given by the father, cash and gold. Though some notional distinction was made between land and gold to remain in the bride’s name and cash and goods going to the husband and his family, in practice most women lost control over the entire dowry, which is used to support the needs of the husband’s family. Osella and Osella (2000: 106) seem to suggest that the Nairs and Christians share these practices, for the Ezhavas are described as adopting the formers’ practices in a bid towards upward mobility. One point of difference cited, however, is that of public registration of the dowry paid and cash gifts received at the marriage of a girl with the SNDP. Ezhavas consider this important to guard against loss in case of a break up of the marriage while Nairs and Christians are noted to consider this shameful. Hence a Nair bride has proof of only her share of land via the NSS register.

It is important to note that property transfers are being made increasingly at the time of marriage of a girl and that there is an element of force associated with such demands. Two of our younger respondents, who are Nair, reported that dowry was not demanded or given at their marriages. However one of them mentions that her husband who later deserted her, would point out that she had not ‘brought’ anything, despite the fact that they lived in her natal home. While expressing herself against dowry, she added that she would be forced to pay dowry for her girls, if demanded, for fear

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19Mariamma views dowry as a woman’s rightful share, “because we won’t give them money anymore”. Besides, “I have given my land and house to my son. I am not partial. She can come to my house at any time but she is not supposed to show any authority over my house”. (Life Histories)

that otherwise they may be harassed. The unmarried respondent pointed out that dowry was a factor blocking her marriage — very recently a construction worker and wage labourer like herself demanded Rs 50,000 and 50 sovereigns of gold as dowry for his marriage.20 Among the matrilineal Muslims too there seems to be a gradual shift towards dowry. Our younger respondent from this group pointed out that while
dowry was not paid at her marriage, they may not be able to stop their son (now 13) from taking it, ‘because they are the new generation’. It was clear from the patrilineal Muslim respondents that they did not have control over dowry, specially cash and sometimes gold and land.

Non Conventional Indicators: Violence and Mental Distress

Analysis of reported crime in the state shows a four-fold increase between 1991 and 1996, of which growth in rape and domestic violence was the highest (National Crime Records Bureau, various issues). On the basis of the 1995-1997 average, it is seen that in the ascending order of crime, Kerala was ranked 25th among the Indian states in molestation and domestic violence, which includes dowry-related crime, 18th in sexual harassment and 10th in terms of dowry deaths (Mukherjee et al., 1999). While it must be remembered that dowry deaths were little heard of even in the recent past, it is possible that some dowry deaths were disguised as suicides. In a micro level study of 133 survivors of attempted suicides in 1994-95, more than half were women (Jayasree, 1997).

Sindhu pointed out that in the past it was possible for girls to marry without dowry. Expressing herself against the practice, she added that she would receive 10 cents of land and 5 sovereigns as her share of property. (Life Histories)

Arifa like the elderly matrilineal Muslim respondent, Pathumma, received mehr, (given to the wife by the husband at marriage). (Life Histories)

Fathima points out that she was unaware that her husband had used her dowry to renovate his parent’s house which was to go to his sister. She also had to give some of her gold to her husband’s sisters at their marriages. Nafissa’s parents had paid Rs 10,000 and 8 sovereigns of gold to her first husband at their marriage about 10 years ago, which was not returned on divorce. (Life Histories)

In general the incidence of completed suicides is higher for men and attempted suicides are higher for females (World Health Assembly Report, 1998, Vadakumcherry, 1994).

A major factor associated with suicide attempts by women was marital disharmony — 36 of 75 women. It was found also that one third of the women were suffering from domestic violence. Men, however, related economic problems followed by family problems. While harassment of women was not linked directly to dowry in this study, an autopsy study conducted in a district in Kerala revealed that more than one third of the women who had died had a dowry problem preceding suicide (Ibid).

A study of domestic violence undertaken between 1997–99 in seven sites (cities) in India, revealed that Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) had the highest prevalence of overall violence (to some extent due to higher reported rates of husband’s infidelity). Levels of psychological violence were very high — over two thirds of the sample women in rural and a little lower in urban non-slums (INCLEN/ICRW, 2000). Key causes of violence were: perceived lapses in fulfilling household responsibilities,
infidelity and alcoholism. ‘Disobedience’, including any act construed as disrespectful or disobedient or a challenge to male authority, has been seen as a critical precipitating factor (Batliwala, 1998, Jejeebhoy, 1998). Four of our younger and one middle aged respondents experienced violence from their husbands. As factors precipitating violence they cited suspicion of their fidelity, ‘disobedience’ and ‘disrespect’.  

It is understood that the more severe mental disorders such as schizophrenia show no significant gender difference in prevalence. However there is a greater prevalence of the more common type of conditions such as depression, and anxiety among women across socioeconomic levels and in diverse societies (Sonpar and Kapur, 1999). Research seems to indicate the social (rather than entirely psychological) influences on common mental distress in women, in particular due to domestic problems, are quite strong. A study of cases brought before the Family Court in Trissur between 1995-98, indicates that petitions filed increased from 477 to 860 — almost two thirds were filed by women for divorce and maintenance induced by protracted marital disharmony. Through case studies the author suggests that women suffered from greater stress (James, 2000). Based on his experience with psychiatric patients in Trissur district, a doctor asserted that the most common cause of psychological stress among women who are educated is lack of employment and the roles they are expected to assume after marriage (cited in Halliburton, 1998). Hence despite data limitations, there are clear indications that violence and mental distress are growing to be a serious problem in Kerala, warranting social concern and intervention.

Women, Education and Employment

As was stated earlier, male-oriented structures and beliefs profoundly affect women’s access to education and educational achievements (Mukhopadhyay and Seymour, 1994). While the 19th century reform movements had established the case for educating girls, this also had to be done without jeopardizing the interests of the patrifocal family. Over time arguments had been built up for imparting higher education to girls but couched in ‘marriageability- enhancing’ terms; later this argument was augmented by the increasing value placed on their potential earning capability and contribution to the economic well-being of the patrifocal family. If this
posed a challenge to gender differentiated roles within the family, the resilience of the
social division of labour is evident in

\[\text{Research on the negotiation of the issue of western education for girls (specially at the second ary and college levels) in the late nineteenth century brings to the fore the ‘value’ question. This could inform the contemporary debate as much for its difference in terms of policy as the continuity it marks in terms of socialization of girls and familial perceptions. Writing of Bengal and Calcutta in particular, Kerkhoff (1998) points out that high schools at this point were not intended to bring about equity in society, gender, class or otherwise. Girls high schools were recognized as socializing institutions established to better equip adolescent middle class girls to changing demands of the colonial urban and patriarchal society. It was hoped then that these high schools would reproduce the ideological and cultural hierarchies of the metropolis on which colonial rule depended.}

that women still (had to) do the cooking (Sen 1990) and shoulder principal responsibility of child care and other household chores.

In fact tensions between the value of formal education for women and the disruptive potential for the patrifocal family have influenced the very system of education. (Mukhopadhyay and Seymour, 1994). While certain historical specificities do mark out Kerala from the compulsions of a patrifocal family; broadly the changing strategies and practices of families in shaping educational achievements towards their ‘collective well-being’ remain. The high levels of female literacy in Kerala have been well documented. In relation to men too, the achievements of women have been laudatory: over the decadal periods since 1961, gender-based disparity (ratio of male literacy rate to female literacy rate) has narrowed rather sharply from 1.39 to 1.07 by 1991. Some of the more notable achievements have been the near universalization of primary education for both girls and boys, and the very low (compared to all-India) school drop-out rates for girls which in fact are higher for boys since at least the early seventies, at each level of school education (Ambili, 1996). However, what gets obscured in the context of the very high aggregate literacy levels in the state is that gender disparities (ratio of male/female percentages at each level) at higher than primary or middle levels of schooling existed and continue to exist in college education, particularly technical education. It is well-known that in the state, macro level pressures that increase the desirability of education for girls have been strong historically and have been maintained over time (Jeffrey, 1992). As argued above such pressures create tensions at the micro-level of the family. In the context of Kerala it has been argued that matriliny, in this respect, would have been less restraining since even prior to the 1860s, the period in which the centralized education systems were established, girls often attended local schools (Jeffrey, 1992). The fact that Malabar showed much higher rates of female literacy compared to the other districts of Madras Presidency, gave this added support. In contrast, in Namboodiri households in the 30s and 40s, girls did not attend schools but were taught at home. However, it appears that this freedom to girls for attending schools did not hold for higher than primary/middle levels of schooling even among the matrilineal households.
The attainment of puberty seems to have been a significant barrier to further education for girls cutting across family structures, communities and socio-economic groups. A respondent from a middle class Nair family pointed out that (around the 1940s) her father tried to stop her education after middle school, relenting only due to her insistence. In this context her mother had argued that she (mother) had only studied up to fourth standard and ‘that was the norm for girls’. The experience of three Muslim women (40 years and below) suggests that girls study up to the primary level at least. In contrast, the elderly Muslim respondent reported that three of her four daughters were teachers, having studied entirely out of their own interest. Two younger respondents from poorer Hindu matrilineal families indicated that economic hardships were instrumental in pushing them out of school. For if education was ‘free’, it nevertheless involved certain costs, especially as higher schools tended to be at longer distances. Gender differentiated roles implied that girls often had to combine household chores, including care of younger siblings with schooling, while boys mostly ran outside errands. This constrains the educational options of girls more than boys.

In contemporary Kerala, even though the disparity (at higher than primary/middle levels of education) is extremely low up to the 10th standard, and in fact reversed to some extent at the intermediate/pre-University and non-technical diploma levels, considerable difference still exists at the college levels, particularly in the technical fields. What is more interesting is that even in the field of higher education, particularly at the intermediate, pre-university level, it is courses which will lead to ‘suitable’ professions for women, from the point of view of their familial roles/responsibilities, that have a larger intake of girls. In teaching, the percentage of girls outnumbered the percentage of boys among the graduates and above category (Table 2). Some data on trade-wise intake in government ITIs and private ITCs (one year course)

26 Surprisingly, even one of our younger respondents, Anita, only in her twenties, cited puberty and economic hardship as reasons for her education being stopped at class seven. Almost all our respondents pointed out that puberty spelt restrictions on their mobility. Only two respondents, Kala and Chandrikakumari stated that puberty did not bring any restrictions. (Life Histories)  
27 Proximity to primary school was there but schools for higher levels were not very near. Currently the state has one lower primary school for every sq km and one secondary school for every 4 sq km.

TABLE 2
Gender Disparity (M/F) in the Different Levels of Educational Achievements of Kerala: 1971–1991
Note: NTDip: Non Technical Diploma not equal to degree
TDip: Technical Diploma not equal to degree
I: Graduation other than technical degree
II: Post Graduation degree
III: Engineering and Technology
IV: Medicine
V: Agriculture, Dairying and Veterinary
VI: Teaching
This disaggregation is given only for urban areas.
2. Gender disparity is estimated as the ratio of male to female percentage of literates in each educational category
*Percentage to literates
Source: Census of India, Social and Cultural Tables: Kerala (various issues)

shows a preponderance of girls in stenography, dress-making, cutting and tailoring, secretarial practice and data preparation (Table 3); girls’ intake in the two-year technical courses is negligible (Table 4) except in civil draftsman and radio mechanic trades. Hence, the narrowing of gender disparities in education have equipped women to acquire earning power in ‘suitable’ occupations

TABLE 3
Tradewise Intake in Government ITIs and Private ITCs during 1995–96 (one year course)


**TABLE 4**
Tradewise Intake in Government ITIs and Private ITCs during 1994–95 (two year course)
generally non-technical in nature as we shall see from the employment pattern. The persistence of gender differentiated family roles, with primary responsibility of domestic chores falling on women, in turn perpetuates this sexual division of labour through an asymmetry of opportunities offered for acquiring ‘untraditional’ skills. While girls have made remarkable advances in professional courses such as engineering, medicine, agriculture, dairy development and veterinary science, their achievements are still low compared to boys. However, in the Kerala context, there is a certain sense in which girls are overeducated, being encouraged to study further while waiting to get a suitable job.

This is related to the nature of the labour market. A reason cited often for the lower (than all-India) and falling levels of female work-participation rates in Kerala is the longer years spent in schooling/higher education. Almost 32 per cent of males and 26 per cent of females were recorded as students in rural Kerala in 1987-88; the figures for rural India were 19 per cent and 11 per cent respectively (NSSO 1990). However (Kumar, 1992) points out that in a situation of slow growth of desired employment opportunities, commensurate with the levels of education, the causation may be the other way round: that the girls continue in the educational stream due to the lack of suitable employment avenues. Thus the growing proportion of students may well be a reflection of the falling levels of participation rather than the reverse. At the micro level this fits in with the patrifocal family, as it could be seen to further the ‘marriageability’ of girls, by enabling them to make better wives and mothers and/or be a potential contributor to the economic well-being of the family. However, higher levels of education of girls in a situation of high overall unemployment rates, are also manifested in poorly educated men with good jobs marrying better educated women,
observed particularly among the Gulf migrants (Rajan et al., 1996). While this does not seem to have affected gender relations in any visible way; there are indications that it is one of the factors shaping domestic violence. The INCLEN/ICRW (2000) study revealed a strong association between violence, physical and psychological, and female favourable gender gap in education and employment.

**Levels of participation**

Female work participation rates (WPRs) in Kerala have been among the lowest in India and declining, (Gulati and Rajan, 1991; Eapen, 1992; Kumar, 1992). The 1991 Census ranks Kerala 22nd among the states with respect to female participation. Using the NSSO data which adopts a more extended definition of work, we find that female WPRs, in terms of the usual principal and subsidiary status, hover between 20 per cent (urban) and 23 per cent (rural) according to the 50th Round of the NSSO for 1993-94, compared to male WPRs of 56 per cent (urban) and 54 per cent (rural). While male work participation rates have remained steady (in rural areas) since 1977-78 (32nd Round) or turned mildly upwards in urban areas, female WPRs have declined consistently, more so in rural areas, and it is only between 1987-88 (43rd Round) and 1993-94 that female urban WPR has increased; however the rural WPRs declined further.

That the female WPR is low does not mean that the supply of female labour is low since a certain percentage of women would be unemployed. Indeed female unemployment rates are very high in Kerala, in particular among educated women in rural areas. Table 5 attempts to relate labour market indicators by level of education for women and men, highlighting the inferior position of women in the labour market, both in terms of employment/unemployment. Almost a quarter of women graduates in rural areas are unable to procure employment compared to 13 per cent for men. While the problem is less serious in urban areas, among matriculates it is very severe. Although unemployment increases with the level of education, the possibility of securing regular work is also higher. This is reflected in the sharp rise in the proportion of women in regular employment with graduate level education, a reason we mentioned earlier for women continuing to study.

It is also a matter of concern that even in the prime working age groups, 20-34, female work force participation rates (44 per cent in rural and 25 per cent in urban
areas) are less than half that for men (96 per cent and 95 per cent respectively); and while male WPRs in the age groups of up to 54 years have increased between 1987-88 and 1993-94, female WPRs have declined (data not shown here). Is it possible then that in the wake of increasing male participation rates, and high female unemployment rates, women are withdrawing from the labour market and it is probable that the withdrawal is among the educated. A recent Migration Survey in Kerala (Zachariah et al., 2000) shows not only that wives of emigrant husbands were on average better educated but a significantly higher proportion of them (84 per cent), than the proportion of all women (60.9 per cent) reported being housewives.

TABLE 5
Various Aspects of Employment and Unemployment of Persons of Age 15 years and above Across Educational Categories; Genderwise 1987-88 (usual principal and subsidiary status)

| Note: I: Not Literate  
II: Literate upto Primary  
III: Middle  
IV: Secondary  
V: Graduate and above  
Unemployment rate is per 100 population; the base is the educational categories.  
Patterns of work

Manufacturing, trade and services are growing areas of female employment in Kerala. While a more detailed break-up of industry groups is not available for 1993-94, between 1977-78 and 1987-88, we find that within manufacturing the growth in employment was in food processing industries including canning/processing of fish, beedi making, garment making, and wood products within which basket/mat weaving was important, and non-metallic mineral products, primarily brick making. The growth of employment in non-traditional sectors was marginal except in ‘electrical machinery’, largely on account of a number of labour intensive sub-contracting units which came up in the electronics industry. In trade most of the growth in employment was in the retail trade, primarily as sales girls/assistants (Eapen, 1994). While there was an increase of female employment in public administration, education and health under Social, Community and Personal Services, which are largely organized sector activities, it must be remembered that for women almost 60 per cent of organized sector employment is accounted for by the private sector while for men it is the reverse (Government of Kerala, 1989).

However, this growth in organized sector employment has to be probed deeper since looking at changes in the status of employment of women, we find that the share of casual work has been increasing while that of regular employment shows a decline. For instance, between 1987–88 and 1993–94 casual employment for females grew from 48 per cent to 50 per cent in rural areas and much more sharply, from 23 to 32 per cent in urban areas. Regular employment in urban areas declined very sharply. Since it is in urban areas that female participation rates show an increase, is it that a substantial part of the so-called newly emerging formal sector employment for women is not of a permanent, regular nature and hence being recorded as casual work? In other words does it reflect the increasing informalization of activities in a bid to keep the earnings low?

All this evidence points to an asymmetrical position for women in terms of occupational distribution. We have seen how family structures channel women’s education to specific areas, facilitating occupational segregation, in areas generally less capital-using and less productive. This is confirmed by the occupational distribution of women, relating to the Census year 1981. The differential occupational distribution by gender, captured by the Occupational Segregation Index, is rather high, the index of dissimilarity (which measures the extent of dissimilarity in the distribution of men and women across occupation taking a value between 0 and 100) being 52 (Table 6). It is interesting to highlight the type of jobs women are engaged in: even in the field of professional/technical activities where the proportion of women is relatively high (female to male ratio being 0.64) most of the women are engaged in the lower rungs

TABLE 6
Occupational Classification of Workers other than Cultivators and Agricultural Labourers, Kerala: 1981
Dissimilarity Index 0.515579 Calculated as \( (1/2) \sum (Fj/F) – (Mj/M) \)


of the professional hierarchy — teaching but largely in schools, especially at the primary and nursery levels. In the medical profession the larger number is in nursing. Other professions are clerical, sales assistants, maids, sweepers, cooks and very few in managerial, administrative occupations. That even for the same levels of professional education, women’s earnings are lower, establishes the fact of both occupational segregation and discrimination in the labour market. A study shows that the gender gap in earnings of highly qualified persons, measured by the ratio of female to male earnings is 0.78 in Kerala in the science and technology fields. About 18 per cent of the differential can be explained in terms of the occupational segregation, 50–60 per cent by productivity characteristics, which suggests that almost a quarter is in terms of discrimination (Duraisamy and Duraisamy, 1997).29

We have attempted to highlight certain dimensions of the labour market, which suggest a certain continuity in terms of the gendering of employment, reflecting women’s weaker position. Nor has there been any marked improvement in recent years. On the contrary, the informalization of formal sector activity and a tendency towards withdrawal from the workforce on the part of the educated women, indicate a worsening of their access to this ‘self-acquired’ income. This only weakens women’s position within the family, since any attempt to have a greater ‘voice in the family’ could be misconstrued as an attempt to challenge the gender differentiated family authority and lends itself to domestic violence, particularly because of the wife’s greater economic dependence on the husband. Increasing levels of domestic violence
in the state and a norming of the male working subject and a domestic woman (Osella and Osella, 2000) suggests that education, even higher education, does not appear to have motivated large numbers of women to challenge gender role assumptions. In this context an observation by a well educated woman (a qualified lawyer) from our life histories, is instructive. ‘Though there is not much open discrimination against women in Kerala, there is a sharp distinction in the roles of men

29Gender disparity in earnings of casual workers in agriculture and non-agriculture clear from secondary information was confirmed by three of our respondents. Whether agriculture, construction or tile factory work, women receive ten to fifteen rupees less than men “for the same work”. (Life Histories).

and women. If women enter their roles, they have to face all kinds of abuse’.

Conclusion

From the preceding analysis it appears that ‘status’ of women as conventionally defined is inadequate for capturing the relations of power between men and women, which systematically place women in an inferior position in the household and outside. Although measures of literacy have been improved, in terms of enrolment rates and retention rates, to highlight the structural constraints on women’s education, its snowballing effect in terms of occupational rigidities and women’s own perceptions and aspirations for adult life need to be addressed. Our study throws up the need to understand decision-making at the household level, in the context of norms and practices that influence behaviour and shape choices. There are clear indications that families (whether natal or conjugal) mediate education and employment decisions of women, channeling them towards the ‘marriageability’ of girls. Alongside are the indications of the decline of women’s property rights in erstwhile matrilineal families as well as women’s lack of control over property transferred at marriage among matrilineal and patrilineal families. Greater access and resort to consumer practices have left their stamp on the organization of marriage as well as gendered decisions on education and employment. More importantly they have added new dimensions to earlier images of masculinity and femininity in the direction of the male ‘working’ subject and ‘domestic’ women. It is perhaps in this context of the ‘discontinuity’ between education and employment of women and ‘autonomy’ that we need to place the emerging picture of declining property rights, violence and the mental ill health of women. Here we need to reiterate that Kerala leads other states in the number of reported suicides, the links between dowry, violence and suicides on the one hand and that women lead men (as elsewhere in the country) in ‘common’ mental conditions such as stress on the other hand. Also important are the male-female differences in reasons advanced for common mental conditions, a larger number of women attributing it to marital disharmony as against the larger number of men citing economic factors.
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