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**FAMILY STRUCTURE, WOMEN'S  
EDUCATION AND WORK:  
RE-EXAMINING THE HIGH  
STATUS OF WOMEN IN KERALA**

**Mridul Eapen and Praveena Kodoth**

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## ABSTRACT

Literacy, together with non-domestic employment, which gave women access to independent sources of income, have been regarded as important indicators of women's 'status', which affected fertility and mortality outcomes. Since women in Kerala have on average, been the most literate when compared with women in other states of India (though the same could not be said of female work-participation rates), much has been written about their 'high status' and their central role, historically, in social development. However, there is a growing uneasiness with Kerala's social development outcomes linked to non conventional indicators as in the rising visibility of gender based violence, mental ill-health among women, and the rapid growth and spread of dowry and related crimes. We suggest that engagement with socio-cultural institutions such as families, which mediate micro level decisions regarding education, health or employment, could reveal the continuities rather than disjunctures between conventional social development outcomes and non conventional indicators of ill health and violence. Changes in the structure and practices of families in Kerala in the past century have had wide-ranging implications for gender relations. Alterations in marriage, inheritance and succession practices have changed dramatically the practices of erstwhile matrilineal groups as well as weakened women's access to and control over inherited resources. Alongside, women's education and employment have not played the transformative role so generally expected of them. Changing levels of female employment and the persistence of a gendered work structure have limited women's claims to "self-acquired" or independent sources of wealth. Underlying these changes are conceptions of masculinity and femininity, which privilege the male working subject and female domesticity.

**Key words:** family, gender relations, women's status, empowerment, education, employment.

**JEL Classification :** D1, J12, J21, K11

## **Introduction**

Kerala has drawn considerable attention in recent years for its paradoxical pattern of growth with high social development indicators on a weak economic base, often referred to as the ‘Kerala model of development’.<sup>1</sup> The dramatic decline in fertility since the seventies and the process of demographic transition in the state have been at the forefront of this experience. Attempts to understand the determinants of fertility decline in Kerala, as also in other regions 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 recognised 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 indicators 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 could not be said of female work-participation rates), much was written about the ‘high status’ of women in Kerala and their central role, historically, in social development (Jeffery 1992).

Later research questioned the adequacy of these conventional indicators in understanding women’s status, in particular the assumed straightforward link between education and fertility. It is increasingly

becoming clear that education alone does not enable women to challenge gender relations; much depends on engendering education to enable critical attitudes. Crucially domestic violence and dowry deaths went alongside rising levels of education. Nor does work by itself ensure women's control over earnings or ability to take 'self interested' decisions. These emphasise the need to focus on the social context, defined by inequitous gender relations through which women are positioned as a subordinate group, both inside and outside the family, with very little power to make decisions (Basu and Jeffrey 1994; Heward and Bunwaree 1999).

The concepts of 'autonomy' and 'empowerment' in terms of power or access/ control over resources which in turn confers the power of decision-making, gained greater credibility. 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), 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. Autonomy, not easily measurable, could be severally constituted and more direct measures of autonomy could yield different results (Visaria 1996; Rajan et al 1996). 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, continued to place Kerala at or near the top. That Kerala would not fare very well in terms of

what later came to be called ‘non-conventional’ indicators (Sonpar and Kapur 2001), attempting to capture power and subordination, was evident with the rising visibility of gender based violence in the state, particularly domestic violence, mental ill-health among women manifested increasingly as suicide (marital discord being a predominant cause), and the rapid growth and spread of dowry and related crimes.<sup>2</sup>

There is a growing uneasiness with Kerala’s social development outcomes and we suggest that the faultlines could be traced by engaging with socio-cultural institutions such as families. Changes in the structure and practices of families in Kerala in the past century have 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, (one that gives precedence to men over women).<sup>3</sup> Alterations in marriage, inheritance and succession practices have changed dramatically the practices of erstwhile matrilineal groups as well as weakened women’s access to and control over inherited resources. Alongside, changing levels of female employment and the persistence of a gendered work structure have limited women’s claims to “self-acquired” or independent sources of wealth. Emerging consumer practices are extremely important here for they reach out directly to emerging norms of masculinity and femininity and are crucial to the consolidation and reinforcement of a patrifocal ideology.

The paper is in four sections. Section 1 provides a framework for our study clarifying some of the concepts used - patrifocality, bargaining power and fall back position, status, autonomy, agency and empowerment, to understand gender relations and discern the need to focus on families and their social contexts. Changing family structures and practices in Kerala and their implications for gender relations are

analysed in Section 2. In Section 3 we explore the less known aspects of the relationship between literacy/education and employment, both conventional indicators of status, in the context of patrifocal families. We conclude in Section 4 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 family practices. The study is based on secondary, published material, is exploratory in nature and underlines the need for more research.

## **1. The Framework**

Families regulate gender differentiated access to and control over resources, both material and social, including education, health and property and are an important arena where gender relations are structured. Mukhopadyay and Seymour (1994) use the term *patrifocal* to understand a family that is in important aspects focussed on the interests of men and boys. 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 emphasise 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 they will upon marriage 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 (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 characterised both by cooperation and conflict and their hierarchical character is maintained or changed through a process of bargaining between men and women. We will also draw upon his analysis of the household in terms of bargaining power, fall-back 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 fall back 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 outcome such as to make 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, strengthening fall back position, perception of individual interest and raising perceived contribution to the household. However 'status' is 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 constrain women from making choices against societal values or provide strong rationale for women to make disempowering choices (Kabeer 1999).

There is then a clear need to focus 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 distinct patterns of inheritance, marriage and post-marital residence seemed to indicate greater decision-making power for women vis-a-vis women in the patrilineal families of north India. However, studies using 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. Agency or the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them tends to be operationalised 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. Hence ‘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).

The concepts of ‘autonomy’ and ‘empowerment’ were expected, nevertheless, to shed critical insights on power relations (Batliwala 1994, Kabeer 1999). Empowerment alludes to a recognition by women of the ideology that legitimises 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.

## 2. Changing Family Structures and Practices

In the last few decades there has been a gradual but concerted shift involving the major social groups in Kerala – patrilineal and matrilineal – towards a convergence on property practices usually associated with patrilineal forms of families. Conventionally and very generally, women’s property rights in patrilineal 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 birth right in the family property not unlike (though distinct from) the manner of males in the Hindu Undivided Family. 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 and the major patrilineal groups, the Christians. 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 families leading to legislation in the first half of the twentieth century established the basis of patrifocal families

in Kerala.<sup>4</sup> Until in 1986 when the Supreme 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. In fact, the Travancore Christian Succession Act, 1916 has been described as an outcome of the expression of fear and anxiety by 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. Denial of women's rights to property rested on 'fears' of domestic disharmony and ruin arising from frequent litigation and fragmentation of property.<sup>5</sup> Under the Travancore Act, women were eligible to receive one-fourth the son's share or five thousand rupees which ever was less as *stridhanam* 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 'recognising' the conjugal family (as against the matrilineal family which did not center 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 coparcenary. Hence except of a small difference in terms of order of heirs of the mother, there is no special advantage that women enjoy vis-a-vis men among the matrilineal groups. 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. 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 emphasise the *tali* rite and considerable thought has gone into the fashioning of the *tali* (the Ezhavas have also incorporated the caste Hindu rite of *kanyadanam*) (Osella and Osella 2000).

In phases the *Shariat* 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* and a Kerala amendment in 1963 brought the share of any member of a Mappilla *taravad* under the purview of the *Shariat*, while also substituting Muslim for Mappilla. (Agarwal 1994). Muslim women's inheritance rights among the patrilineal groups of south Malabar, Cochin and Travancore were generally on the lines of the *Shariat*, moderated by local custom as anywhere else in India.<sup>6</sup>

### **Matriliny and Women's Rights**

A question that inevitably arises in the context of discussion of matriliney is whether the system allowed women effective rights (as in control) to property. Matriliney under colonial law was unabashedly patriarchal, investing the right to manage and regulate property in the senior male. This has led to easy dismissal of matriliney 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* (joint family) and significant management rights over property in the male members. 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 (Kodoth 2001). Besides, the tendency to dismiss matriliney, on the grounds that authority was gendered in favour of males, masks from view the less dramatic but equally important positive gains emerging from matriliney which may be grouped into three: emerging from a) differences in regulation of women's sexuality, b) from positive attitudes towards girl children, and c) in terms of kinship (social) identity.

*a) 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 (Ramachandran 1997).<sup>7</sup> 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 were frowned upon (Puthenkalam 1976, Gough 1961, 1959). 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 husband<sup>8</sup>; in comparison with patrilineal societies the oppressive edge of widowhood was absent. An absence of the more stringent forms of sexual control made available to women of matrilineal castes greater mobility and greater exposure of girls to locally available forms of literacy (Gough 1961).

b) *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 female favourable sex ratio cannot be taken for granted anymore (Rajan et al. 2000).

c) *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 husband. 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). In contrast, among patrilineal groups marriage (expressed through several ritual observations) marked the severing of a woman's ties with the natal house/family.<sup>9</sup> Among the Christians 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 with rights comparable to that of her husband. Rather she is incorporated distinctly 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 that of maintenance from her husband's estate (Visvanathan 1993). Separated women had no place in Syrian Christian society (Ibid, Roy, 1999).

### **Family Practices**

Changes in organisation of marriage provide indications of changes in gender relations and erosion of property rights. Especially 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 at the vanguard of consumer trends (Osella and Osella 2000, Kurien, 1994).<sup>10</sup> Osella and Osella (1999) 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 and argue 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 could 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.

#### *a) 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).<sup>11</sup> "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. The idiom of marriage has changed, both in terms of celebration – through ritual and feasting – and in terms of organization i.e., moving away from existing practices of matrilineal social groups such as village endogamy and cross cousin marriages. Linked to sustaining ties that already exist by marriage, the latter had helped keep marriages at close distances, giving women and men constant recourse to their natal kin; required less formality and expense (Aiyappan cited in Puthenkalam 1977). It is significant then that cross cousin marriages do not find favour anymore. Puthenkalam (1977) 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 Puthenkalam (1977) records this trend among the Nairs, Osella and Osella (1999) 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).

Marriage, raised to the level of a social imperative, also mediates gendered interest and identity. Notably, families 'husband' scarce resources so as to achieve the best possible marriage for women,<sup>12</sup> hence 'family decisions' regarding education and employment of women are 'harmonised' with the perceived requirements of marriage. Emerging norms of femininity dictate that women use their education in the interests of marriage to be accomplished wives and better mothers (Ibid, 2000).

b) *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.<sup>13</sup> The general trend is towards adoption of nucleated residence (where a married couple sets up a household). Mencher (1965) found in her south Malabar village that 50 % of Nair households were small matrilineal branches (an average of 3.5 persons per household), 15 % were nuclear family units living in houses that were received by women from their taravad, 15 % lived in houses established by men and women after marriage and 20 % 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, Puthenkalam (1977) found that the general pattern was patrifocal residence (where a married couple moves to a new house).<sup>14</sup> However this pattern was more dominant in south Kerala (85.7%) followed by central Kerala (61.8%) and north Kerala (59.7%). The largest proportion of matrilocal residence was in central Kerala (29 %) and residence in either the natal or husband's home while waiting to move to patrifocality was highest in north Kerala (16.9%).

A casual comment made by Puthenkalam (Ibid) is insightful regarding gendered power relations and 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 children's property.*” (emphasis ours).

The dice it would seem is heavily loaded against the woman-subject! Yet, Puthenkalam's 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 % (of 398 respondents) of wives returned to their natal homes in north and central Kerala and about 50 % in south Kerala. In south and central Kerala more than 70 % and in north Kerala more than 50 % of widows lived with married sons.

c) *Inheritance Right*

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). More importantly, Osella and Osella (2000), while not commenting directly on inheritance rights of women, note that 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). It is possibly an effect of cumulative change that they 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* goes alongside exercise of testation to safeguard patrimonial interests (Roy 1999, Visvanathan 1993).

d) *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 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 patrilineal and certain matrilineal groups (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).

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 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 solemnised 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).<sup>15</sup> If *stridhanam* was understood 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) 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. 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 employment status of men and women, and of considerable importance were factors such as a woman's complexion and 'beauty' (Visvanathan 1993, Osella and Osella 2000).<sup>16</sup>

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 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 sons in law)...”. In the third, 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”. Puthenkulam’s (1977) survey recorded a fairly even presence of dowry in north (32.7 %), central (29.8 %) and south (24 %) Kerala among the matrilineal groups, which is somewhat contrary to the prevailing view that dowry is less prevalent in north Kerala.

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 and consumer durables. A high prestige dowry could include up to 101 sovereigns of gold, a preferred form of dowry (Osella and Osella 2000). 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) 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 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 that property transfers are being made increasingly at the time of a marriage of a girl and that there is an element of force associated with such demands.

The preference to transfer women's share of property as part of a marriage has implications for inheritance rights and dowry. More importantly the emerging trends suggest the shaping of women's interests and identity in a dependent relation anchored to marriage and underlining the vulnerability of women who resist or are unable to cope with existing notions of status. Clearly then, underlying the emphasis on marriage as 'value' for women are specific norms of femininity that constrain women's choices in other areas such as education or employment.

### **3. Women, Education and Work**

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, it also had to be done without jeopardising the interests of the patrifocal family.<sup>17</sup> 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 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 has 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 and remained at 1.07 in 2001. Some of the more notable achievements have been the near universalisation 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).

It is well-known that in the state, macro level pressures that increase the desirability of education for girls have been strong historically and 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 matriliney, in this respect, would have been less restraining since even prior to the 1860s, the period in which the centralised 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.<sup>18</sup> Earlier, the attainment of puberty was the critical factor in determining the desirability of further education for girls. In poorer households, education decisions had to consider other factors too. Gender differentiated roles tended to restrict girls' education since they had to combine household chores with schooling, including care of younger siblings while boys mostly ran outside errands. Even while "free," education did involve certain costs, especially as higher schools tended to be at longer distances, leading to having to choose which children were to be educated.<sup>19</sup>

In contemporary Kerala, what gets obscured in the context of the very high aggregate literacy levels is that even though gender 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 the courses which would 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) shows a preponderance of girls in stenography, dress-making, cutting and tailoring, secretarial practice and data preparation (Table 3); girls' intake in the 2-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

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 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 percent of males and 26 percent of females were recorded as students in rural Kerala in 1987-88; the figures for rural India were 19 percent and 11 percent 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 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 higher education could be seen to further ‘marriageability’ of girls, by enabling them to make better wives and mothers and/or 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, is also manifested in poorly educated men with good jobs marrying better educated women, observed particularly among the Gulf migrants (Rajan et al 1996).<sup>20</sup> 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.

## **Women and Work**

### *a) Level 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 percent (urban) and 23 percent (rural) according to the 50th Round of the NSSO for 1993-94, compared to male WPRs of 56 percent (urban) and 54 percent (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. Interestingly, the latest Round of the NSSO relating to the year 1999-00 reveals a constancy in the female WPRs both in the urban and rural areas.

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 of the educated 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 percent 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 percent in rural and 25 percent in urban areas) are less than half that for men (96 percent and 95 percent 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 %) reported being housewives than the proportion of all women (60.9 %).

*b) Pattern 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. 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 retail trade, primarily as sales girls/assistants (Eapen 1994). While there was increase of female employment in public administration, education and health under Social, Community and Personal Services, which are largely organised sector activities, it must be remembered that for women almost 60 percent of organised sector employment is accounted for by the private sector while for men it is the reverse (Govt. of Kerala 1989).

However, this growth in organised 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 percent to 50 percent in rural areas and much more sharply, from 23 to 32 percent 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 not of a permanent, regular nature and hence being recorded as casual work. In other words does it reflect increasing informalisation of activities in a bid to keep the earnings low?

All this evidence points to an assymetrical 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 occupations 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 of the professional hierarchy - teaching but largely in schools, especially at the primary and nursery level. 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 field. About 18 percent of the differential can be explained in terms of the occupational segregation, 50-60 percent by productivity characteristics, which suggests that almost a quarter is in terms of discrimination (Duraismy & Duraismy 1997).

We have attempted to highlight some 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, informalisation of formal sector activity and a tendency towards withdrawal from the work force 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.

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.

#### **4. 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 enrollment 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 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 mental ill health of women.

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**Table 1: Development Indicators: Kerala and India**

Indicator	Sex	Period	Kerala	India
1. Expectation of Life at Birth	F	1995-96	72.4	61.7
	M		67.2	60.6
2. Birth Rate		1998	18.2	26.4
3. Death Ratio		1998	6.4	9.0
4. Sex Ratio		2001	1058	933
5. Infant Mortality Rate (per 1000 live birth)		1998	16	72
6. Maternal Mortality Rate (per 1000 live births)		1990	1.3	5.7
7. Literacy Rate as % of total adults	F	2001	87.9	54.2
	M		94.2	75.8
Scheduled Caste	F	1991	74.0	24.0
	M		85.2	50.0
Scheduled Tribe	F	1991	51.0	18.0
	M		63.4	40.7
8. Total Fertility Rate		1991	1.8	3.6
9. Female Age at marriage		1994	22.3	19.4
10. M/FAge Specific Death Rates (age 0-4)		1990-91	1.2	0.9

**Table 2: Gender Disparity (M/F)<sup>@</sup> in the Different Levels of Educational Achievements of Kerala: 1971-91**

Levels	1971			1981			1991			1991 Percentages *			
	T	R	U	T	R	U	T	R	U	RM	UM	RF	UF
Primary	0.97	0.98	0.94	0.97	0.97	0.97	0.98	0.99	0.96	31.74	27.15	32.17	28.29
Middle	1.05	1.05	1.05	1.01	1.01	1.02	1.04	1.04	1.05	30.27	30.58	29.24	29.18
Matric	-	-	-	1.05	1.06	1.02	1.04	1.06	1.01	13.43	15.66	1.27	15.46
Mat+high.Sec.	1.31	1.34	1.25	-	-	-	-	-	-				
High Sec.	-	-	-	1.04	1.06	0.98	0.88	0.89	0.87	3.15	4.35	3.55	5.02
NTDip	0.83	0.83	0.73	0.71	0.72	0.57	0.55	0.55	0.50	0.21	0.08	0.38	0.18
TDip	1.90	1.33	0.84	1.45	1.48	1.35	1.57	1.60	1.49	1.74	2.30	1.11	1.54
Grad & above.	1.92	2.04	1.82	1.45	1.51	1.39	1.22	1.23	1.21	2.84	6.51	2.32	5.38
I	-	-	2.07	-	-	1.47	-	-	1.23				
II	-	-	1.55	-	-	1.30	-	-	1.17				
III	-	-	16.00	-	-	19.00	-	-	6.63				
IV	-	-	1.90	-	-	1.83	-	-	1.50				
V	-	-	8.33	-	-	4.55	-	-	4.11				
VI	-	-	0.62	-	-	0.47	-	-	0.45				
Others	-	-	4.65	-	-	5.33	-	-	1.60				

Note: NTDip : Non Technical Diploma not equal to degree III : Engineering and Technology  
 TDip : Technical Diploma not equal to degree IV : Medicine  
 I : Graduation other than technical degree V : Agriculture, Dairying and Veterinary  
 II : Post Graduation degree VI : Teaching

This disaggregation is given only for urban areas.

<sup>@</sup> Gender disparity is estimated as the ratio of male to female percentage of literates in each educational category

\* Percentage to literates RM - Rural males; UM - Urban males; RF - rural females; UF - urban females

Source: Census of India, Social and Cultural Tables: Kerala (various issues)

**Table 3: Tradewise Intake in Government ITIs and Private ITCs during 1995-96 (one year course)**

Name of Trade	Industrial Training Institutes			Industrial Training Centres		
	Total	Girls	% to total	Total	Girls	% to total
Carpenter	364	24	6.59	279	-	-
Sheet Metal Worker	277	72	25.99	44	6	13.64
Welder	721	-	-	392	-	-
Forger & Heat Treator	303	-	-	37	-	-
Plumber	364	-	-	1619	-	-
Diesel Mechanic	146	-	-	612	-	-
Dat Prep & Comp...	253	157	62.06	3151	2236	70.96
Steno (Hindi)	50	50	100.00	58	36	62.07
Steno (English)	482	272	56.43	1461	548	37.51
Dress Making	83	83	100.00	368	192	52.17
Secretarial Practice	50	50	100.00	102	80	78.43
Cutting & Tailoring	-	-	-	322	176	54.66
Moulder	208	-	-	39	-	-
Plastic Processing	54	3	5.56	-	-	-
Tractor Mechanic	64	-	-	-	-	-
Upholster	28	-	-	-	-	-
Photographer	-	-	-	16	-	-
Hair & Skil Care	-	-	-	16	-	-
Preservation of fruit	-	-	-	32	-	-
Letter Press Mech...	-	-	-	49	-	-
Book Binder	-	-	-	16	-	-
Hand Compositor	-	-	-	107	58	54.21
<b>Total</b>	<b>3447</b>	<b>711</b>	<b>20.63</b>	<b>9719</b>	<b>3330</b>	<b>34.26</b>

Source : Kerala State Planning Board (1997) Report of the Steering Committee...  
Ninth Five Year Plan: 1997-2002

**Table 4: Tradewise Intake in Government ITIs and Private ITCs during 1994-95 (two year course)**

Name of Trade	Industrial Training Institutes		Industrial Training Centres	
	Total	Girls	Total	Girls
Draftsman Civil	326	118	2960	724
Draftsman Mechanic	100	19	292	10
Surveyor	86	28	95	17
Fitter	520	-	2429	-
Turner	306	-	85	-
Machinist	303	-	28	-
Machinist (R&AC)	253	-	372	-
Instrument Mechanic	69	-	-	-
Mechanic Watch & ...	120	60	-	-
Wireman	360	-	248	-
Electrician	405	-	2680	-
Electroplator	33	-	-	-
Mechanic (motor veh)	405	-	763	-
Mechanic (radio&TV)	500	120	934	80
Electronic (mechanic)	538	131	1349	133
Painter (general)	68	-	20	-
Mill Wright...	19	-	-	-
Tool & Die Making	-	-	18	-
Total	4411	476	12273	964

Source : Same as Table 3

**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)**

RURAL						
Education. Category	Unempt. Rate	% worker in non-agri.	% casual workers	% regular workers	% self emp.	labour force
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(1+3+4+5)
I F	1.9	14.3	22.0	1.6	22.3	47.8
M	2.5	22.0	47.6	2.9	26.4	79.4
II F	2.9	14.6	17.2	2.2	26.8	49.1
M	4.3	34.3	44.0	4.8	36.2	89.3
III F	8.8	9.7	6.6	2.0	23.1	40.5
M	10.1	39.8	28.0	9.3	35.0	82.4
IV M	23.1	14.7	1.6	10.9	15.8	51.4
F	16.7	15.3	8.0	20.3	28.9	73.9
V M	28.2	38.2	-	37.1	8.2	73.5
F	13.0	61.3	-	49.3	24.9	88.3
URBAN						
I M	1.5	18.4	11.4	2.7	16.1	31.7
F	1.6	42.6	19.4	7.0	16.2	73.5
II M	3.5	10.9	6.0	3.2	14.8	27.6
F	5.8	61.2	20.5	16.7	24.0	88.3
III M	11.7	14.4	4.0	2.5	15.9	34.1
F	10.4	62.7	18.2	21.0	23.5	83.6
IV M	16.1	18.8	0.3	15.3	9.7	41.4
F	11.3	50.9	2.8	27.8	20.3	69.8
V M	11.5	49.0	0.8	44.2	6.8	63.3
F	6.0	80.5	0.5	56.7	23.3	89.6

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.  
 Source: Sarvekshana, Vol.26(2) Oct-Dec. 1992: Results of the Fourth Quinquennial Survey on Employment and Unemployment (43rd Round).

**Table 6: Occupational Classification of Workers other than Cultivators and Agricultural Labourers, Kerala:1981**

	Male	Female	Mj/m*100	Fj/F*100	F/M
Total Main Workers	3136822	849759			0.278898
0-1 prof.tech wkrs	255358	163841	8.14066	19.28088	0.641613
07 physicians/surgeons	24420	7576	0.778495	0.891547	0.310238
08 Nursing	9051	21571	0.28854	2.538484	2.383273
150 univ/college	10292	5483	0.328103	0.645242	0.532744
151 high/higher sec sch	25565	30510	0.814997	3.59043	1.193429
152 middle school	18514	24695	0.590215	2.906118	1.333855
153 primary	32824	43375	1.046409	5.104388	1.321442
154 pre-primary	228	5883	0.007269	0.692314	25.80263
156 craft	1941	4220	0.061878	0.496611	2.174137
2 admn/exec/manager	98363	3856	3.135753	0.453776	0.039202
21 adm/exec of govt/local	35209	1397	1.122442	0.1644	0.039677
3 clerical/wkrs	253221	48771	8.072533	5.739392	0.192603
32 steno/typist	8743	8273	0.278722	0.97357	0.946243
33 book keeper, cashier	35338	7179	1.126554	0.844828	0.203152
4 sales wkrs	451151	27435	14.38242	3.228562	0.060811
43 salesmen, shop assts	140772	10418	4.487727	1.225995	0.074006
5 service wkrs	278981	116349	8.574953	13.692	0.432555
53 maids	25907	73226	0.8259	8.617267	2.926495
54 bldg caretaker/sweeper	8910	13514	0.284045	1.590333	1.516723
55 launderer/dry cleaner	10267	12570	0.327306	1.479243	1.224311
6 farmer/fishermen/hunter	529463	104713	-16.87896	12.32267	0.197772
64 plantn/rel labourer	240920	86006	7.680385	10.12122	0.35699
7-8 prod/rel wkrs,transp	1263533	380867	40.28067	44.82059	0.30143
75 spinner/weavers	89676	133325	2.858817	15.68974	1.486741
77 fd/bev processor	46784	21396	1.491446	2.51789	0.457336
78 tobacco prod makers	77235	40700	2.462205	4.789593	0.526963
79 tailors/dress mkr	66680	22934	2.125718	2.698883	0.353941

**Dissimilarity Index 0.515579 Calculated as  $(1/2) \Sigma (Fj/F)-(Mj/M)$**

Source: 1981: Census of India, Kerala, Series 10, Part III-A&B[iii],  
General Economic Tables (B21 & 22)

## Notes

1. 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 industrialisation: "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, industrialisation and urbanisation. Much the same results could be achieved in less industrialised 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).
  
2. Analysis of reported crime in the state shows a four-fold increase between 1991 and 1997, 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 crimes, Kerala was ranked 25<sup>th</sup> among the Indian states in molestation and domestic violence, which includes dowry-related crime, 18<sup>th</sup> in sexual harassment and 10<sup>th</sup> in terms of dowry deaths (Mukherjee et al, 1999). It must be remembered that dowry deaths were little heard of even in the recent past though 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). A major factor associated with suicide attempts by women was marital disharmony – 36 of 75 women; one third of the women were suffering from domestic violence. A study undertaken between 1997-1999 of domestic violence in seven

sites (cities) in India, revealed that Trivandrum had the highest prevalence of overall violence. Levels of psychological violence were very high – over two thirds of the sample women in rural and a little lower in urban non-slum area (INCLEN/ICRW, 2000). Key causes of violence were: perceived lapses in fulfilling household responsibilities (including disobedience), infidelity and alcoholism. Research indicates that social (rather than entirely psychological) influences predominate in common mental distress among women, in particular due to domestic problems. A study of cases brought before the Family Court in Thrissur 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). Another study by a psychiatrist in Thrissur, based on his experience with psychiatric patients finds 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.

- 3 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.
- 4 As many as 20 legislations were enacted between 1896 and 1976 which marked the gradual revocation of a legal framework for matriliney. The processes of reform however were of two kinds — a) legislative reform and b) reform of caste/social practices

involving local level mobilisation and campaign — 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.

- 5 “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).
- 6 A large majority of Muslims in Kerala are Sunni and are governed by the provisions of the Hanafi school of Islamic law.
- 7 This statement rings true particularly on a comparative scale with women of patrilineal families where such freedom did not exist. However it has been pointed out that the decisions of matrilineal women could be mediated by the needs of the *taravad*. Menon (1996) provides an instance of a woman, in recent memory, who had visiting relationships with several men and who was required by her brothers to call them off because a) she already had a number of children and b) they felt the *taravad* could not support any more children. In terms of sexuality this is an entirely different mode of ‘restriction’ from the conventional patrilineal mode.
- 8 Menon (1996) gives more recent instances of women who chose to break off their marriages and to live with men of their ‘choice’.
- 9 Even 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). Visvanathan’s study is based on ethnographic work in the village

of Puthenangadi, known for its 'old Christian families' near Kottayam in former Travancore.

- 10 It has been estimated that there were around 1.7 million Indian migrants in the middle eastern region in 1983, more than 50 % of whom were in all likelihood from Kerala. (P R Gopinathan Nair cited in Kurien, 1994) Importantly, the turn over of migrants is quite rapid and the number of people who have been involved over a period of time is much higher. Besides, in the State, Gulf migrants are concentrated in certain pockets reflected in the fact that remittances contributed up to 50 % of the gross domestic product of high migrant districts (ESCAP, 1987, in Kurien, 1994). While the ripple effect on spending in non migrant households (communities) is quite evident in villages with large numbers of outmigrants and is documented, Kurien (1994) suggests that consumption patterns of non migrants (earning comparable income) in villages with little or no migration tended to be different from that of migrants.
- 11 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.
- 12 In contrast while marriage is important for men, masculinity is not organized around it as it is around work. The difference is that when a man goes to the Gulf it is to work and earn and garner the social mobility this would afford and not centrally to access a better marriage, even if gulf migrants are reckoned as preferred bridegrooms (Osella and Osella, 2000).
- 13 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.

- 14 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.
- 15 If Visvanathan’s informants pointed out that it was not unusual for people to ‘trick’ the church now a days 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 the church. 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.
- 16 Notably dowry and education or employment are posed as competing demands for cash within families (Morrison, 1997, Osella and Osella, 1999). Interestingly, Osella and Osella (1999) note, in the same breath, the growing tendency of parents to use their resources to launch children onto the job or marriage markets spending huge sums as donations or dowries to their children’s employers or affines.
- 17 Research on the negotiation of the issue of western education for girls (specially at the secondary 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 socialisation 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 recognised as socialising 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.

18. This was brought out in the life histories which had been done for the larger Gender Planning Network project primarily by Dr.T.K.Anandi, a research scholar in Kozhikode.
19. Though primary schools were more accessible, secondary and higher levels were not. Currently the State has one lower primary school for every square kilometer and one secondary school for every four square kilometers.
20. This is also evident in a recent study of migrant households in several districts that there is a 'premium' attached to the Gulf migrant as a 'desirable' bridegroom. In cases of migrant bridegrooms, the age difference between husband and wife tended to be wider and on an average the wife was better educated than the husband. Only in Government jobs were there a higher proportion of that women married to Gulf migrants as compared to all women (Zachariah et al, 2000).

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