

Gender Role and Family Pattern in Kerala

Dr. Laisa Thomas

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Morning star Home Science College, Angamaly.

Abstract

The most important determinants of family size are family structure and fertility. A wide change in the perception towards family has occurred in the minds of people of Kerala. Through demographic transition and the influence of Western culture, the traditional values have been greatly modified. The credit of positive trend observed in Kerala is due to the uniqueness of its culture evolved through the ages. One of the striking and most impressive changes that have taken place in the state during the last three decades is the decline in fertility. In the present context, a study was carried out among the women to analyse the factors that determine family size and the role of gender difference in it. From the study it is seen that the major family planning decisions were taken by the age of '35'. It is seen that in old-age, parents give more importance to physical security than financial security.

Keywords : Family size, Gender inequality, Sex ratio, Fertility, Physical security, Financial security.

Introduction

In the demographic arena, the most important determinants of family size are family structure and fertility. The family occupies a pivotal position in society. In the beginning it emerged merely as a reproductive and biological association, but later it blossomed into a primary social unit of the highest order for human civilization. Family has already been undergoing a gradual transformation and adjustment in different situations and epochs of history. But of late, the process of change has received a boost due to many factors- legislative, political, social, economic and cultural.

In the past, the size of the family was relatively big, the kinship network was large and kinship obligations more. Now a days, most of the households are simple in composition. This is part of development [1]. This view is applicable to Kerala state also. The high cost of living and the new opportunities for the expression of egoistic impulses have made the family composition simple. A wide change in the perception towards family has occurred in the minds of people of Kerala. Through demographic transition and the influence of Western culture, the traditional values have been greatly modified. They come to know that by reducing family size, they can also enjoy a

better life with all facilities as in other developed countries.

Social and cultural factors are very predominant in determining the pace of the demographic pattern of a region. Generally, gender inequalities are manifested in the form of early marriage of females, dowry, female infanticide, female child labour, poor education to females, strong preference to sons against daughters, long breast feeding to male infants, cultural restrictions on some kind of food to females etc.

It is interesting to note that all the cultural traits mentioned above holds good for Kerala at a lesser degree. In Kerala, the position of the females is far better than their counterparts in the rest of India. The credit of positive trend observed in Kerala is due to the uniqueness of its culture evolved through the ages. In Kerala, female child has far attraction than in any other part of the country. Even though, the parents prefer the first male child, they seldom detest the birth of female child and hence reports of female infanticide are absent among different castes of Hindus and other religious groups [2]. Inter-state migration of females and their subsequent employment outside

the state has enhanced the social and economic status of females in Kerala.

The emergence of micro families has radically changed the attitude, attention and responsibilities of males towards the health care and food requirements of their wives and children. The female partners are treated as stepping stone to build the family life which has reduced the gender inequalities among the middle- income status groups. The high female sex ratio existing in Kerala has not rendered any positive effect upon the socio-economic and cultural development of the state.

The sex ratio implies the number of females per thousand male populations. In Kerala, the female sex ratio increased at an alarming rate from 1005 in 1901 to 1084 in 2011. One of the important reasons that have contributed to the favourable sex ratio is the family organization in Kerala. The system of female inheritance, the right of female residence and the right to divorce and remarry if widowed, gave to women in Kerala a unique status unknown to the rest of India [3].

One of the striking and most impressive changes that have taken place in the state during the last three decades is the decline in fertility. With levels of income and nutrition among the lowest, this state has achieved results in controlling population growth comparable to those in the most successful middle-income countries. In the 1980s mortality decline accelerated in Kerala and fertility decline and increase in age at marriage continued without much deceleration [4]. Even with the very low infant mortality rate, fertility has reached replacement level.

The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) for the Kerala state stood at 4.1 in 1971 and came down to 1.7 in 2011 [5]. This fertility decline aroused the attention of demographers and other researchers. Rajan and Gulati (1991) and National family Health survey (1992-'93) analyzed the age specific fertility rates for Kerala between 1971, 1981, 1992-93, 2000 and 2012 and their studies show that the decline in fertility has occurred in all age groups, but the decline is very impressive in ages above 30 [3].

Fertility has reached replacement level in Kerala. Fertility preference in Kerala has registered a major shift since 1980. Kerala women now want a very small family with one or two children. A larger proportion of women were able

to implement their fertility preferences than in previous years, thus reducing the proportion of excess fertility women and the proportion of unwanted births. In the present context, a study was carried out among the women to analyse the factors that determine family size and the role of gender difference in it.

Objective

The major objective of the study is to analyse whether the gender play any significant role in determining the size of the family.

Methodology

The study was based on both primary and secondary data. For primary data collection, Kottayam district was selected for the study because it was announced as the first fully literate municipal town of India and it played an admirable role to make Kerala, the country's only state to acquire 100 percent literacy. Kottayam district has the literacy rate of 97.21 percent in 2011[6].

Survey was conducted in five taluks of Kottayam district by taking 150 women within the age limits of 19-49 years at random on the basis of judgement sampling. The views of the selected women were elucidated through a questionnaire. The qualitative part of the information which was part of the questionnaire was collected through personal interviews. Secondary data was collected from books, reports, and other published sources in this field.

Results and Discussions

Among 150 women surveyed, 84 persons (56.0 percent) were below the age of 35. There were 66 women (44.0 percent) who were above 35 years. Majority of the respondents i.e. 40.0 percent belong to the age group 30-35. So the age '35' acts as a major decision taking factor.

The number of children in a family constitutes the size of the family. Fertility preference in Kerala has a direct influence on the family size. The following table shows the classification of respondent women based on the number of children.

Table: Classification of Respondents Based on the Number of Children

Number of Children	Number	Percentage
One	0	0
Two	122	81.3
Three	28.0	18.7
Total	150	100.0

Source: Survey data

It can be seen from the table that 81.3 percent of the respondents have two children and only 18.7 percent of the respondents have three children. It is interesting to note that none of the respondents prefer to have one child in their family and also none of the respondents prefer to have more than three children in their family.

Decision on family size is closely related to a preference of gender. This aspect is analyzed in the table given below

Table: Respondent Women Cross Classified Based on the Number of Male and Female Children

Sex	Age				Total	Percentage
	25-29	30-35	36-40	Above 40		
(1M,1F)	11	24	10	11	56	37.4
(1F,1M)	8	16	9	10	43	28.6
(2F,1M)	3	8	6	6	23	15.3
(2M,1F)	1	0	0	7	8	5.4
(2F)	1	6	3	2	12	8.0
(2M)	0	5	0	0	5	3.3
(3F)	0	1	2	0	3	2.0
(3M)	0	0	0	0	0	0

(3M)						
Total	24	60	30	36	150	100.0

Source: Survey data

It is seen that, 37.4 percent of the respondents have first male child and then a female child and 28.6 percent have first female child and then a male child. This shows that there is a slight gender preference in favour of females at this stage. This may be because of old-age security especially for the physical security dominates in the minds of the parents at this stage. 15.3 percent of the respondents have 2 female child and then one male child. Here another type of sex preference can be seen in favour of males. This is because after having two females, parents had a desire for at least one male to share some of their financial responsibilities. This points to the need for financial security of the respondent parents. None of the respondents had three male children in their families.

To sum up, it can be observed that this gender preference operates in different trajectories. At the two children limit, at least one female is certainly desired. But beyond the two female children limit, the desire is strong for a male child. On the other hand, after having two male children, the desire for a female child is not all that strong

Table: Remarks Regarding the Preference of at least One Boy

Remarks	Number	Percentage
Social Security	7	4.7
As an Additional Income Earner	9	6.0
To Carry on the Duties and Obligations of the Family and Family name	134	89.3
Total	150	100.0

Source: Survey data

The above table shows that majority of the respondents, that is, 89.3 percent are of the opinion to have at least one boy in their family to carry on the duties and obligations of the family and family name. This might be due to the fact that only boy child can retain their family name and parents are more concerned about this. Only 6.0 percent of the respondents wanted to have atleast one boy in their family as an additional income earner and 4.7 percent of the respondents remarked as social security.

Conclusion

The people of Kottayam have a clear awareness regarding the need for birth control. They are aware of the after effects of having a large number of children in their families. The major family planning decisions were taken by the age of '35'. In the case of first two children, a slight gender preference can be seen and that is in favour of females. This might be because parents expect their daughters to look after them in their old-age. After the birth of the second child, there seems to be a strong desire for a male child inorder to meet the financial security of the parents in the old-age. It is also seen that in old-age, parents give more importance to physical

security than financial security. A child appears to be more wanted for upward social mobility that it may bring and act as a source of inheritance of family property.

References

1. Shah, A.M., The Household Dimension of the Family, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1973.
2. Surendran, P., The Kerala Economy-Growth and Survival, Vrinda Publications Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 2nd Edition, 2002.
3. Rajan, Irudaya, S. et.al., Population Aspects of Aging in Kerala, India, Their Economic and Social Context, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, 1991.
4. Zachariah, K.C., Demographic Transition in Kerala in the 1980's, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, 1994.
5. Vital Statistics, Govt. of Kerala Report, published by Department of Economics and Statistics, 2010.
6. www.kottayam.com