8.1. Summary

This chapter provides a discussion on the summary of the study along with important conclusions. Additionally, it also discusses policy implications that have emerged from the study.

Most of the available research on single child families and low fertility was focussed on developed world. This is a relatively new phenomenon in a developing country like India. There are substantial proportions of women opted to have single child in Kolkata city. In this context, the present study was an attempt to explore and understand the factors contributing to single child family, based on a primary survey carried out in selected localities of Kolkata city.

The main objectives of the study are (1) to examine the levels, trends and determinants of single child families in India and West Bengal, (2) to explore the rationale behind the choice of women to have single child, (3) to examine whether there was a trade-off between career prospects and number of children among urban working women, (4) to assess whether the emergence of single child families is an indication of changing attitudes towards son preference among urban women.

The present study utilizes both primary and secondary sources of data. The secondary data analysed include three rounds of National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) - the Indian equivalent of Demographic Health Survey (DHS) in other countries. The primary data was collected from Kolkata city, which has the highest proportion of
single child families. Inclusion criteria for the study was, single child mothers above age 45 years or single child mothers who have undergone sterilization (or husband is sterilised) or single child mothers whose child’s age is above 10 years. Primary data consists of 330 single child mothers and 234 husbands of these women. Data collection was done during of March to July, 2012. Quantitative data was collected by administering a structured interview schedule. Apart from household survey, in-depth interviews were also carried out.

At national level, the proportion of single child families is slowly but gradually increasing in India. There is a steady increase in the prevalence of single child families in all south Indian states, and also East Indian states such as West Bengal and Odisha. It is the urban, rich, educated and employed couples who are at the forefront of this new demographic phenomenon. Basu and Desai (2010) also found similar trends in their preliminary analysis based on India Human Development Survey (2004-05). The rural residents are less likely to have single child families, which highlights the difference in the educational levels of females, their marriage patterns, and occupational status in rural and urban areas. According to the Sample Registration System, though the urban TFR (1.9) in India has come down to below replacement level, the rural TFR (2.8) is still at a higher level. Available secondary data indicated that there is a steady increase in the prevalence of single child families in West Bengal. About 13 percent of women in Kolkata city have only single child, which is very high as compared to all other metropolitan cities. Women’s age at marriage and age at child birth are two important determinants of single child families. Since women who marry at a later age and give birth to their first child further late age have relatively a small reproductive span, mostly ending up with single child. Late childbearing is found to be significantly associated with having only one child, suggesting that the decision to postpone family
formation may result in having only one child due to lower fecundity at older ages. Wood (1994) has also observed that fecundability reaches a peak at around age 25; from this age onwards, the fecundability declines.

The most important factors influencing couples to opt for only one child are low income and high cost of education. The aspiration of most parents now-a-days is to give best education to their children, which has become quite expensive. Kulkarni (2011) found that parental aspirations about children rose significantly in India which led to the classical quantity-quality trade-off. In order to provide proper and high education to the child, parents now consolidate all their resources on one child. Twelve percent of the couples prefer to have a single child by choice. This shows the emergence of new family behaviours among urban couples. About one-fifth of the women interviewed perceive their child is having problems due to lack of siblings. Most common problem cited was self-centeredness and loneliness.

The trade-off between woman’s work and number of children is a predominant factor in the decision to have a second child or not. Working women are more likely to associate with the one-child model as compared to those who are not working. Thus, the first hypothesis, i.e., “The working status of the woman does not influence the decision to have single child”, was rejected. This is because the work-culture in the modern professional jobs is not “family friendly” that helps the working mothers to combine both work and family responsibilities. Working mothers usually make some sacrifice on the family front by opting for a small family to accommodate professional jobs in their life. Therefore, home-makers have larger families as compared to working mothers. The women with high work stress tend to have one child, even if they wanted more children. As high paid jobs demands higher commitment from employees, in order to accommodate both job requirements and family life, these women limit their
family to only one child. Low paid jobs provide a degree of flexibility and proximity that enable working women to fulfil household and child care responsibilities. At the same time, it is interesting to see that more than four-fifths of the husbands opted for single child, even if their wives were not working. Majority of husbands interviewed never asked their working wives to leave the job to take care of child and family. Husbands are supporting their wives by not forcing them to take up child care responsibilities by sacrificing their career.

Out of the households surveyed, around 56 percent have single son. The sex ratio of the children of the respondents is 771 females per 1000 males. Four-fifths of the women who had earlier desired to have a son had one son. Little more than one-fifths of the couples reported that they had preference for son when the wife was pregnant. Majority of the women with no preference for sons during pregnancy and have a son now stated that they would have only one child even if the child had been a daughter.

8.2. Conclusions

The present study shows that the proportion of single child families is gradually increasing in West Bengal. The analyses show that urban, rich, educated and employed couples are in the forefront of this demographic phenomenon of single-child families. There is a clear rural–urban gap in the prevalence of single-child families even after accounting for standard demographic, economic and social characteristics. The lower prevalence of single-child families in rural areas reflects the continuing high level of fertility compared to urban areas (Guilmoto & Rajan, 2013). Women’s age at marriage and age at child birth are also two important determinants of single child families. The present study clearly illustrates that Kolkata city, with TFR of 1.3, is having highest
proportion of single child families in India. In future, the proportion of single child families will increase in Kolkata city.

The study illustrates that due to economic reasons such as low household income and high cost of education of children, most couples limited their family size to one child. Significant proportion of women who perceive lack of child care support at home as the reason for opting for single child, said that they would have had more children if support were available in the family for child care. The study reveals that most couples jointly took the decision for having single child. Most of the women felt that the decision to have a single child was a right decision. Most women having son expect their son will take care of them in old age. But, most women having a daughter do not want to stay with the daughter in old age, even though they believe the daughter will support when required.

The study also shows that working women are more likely to have single-child than non-working women. This perhaps reflects the difficulty of working mothers to balance family and work responsibilities. Most of the working women interviewed said that it is difficult for a working mother to have more than one child. Nine out of ten working women who did not get any help from their husbands felt it is extremely difficult for working mothers to have children and also maintain the job. Very few working women made changes in their jobs in order to fulfil demanding child care responsibilities. Most of them maintained both household responsibilities and job. As high paid jobs demands higher time, travel and commitment from employees, these women were forced to limit their family with one child. Many recollects that – “It was very difficult time we went through, particularly when the child was very young.”
Study demonstrates that in most cases, there is a deliberate control on family size after having one son. The proportion of girls in the single child families in West Bengal is 37 percent. But in the study population in Kolkata city, the proportion of girls among the single child families is little higher (44 percent). About one-fifths of the couples wanted to have only one son. Very few of them wanted to have only one daughter. Even with the strict rules banning prenatal sex determination, around 10 percent of the women (in the age group 25-34 years) admitted that they had sex determination test. The study reveals that majority of the women who had preference for son limited their family after having one son. About 36 percent of the women stated that it is very important to have at least one son. The most common reasons cited for wanting a son is “to continue the family line” followed by “for emotional support” and “for old age security”.

8.3. Policy implications

In India, most policies mainly aimed at reducing fertility from high levels to replacement level. Still there are 10 major states which have fertility above the replacement level and five among them have a TFR above three. In such a situation, the policy makers have never thought about any programme or policy for the states moving towards low fertility or single child family in particular. Some of the emerging issues that will have future policy implications have been mentioned below.

The urban TFR of West Bengal is at 1.3. If the TFR remains for a long time at or below 1.3, it will reduce the number of births by 50 percent and halving of the population in less than 45 years. During 2001 to 2011, Kolkata district already experienced a negative (-2 percent) decadal growth pattern. However, this has not received enough attention of policy makers and also researchers. Specific attention may be required to address the issues emerging out of low fertility in cities like Kolkata.
The national level analysis shows that among the single child families, there is a deliberate attempt to control family size after having a son. One son and one daughter combination is highly preferred among two children families. But higher order births usually have more sons than daughters. This indicates a clear son preference among Indian families. There is a strong desire to have at least one son. When couples get that desired son with the first child, they are ready to stop even at one child. What is emerging from the analysis is the increased manifestation of son preference among single child families. This could increase the sex-selective abortions, in many instances. Even with stringent laws against sex determination tests and wide publicity, 4 percent of interviewed women in Kolkata city openly reported of having done tests to determine the sex of the baby. If we consider the younger mothers (25-35 years) in our sample, the percentage of women went for sex determination test is much higher (about 10 percent). Measures should be taken to periodically monitor the clinics to control the incidences of sex determination tests and sex selective abortions, as the proportion of single child families is likely to increase not only in Kolkata city, but in urban India in general. In the context of increasing gender discrimination and alarming number of female foeticides, the gradual increase in single child families may have many implications for gender equality.

In case of low fertility, the population size among young age group reduces. If the current trend of single child families continues for a long time in Kolkata, then the social security for elderly may have certain implications. Many parents having single girl child are unwilling to stay with married daughters due to cultural reasons. Thus, those couples with single daughters may not get enough support in their old age and may have to find their own living arrangements.
Being one of the first studies on single child families in India, this study illustrates the changes in the attitudes and the preferences of the couples. It also captures the views of both husbands and wives with single child and their perceptions. In this respect, this study adds a new dimension to the existing limited literature on this emerging and important demographic phenomenon.

8.4. Limitations of the study

The present study mainly focussed on single child families in Kolkata city. Considering the uniqueness of the city with lowest fertility in India, the findings of the study cannot be generalized in Indian context. The reported information on sex determination tests may be underestimated due to the sensitivity of the issue. The actual number of cases may be much more than what was reported by the respondents.

8.5. Scope for future research

It is important to examine the behaviour and performance of single children. The psycho-social dimension of single children and parental attachment may be a relevant issue to explore.