Looking back over the last five decades, it is impossible not to be impressed by the enormous change that has occurred in the status of women in India. Before 1950, few women participated in work outside the home. Most of the women were uneducated, and among the educated, majority did not engage in work outside home, and those who did, were mostly concentrated in nursing, elementary school teaching, and other traditional female occupations. Few women held positions of responsibility in the workplace. A handful of women were in the professions, and, still fewer were in positions of power and authority.

But, by the dawn of the twenty first century, this picture changed radically. Women established an identity of their own and created a space for them in education and work sphere. Educational institutions started training women to enter new arenas enabling them to move away from traditional roles. Families began expecting women not only to continue with higher education, but also to pursue any interest they may have in the profession. And, naturally, after spending so many years in education and obtaining professional degrees, they became interested in using the knowledge acquired productively. As a result, modern Indian women have made inroads into different professions that were unthinkable to women in the past. The number of women in the professions is increasing and they are making substantial progress toward parity with men.

Today, in India, we find more and more women in familiar as well as unfamiliar places - as heads of giant organisations, at the
controls of aircrafts, in parliament, in judiciary, as police officers, doctors, engineers, teachers- the list is never ending. By tradition and throughout history, Indian women were expected to fulfill roles that defined them in relation to others only, – the kinship identities. But increasingly contemporary women establish independent identities and move beyond the identities of daughter, wife and mother.

The credit for this can be attributed to the socio economic and legal reforms that began five decades ago, which has transformed India and her women. No one can deny that one of the most positive developments in the recent past in our national life have been the enhancement of the status of women. The past few decades have witnessed a positive change in the roles that Indian women play in all the spheres of their lives. In sum, modern Indian women are well educated and they are proficient at skills that are necessary for success anywhere.

As a result, the modern Indian woman redefines her limits and emerges to claim traditional male space as her own, juggling multiple roles to excel at a level that would have been perceived as impossible a generation ago. It is no secret that women are storming traditional male fields in India. Even those occupations that had a male monopoly - defense services, merchant navy, administrative or police services - for example, are professions for women now. Yet, to these women, it is never an issue of fighting a battle, or trying to encroach into the men’s world, but rather, they are just doing what they are good at and thus are trying to prove themselves.

Thus, with women having demolished almost all male monopolies, gender barriers at work place are fast becoming a feature of the past. In fact, an increasing number of women are proving that
with regard to making decisions or moving ahead in the competitive professional world, they are behind none. Contemporary professional women are confident about themselves and assertive in whatever field they choose for themselves.

Indeed, the new millennium has heralded the era of women who occupy important positions in every field. More and more girls are getting into the professional colleges and are proving themselves as excellent students and later as excellent professionals. The last few decades have seen an increase in the levels of education, confidence and most importantly, ambition in women, who are striving to claim their rightful place in society. The professional women are no exception and they have set very high standards for themselves. They have changed the ways they used to look at themselves and that has changed the way the world looks at them.

The reason for this state of affairs can be attributed to the changes in the socio-cultural set up. Families have now begun to accept workingwomen and, parents have started exploring career options for their daughters and are willing to extend their support to any degree to enable their daughters to be successful in their careers. Girls are brought up to be committed and dedicated and they possess the required drive for any challenging profession that they get into.

As a result, today we have women who play the role of top executives, professionals and leaders in the world of work. Organizations choose women from their rigorous selection process. They are given and they take responsibility of jobs, tasks, roles and performance. They travel everywhere and anywhere. They attend board meetings and walk along with men, their heads held high. They travel to countries and continents far and wide.
Yet a close look at the women in different professions show that while women’s work force participation has more than doubled in the last 25-30 years, most women are still employed in a limited number of occupations. Occupational segregation is quite common. Despite their increased representation, women professionals do not have equal access to the different levels of occupational hierarchies in any profession. They are under represented in higher-level jobs and they have difficulty in obtaining top jobs in the professions. It is true that a handful of women are making headlines here and there, but statistically they represent a mere few percent of top jobs. The rule of the thumb is still: the higher up an organisation’s hierarchy, the fewer the women. (Wirth 2004). A similar idea is given by Dr. Amartya Sen. According to him, in terms of employment as well as that of promotion in work and occupation, women often face greater handicap than men. He calls this “professional inequality”, where progress to elevated levels of employment and occupation is much more difficult for women than men. (Sen 2001)

Researches on the position of workingwomen in dual – earner families in the west have thrown up considerable evidence to suggest growing equalitarianism in such families. But, what is true about the western societies in general is not true about India. The modernisation of Indian society has not been radical and hence, traditional institutions and structures continue to exist forcefully. As a result, though India promises gender equality in employment, it is not accompanied by gender equality at home. Looking after the family members fall primarily on women and hence they are faced with the dilemma of fulfilling the expectations of career and domestic roles which lead them to role-conflict. The conflict may be mild at times and severe at other times, nevertheless, it exists always. Women professionals are also forced to reconcile their career aspirations with societal expectations
about women’s behaviour and roles within the family. Whether by preference or by lack of other options, women professionals often curtail their pursuit of career advancement and limit their career aspirations for the sake of their families.

Besides, employers expect employees to invest themselves fully in their professions. Hence long hours of work, travel, after-office hour’s socialisation, out-station training etc have become the norm of the day. In any profession, adjustment to this is easy for a man, because, this is what society expects of him. But, for a woman this is not what the society expects of her and so it will be difficult for her and sooner or later it will result in mental stress and conflict and will finally lead to “role-conflict”. The conceptual literature on stress suggests that working women are prone to the same stressors experienced by working men along with certain unique stressors such as discrimination, stereotyping, social isolation, and work-home conflicts. Moreover, taking care of children and aging parents prove to be a source of stress for women who work outside the home. (Repetti et al, 1989). As a result they also have to bear the brunt of the career choice: lower pay, fewer opportunities for promotion and low or middle level jobs.

So also, most women professionals are subjected to gender discrimination in the workplace and are rarely able to break through the "glass ceiling" which keeps them away from top-level professional positions. Though there are arguments in favour of women in the professions, research reports indicate that women professionals are clustered at the lower ends of the job hierarchy. Issues related to occupational mobility and prospects are caught in the gender trap. This situation originates in the unconscious biases – the prejudices against women in general and the stereotypes regarding them. Even though it
is largely invisible; it disadvantage women and limit their careers. The prejudices most people harbour about women cast doubts on their (women’s) suitability for high-level jobs. For example, women are stereotypically viewed as less oriented to their careers and more oriented to their families than men are. They are also seen as too nurturing to effectively manage subordinates or to lead competition and too risk averse to success in the profession. Thus sex stereotypes act as glass ceiling and block women’s access to high-level jobs.

In short, though Indian women have made unprecedented headway in the job market; it has been a slow going all along. The pay gap between the sexes has only narrowed, it has not disappeared, there has been a decline in sex segregation, but it still exists and women’s share of top jobs is still a dream.

1.1 Need and Significance of the Study.

Since Independence, women in India in general and women in Kerala in particular have been playing a significant role in all walks of life including the professions. As such the success of any organisations depends on their contributions as well. Besides, there is an ever increasing enrollment of girls in the professional courses, everywhere in Kerala. In view of this scenario, there is need to study the issues affecting women professionals.

From the perspective of women, the state of Kerala, offers a paradox of advancement and stagnation. On the one hand, women in Kerala are better educated, and they enjoy a higher status in comparison with their counterparts in the rest of the country. Evil practices extended to girl children are trifling when compared to the state of affairs in many other states. Yet, though highly educated, the labour force participation rates of women of Kerala are not
encouraging. High rate of female literacy and impressive levels of higher education among women have not resulted in rapid growth of paid employment in Kerala. Census 2001 revealed that Kerala had the lowest female work participation rates among the major states of India. The total work-force participation in Kerala according to 2001 Census was around 10.3 million out of which 7.8 million were males and only 2.5 million were females. In such a setting, this study is pertinent since it aims to identify the underlying determinants of female work participation.

Women of Kerala today have the opportunities and qualifications to be highly successful in the professional world; a world that previously excluded them. A good number of women are willing and are able to devote long hours to their career and they are thriving in their particular professions. At the same time, they feel that they are not devoting adequate time and energy to their family. Hence, they worry about not being good wives, mothers, daughters and daughters-in-law. It is said that the modern workingwomen of Kerala carry the pangs of guilt, about motherhood of an agrarian society, while living in an industrialized society. Today's career women are continually challenged by the demands of full-time work and when the day is done at the office, they carry more of the responsibilities and commitments at home. The winds of change have touched them in their career roles, but they remain untouched in their domestic roles. Working women report that their lives are a juggling act that includes multiple responsibilities at work, heavy meeting schedules, business trips, on top of managing the daily routine responsibilities of life and home. Many women are torn between these seemingly irreconcilable commitments to work and family. This study tries to analyse the ways women professionals struggle to reconcile work dedication with their commitment to family.
“At the level of reality, the contemporary Indian woman is confronted with a few significant questions. Firstly, to work towards her work and career goals and to assign time and effort to them. Secondly, to sort out and fulfill the expectations of her assigned roles as wife and mother and to devote time and effort to it and, thirdly, to manage the problems arising out of meeting the obligations and requirements of these two separate spheres. These problems could be of a practical or emotional nature. How well she manages this depends on so many factors.” (Arora 2003: 3) The present study explores this assumption in the context women professional in Kerala.

In other words, the present study tries to portray the dilemmas women professionals suffer from, when they are confronted with ideas and expectations of the traditional society at home, and the demands of conforming to the modern code of conduct at the work place. The women professionals in Kerala are no doubt, confronted with ‘work-verses-family’ conflict. It is an accepted fact that married women, particularly of the childbearing age, find it difficult to cope with the ‘dual-role’ and suffer from ‘role-conflict. The real dilemma for most women professionals is that both the roles are dear to them. It is painful for them to sacrifice any one of them and so they remain in a state of conflict. No study on working women can do justice without dwelling into the issue of role-conflict. One of the objectives of this study is to understand the phenomenon of role – conflict of women professionals in Kerala.

Earlier studies on problems of workingwomen have focused on the attitudes, perceptions values and struggles of workingwomen. To our understanding, these studies concentrated mostly on women in the unorganised sector or, on the lower levels in the organised sector. This
study has been influenced by these studies, but this draws a difference in that this study is on highly educated and well-placed women professionals who have dared to step into a sphere that was considered a male monopoly till recently. As on date, though a good number of women are participating in the professions, relatively little is known about their work–family conflicts. The present study examines the work-family conflict among women professionals and tries to find out which of the two domains generate more conflict for them. It also tries to find out the predictors of conflict within each domain.

Research in several places outside Kerala have portrayed that discrimination against women persists even in the contemporary times, in spite of the legal enactments. Instances of discrimination include being ignored, excluded, and treated in an unfair manner, to, sexual harassment. Acknowledging that discrimination is rampant, this study focuses on the issue of discrimination women professionals are subjected to, in the workplace. Thus this study aims to address a gap in the studies on women in Kerala, because researchers till date have neglected discrimination at work and hence, a major contribution of this study would be the empirical documentation of the presence if any, of the discrimination in women’s professional lives.

Work-Life Balance has become a major issue in the world of work. While success at both work and life is the most sought after goal for all, the need for achieving equilibrium is equally significant. One aspect of this study that makes it unique and relevant is its focus on the specific adaptive behaviors of people facing work-family conflict. Most previous research has focused on linking work-family conflict with attitudinal outcomes, or with assessing the effects of formal work-family policies. Because workingwomen, on an everyday basis, negotiate the boundaries between work and family, a wide range of
adaptive behaviors needs to be identified and studied. Hence, the behaviors and strategies that women professionals resort to, in response to dual role performance becomes significant. By incorporating the research on coping styles, the present study provides detailed information on the process of how women professionals react to work-family conflict and achieve work life balance.

Research studies over the past two decades which have explored the construct of job involvement have approached it from two different perspectives (Sekaran1989)). First, when viewed as an individual different variable, job involvement is believed to occur when the possession of certain needs, values, or personal characteristics predispose individuals to become more or less involved in their jobs. The second perspective views job involvement as a response to specific work situation characteristics. Thus, in recognition of the above mentioned approaches, the purpose of this study is to further examine the relationship between job involvement and individual, family and work domain variables. The findings of this and similar studies would enable one to identify and assess the impact of variables that can be used as predictors of job involvement and the insights gained may lead to more accurate predictions of the consequences of various structural and behaviour interventions in the workplace.

To conclude, in the modern times, women cannot be confined to the home. There has been an ever-increasing thrust on professional education and employment among women in Kerala and so women will have to hold key position in all spheres of professional life, sooner or later. However the fact remains that even the professionally educated Kerala women are not reaping their share of benefits from the profound social, political and economic changes transforming the society. Why is it so? Why is there such an uneven distribution of male
and female employees across the professions? Why is it that there are only few women at the top in all the professions? How do the professional women manage, a full time profession and family roles? What are their coping strategies? These are some of the issues the present study focuses on.

In short, this is a study on women who have broken the shackles of the past, who are walking along an untraversed path. It is hoped that the findings of this study will stimulate further research and will also provide at least a beacon of light in policy formulations in future.