Chapter-8

Female Status and Fertility
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8.1 Introduction

The effective reduction of fertility level of a country depends on the status of women and their role in the community and family decision making, including the timing and number of births and choice of contraception. Fertility is found to be higher in those societies whose women depend on their children for social and economic security and lack legitimate alternatives to child bearing. In every religion we find that women have been accorded an inferior status. This is mainly because of the patriarchal society and male domination. So unless the patriarchal structure and the values attached to it are meted out the male attitudes towards women will continue to be one of domination.

8.2 Social Status of Muslim Women

All religions have accorded women inferior status and relegated them to a secondary position. In the opinion of Asghar Ali Engineer it is not religion but patriarchy which is the real culprit. Religion itself is the result of patriarchal society and so is male domination. So unless patriarchal values and structures are dispensed with, male attitudes towards women will continue to be one of domination. The prophet of Islam was very favourably inclined to bring about improvement in women’s status, even give her equality if possible. In one instance he even allowed a woman the right to retaliate against her husband i.e to slap him as he slapped her. But even a man of the Prophet’s prestige could not have his way in view of prevailing strong patriarchal values in the society. Allah thus allowed men, in view of the social context and societal values, a slight edge over women but also warned them elsewhere, a last revelation in respect of women in the Holy Quran (33: 35) that men and women are equal in the sight of Allah. Thus if we keep the two significant verses of the Quran related to the social, economic and religious status of women (4: 34 and 33: 35) it will be seen that the Quran has not been unfair to her status and yet we see that the Islamic Shari’ah formulated by the great Imams be it Abu Hanifa, Hanbal, Malik or Shafa’i, under the influence of the patriarchal values, assigned women a
much inferior position than what was intended by Allah in the Quran. However one can hardly blame the four imams and other Theologians for what they thought about women’s status. In the society they lived in, with all their fairness and honesty, they could have hardly thought otherwise. Just as the Muslim ‘ulema’ refuses to change the Shari’ah provisions in respect of polygamy, divorce etc, the Catholic Church refuses to permit abortion. Even in an advanced industrialized country like the United States of America U.S.A, abortion often acquires the serious proportions of a political controversy. Among the Hindus also the traditions are still very strong relating to the status of women. Take child marriage for example. The state of Rajasthan is notorious for it. Every year thousands of child marriages take place despite a law to the contrary and exposure in the media. A few years ago Rajasthan was dogged with controversy about a woman, Roop Kanwar who was compelled to commit Sati. Not only was the act of Sati justified, it became a question of prestige and identity for Rajputs. Rajput youths came out with swords to guard the place of sati. Roop Kanwar’s in-laws were arrested but later released on bail. Therefore every religious group whether Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian, frown upon women’s liberty and want to send them back to their home and hearth (Engineer. (1994), pp 294-300)

The declining trend in fertility level is very slow in India due to the very slow pace of social change in general and the changes in the status of women in particular. According to the 1991 and 2001 censuses, the total literacy among women was about 39% and 54% respectively. A majority of women considered to be literate can simply read and write with or without formal education. The required level of formal education for a meaningful demographic change is not available among them in general. But whatever changes have taken place on the status of women, have had a positive role on the demographic changes in India. (Haq. (2007), p 111)

8.3 Indicators of Women Empowerment

8.3.1 Employment and earnings

According to the report of NFHS III 36 % of currently married women age 15-49 in Odisha were employed in the last year, compared with 99 % of currently married men in the same age group. One-sixth of employed women (17%) received no payment for their work, and 10 % were paid only in kind. Overall, 72 % of
employed women earn cash, compared with 78% of employed men. Among married women who work and are paid in cash, 83% decide how their earnings will be used, either alone or together with their husbands. Only 17% of women who work for cash earn about the same or more than their husbands.

8.3.2 Decision making

Married women in Odisha were asked who makes decisions about their own health care, making large household purchases, making household purchases for daily household needs, and visiting their own family or relatives. More than half of currently married women (58-65%) participate in making each of these decisions. However, only 42 percent participate in making all four of these decisions and 17 percent do not participate in making any of the four decisions. Women in nuclear households, women who are employed for cash, and older women are more likely than other women to participate in these household decisions.

8.3.4 Other indicators of women’s empowerment

Thirty-six percent of women have some money that they can decide how to use. The proportion of women with money which they control is highest for women in the highest wealth quintile, urban women, women employed for cash, and women with at least 10 years of education. Only 10 percent of women have a bank or savings account that they themselves use.

In Odisha, women’s knowledge of microcredit programmes is quite widespread, but use of these programmes is very limited. Sixty-nine percent of women have heard of any microcredit programme, but only 7 percent have ever used one. Only about one-quarter of women (22-28%) are allowed to go by themselves to the market, to a health facility, and outside their own village or community (data not shown in tables). Only 19 percent of women are allowed to go alone to all three of these places. Urban women, older women, women with 10 or more years of education, women employed for cash, and women belonging to the wealthiest households have more freedom of movement than other women Odisha. (National Family Health Survey (NFHS III), 2005-06. (2008), from http://www.nfhsindia.org , 16 / 08 / 10
8.4 Dowry in Islam

A woman holds a very high status in Islamic faith. She is honoured and respected at all times, but many startling transgressions have crept into Islamic practice. These transgressions have been caused by cultural influence that has no basis in Islamic scripture. Muslims living in the Indian subcontinent have slowly incorporated the act of dowry into their lives. Dowry originated in the upper caste Hindu communities as a wedding gift (cash or valuables) from the bride's family to the groom's family. There is nothing strange or unique about a culture influencing Muslim practice, as it is a common characteristic around the globe that when a new religion spreads in an area, people who live in that area retain some of the customs and traditions which they have been practising for centuries. There is nothing wrong with this as long as those practices do not contradict Islamic law. The practice of dowry, however, does in fact transgress Islamic law.

We usually use the word gift for something, which we give voluntarily, to a person we like. A gift is something that strengthens the friendship bond between two people. Dowry, which is usually defined as a “gift” given along with the bride, by a bride’s family to the bridegroom, is used as tool of coercion and greed in some societies. The bride’s family must give this “gift” or the marriage will not take place. Always the price of the dowry is set higher than the bride’s family can afford and sadly, this results in the bride becoming a burden on her family. The bride’s family then struggles to pay the “gift”.

In Islam it is the man who pays Mehr (dower) to the woman. The following verses in the Quran prove that it is the man who is obligated to pay the Mehr (dower) to the woman unless the woman chooses not to take it.

"And give women (on marriage) their dower (Mehr) as a free gift; but if they, of their own good pleasure, remit any part of it to you, take it and enjoy it with right good cheer." (Al-Qur'an : Al-Nisa':4)

Cultures that demands dowry from the bride’s family, are actually practicing the opposite of what Allah commanded. They have reversed Allah’s words in their practice. The bride is forced to pay a negotiated amount to the groom unless the man chooses not to take it.
Dowry is purely a matter of culture. One should not feel obliged to continue these un-Islamic traditions. If a culture contains un-Islamic aspects, then one should not feel any shame to break the culture’s traditional practices. The practice of dowry has caused Muslims in many parts of the world to continue their prejudices against women despite the Islamic prohibitions against it. In the Indian subcontinent, a woman is considered to be a great burden mainly because of the dowry system. Here, it is common to see people rejoicing over the birth of a son and lamenting over the birth of daughter. In India, the reason why people prefer male children over female children is mainly due to cultural practices such as dowry. Why aren’t people listening to the message of Islam instead of following the customs of others around them?

Allah has given us warning of this in the Qur’an. Allah tells us that infanticide is a grave sin and that favour of one gender over the other has no grounds in Islam.

When news is brought to one of them, of (the Birth of) a female (child), his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain her on (sufferance) and contempt, or bury her in the dust? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on? (Al-Qur'an: An Nahl: 58-59)

As Muslims, we should consider the birth of daughters to be a great blessing. In addition to the Qur’an, the Hadith also carry the message to value women.

Malik reported Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) as saying: He, who brought up two girls properly till they grew up, he and I would come (together) (very closely) on the Day of Resurrection, and he interlaced his fingers (for explaining the point of nearness between him and that person). [Sahih Muslim: Book 032, Number 6364]

Narrated 'Aisha: (the wife of the Prophet) A lady along with her two daughters came to me asking me (for some alms), but she found nothing with me except one date which I gave to her and she divided it between her two daughters, and then she got up and went away. Then the Prophet came in and I informed him about this story. He said, "Whoever is in charge of (put to test by) these daughters and treats them
generously, then they will act as a shield for him from the (Hell) Fire.” [Sahih Bukhari: Volume 8, Book 73, Number 24]

It is so unfortunate to see the person submitting themselves to the dictates of culture than to the will of Allah who is our Creator, Cherisher and the sustainer. Islam stresses fairness and kindness. Islam ensures that boys and girls are treated equally. Discrimination between children because of their gender is not advocated in Islam.

If you are a true Muslim say no to dowry. Believe me Allah will bless your marriage and will provide you and for your family. ([http://www.PureMatrimony.com/](http://www.PureMatrimony.com/) : 14:09:2012)

In Odisha the concept of dowry is not very vigorous among the Muslims. But still since Odisha is a Hindu dominated area some influence of this particular custom is found among the Muslims. Therefore a negative attitude towards a female child may be to some extent attributed to the fact that the parents regard a girl child to be a liability in view of the fact that they have to rear her and finally give her away in marriage with a good amount of dowry. Since the people native to this place are very tradition bound and conservative they are also not very keen at allowing their daughters to work independently even if they cannot get married. Moreover they cannot even ignore the societal pressure which calls for marrying their daughters at the right age fulfilling the societal customs and norms.

**8.5 Case Studies**

Some case studies have been given below to enable a proper understanding of how social status of women has an effect on the fertility behaviour of the Muslims in Cuttack district:

**Case X**

This is the case of ”jkl” aged 42, married to a resident of Dargha Bazar, Cuttack. Both “jkl” and her husband are not educationally much qualified, having completed their higher secondary education only. They live in a joint family and their financial condition is not very sound. Her husband runs a watch repairing shop. She
got married at the age of 22 and bore a male child within one year of her marriage. She has 2 more sons, born at an interval of 2 years between each of them. All three of her children were delivered normally without any complication or health hazard either for the mother or the children. Both husband and wife have a strong son preference attitude and their ideal family size is three. And since they achieved their ideal family size they do not want any more children. To avoid further pregnancies they are using contraceptives. I observed that their attitude towards girl child is not quite favourable. They feel that girls are a burden. Since they are not financially very stable they feel that they do not have the means to rear a girl child. According to them sons will help them continue their family name as well as bring financial stability once they settle down in life. Although their finances do not permit them, they still send their boys to good schools and try to give them best facilities for framing their future so that in the future they could add to the family income.

Case XI

Another interesting case that caught my attention was of “mno”, aged 29, married to a resident of Salipur in Cuttack district. “mno” had completed her Master’s degree when she got married at the age of 22. Her husband is an editor in a leading local newspaper. They live in a joint family. She gave birth to her first child one and a half year after her marriage. The child being a girl. They as well as their family members do not discriminate between a boy and a girl. In fact they care for and provide the girl with all best facilities available. Their ideal family size is one and they do not regret the fact that they have a girl child. To avoid further pregnancies they are using contraceptives in the form of birth control pills. Of the majority of the families that I met this was one which showed such a favourable attitude towards having a girl child. She and her family do not believe that giving birth to a female child deteriorates woman’s position in the family or the society at large.

The above two cases are in sharp contrast to each other. In the first one we find a negative approach towards a girl child. Such an attitude may be attributed to the fact that both the husband and wife are not educationally well off. They still follow the stereotyped belief that females are inferior to males. But in the second case we find a totally different viewpoint in terms of position of women. Since the couple in
the second case are educationally efficient they realise the value and importance of females in the society and favour a girl child.

Case XII

Out of the many cases that I encountered this case reflected a problem that most women belonging to orthodox families were facing. This is the case of “pqr”, aged 37, wife of a resident of Jagatpur, Cuttack. Her husband is an electrical engineer and they got married when she was 22. She is a graduate and worked as a primary school teacher for a few months before getting married. But soon after her marriage she left her job because her husband and in-laws were against the concept of working women. Within a year of her marriage she bore a girl child and three more in a row. The interval between her 1st and 2nd child was one and a half year, then her 3rd child was born after an interval of 2 years. Before her fourth child she suffered a miscarriage 8 months later her third child was born which was so complicated that she was almost at the verge of dying. Inspite of her health complications her husband compelled her to go through yet another pregnancy. And one and a half year after her 3rd child she gave birth to another girl child. The reason for having so many children was that her husband and in-laws have a strong son preference attitude. It’s not that they hate or ill treat the daughters in their family but still they crave for a male child who would continue their family name. Her husband is financially fit for looking after and rearing 4 daughters’s but still thinks them to be a liability. They are not against female education but will not allow them to take up a job when the need arises. So, they want a son, who can look after them in their old age and support the family expenses.

This particular case clearly throws light on the degrading status of women in the society. Even among the educated masses such a negative attitude towards a girl child is prevailing. This point towards the fact that those belonging to extremely conservative families are so rooted in their culture that they fail to change their beliefs and attitudes even after acquiring a higher level of education. Moreover this case also reflects the fact that “pqr” despite of being educated had no participation in the decision making process regarding the family size. The final decision regarding the matter of how many children she needed to reproduce was of her husband and her in laws. This clearly reflects the low status she held.
Case XIII

Another case that I came across was of a staunch believer of Islam. "stu" a resident of Kesarpur, Cuttack is one such example. She got married when she was 19 years old. Her husband being a maulvi as well as an Urdu teacher in a government school is a very staunch and practicing Muslim. She too belonged to a very conservative family so it is not surprising when we say that she got married at a very early age i.e. 19 years. Her in-laws being hard core Muslim conservatives had the same aspirations from her as any other holding their kind of thinking would have. One year after their marriage she gave birth to a male child and soon after another year she gave birth to a girl child. Then after a gap of one and a half year she gave birth to a boy and then a girl after one more year. Their youngest daughter is mentally retarded and therefore in fear of anymore such children they stopped conceiving any further. They did not use any contraceptives but went for natural methods for avoiding any further conceptions. Their eldest son and daughter are both married and the younger son is continuing his studies in a madrasa. Their ideal family size is 5 to 6 and if it had not been for their autistic child they would have continued conception. Both of them and their family have a son preference attitude. They are not very economically well off and surely faced problems in rearing their children but since they are very religious bound they consider children as gifts of Allah. I found that both the parents were slightly against female education and freedom. They allowed their daughter to complete her secondary education but soon after she passed her 10th grade they started searching for a good groom for her marriage. And within a year she got married. Both “stu” and her daughter observe Purdah and have restricted movement. They themselves are very comfortable with this and regard men as the sole decision makers of the family.

This case again is a bright example of the inferior status of women in terms of education and freedom. This is the trend among most of the conservative Muslims in Cuttack district of Odisha. Such kinds of people think that education will spoil their girls and will deviate them from following their religious norms properly. They do not consider education important for the girls because in their view at the end of the day they will have to get married and maintaining their family will be of utmost importance to them.
Case XIV

Another case reflecting the low status of women is that of “vwx” aged 36 a resident of Sauri, a village coming under Cuttack district. She got married at an early age of 19. Although she was very good at studies and wanted to continue her education her parents got her married against her will because for them marriage at the right age was more important than pursuing studies. Since they live in a rural area, they were also very conservative and narrow minded. Her husband is a farmer and his status is of a middle class man. “vwx” gave birth to a boy after 2 and a half years of her marriage, and those years were the worst years of her life as stated by her. In those 2 and half years she had to face a lot of humiliation and ill talks about herself. She was continuously taunted that she was a barren women by her in laws as well as other women of the neighbourhood. Those years were very painful for her. But finally Allah paid heed to her prayers and finally she gave birth to a son which brought an end to all her miseries. Now she is a mother of 2 boys and one girl but still it is not that her status in her family has improved. According to her she is thankful to Allah for having blessed her with two sons otherwise if she would of given birth to girls in their place then her sufferings would have multiplied, because when she had given birth to her 3rd child which is a girl her husband and her family were not very pleased.

Case XV

Out of the many cases I went through this was one which portrayed what a modern Indian Muslim woman should be like. A resident of C.D.A Cuttack “yza” is one example. Both husband and wife are software engineers. They got married when “yza” was 24. Two years later she gave birth to a male child. It was a caesarean but not a very complicated one. Both mother and child were in good health. According to “yza” it is difficult but not impossible to work and at the same time maintain a family. Earlier she used to face difficulties but now she can very well manage her child and her nuclear family as a whole. In addition to this both husband and wife are extremely religious and follow Islam in a proper way. Their ideal family size is two. Undoubtedly they are economically stable and can manage a large family but they feel that they should provide all the best amenities to their children. They want to give their children the best education. Being religious they are against abortion but still use
contraceptives to prevent unwanted pregnancies. This they are doing for a greater
good.

This is the kind of attitude which is required to bring a desired change in the
society. But unfortunately such people are very few. The kind of people I came across
during my field study are mostly those who have a negative attitude towards females.
Such an attitude is in one way responsible for the lower position of Muslims as well
as their higher fertility level.

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