CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

The most basic, the first and the most significant social institution in all societies, whether of the modernized North or the tradition dominated South, is the family. It is in the family that individuals are socialized into the norms and values accepted of human beings, into the traditions and cultures of their societies and also into their gendered social roles. In the family, an individual finds companionship, and it is the family which protects and shields individuals from the travails and tribulations encountered in society. Traditional social and political thought has for long divided the world into two spheres, the private sphere associated with the home and family and public sphere of the world outside. Women, for centuries, have been relegated to this private sphere, and they have also been defined in the context of their roles within this institution, viz. mother, wife, sister or daughter. At the same time, the protective cocoon which the family embodies has not been so safe for women, who have experienced the major discriminations and violence in their life in this so-called safe bastion. Thus, experiences within the family are gendered and this gendering has resulted in differential status and roles conferred upon men and women within the family. Women, in this context have been conferred the roles and status in keeping with their devalued status in the family and society. In this backdrop, the present study sought to analyse whether the status and roles conferred upon women within the family change with an increase in their level of education in a comparative perspective in Tehran and Chandigarh.

The study, as stated above, was primarily focused upon assessing the changing status and role of women in the family as a result of higher education through an analysis of its impact on productive and reproductive roles of women, as well as participation in decision-making. It sought to look into this status and role in an evolutionary perspective as also from the perspective of males in the family. An attempt was also made to assess how far education impacted women’s perceptions of their own status and roles in the family as well as the impact of higher education on loosening the shackles of parochial factors of caste, class, religion and tradition.

Historically women in both societies, whether of Iran or India have been suppressed, subordinated and devalued. The situation, today, is not very different and women continue to be regarded as secondary in all arenas of social and individual life,
whether within the family or outside its domain. Son preference is a fact of life in both societies, though more so in India than in Iran. Women continue to be discriminated against in education, employment, inheritance and participation in decision-making. In India, the health status of women is also not something to be proud of. High maternal mortality rate, high rate of prevalence of anaemia and well as high rates of female infant mortality continue to put the nation to shame where women are concerned. Iran, however, is much better off in this respect, for the maternal mortality rates, as well as female infant mortality rates are much lower. Where the family is concerned, both societies are highly patriarchal and women are regarded as secondary. Rights within the family are almost non-existent or exist on paper only. Women continue to be denied inheritance rights, are unable to participate in family decision-making and are subjected to various kinds of violence, all in the name of the family. Violence is particularly visible in the form of honour killings. Women’s bodies, in both nations, are regarded as the repositories of family honour. The high rate of suicides by women, particularly in Tehran, is also indicative of this phenomenon. Tehran and Chandigarh, being microcosms of these larger states, reveal a similar status of and attitudes towards women. The two cities are notable for their developed and modernised status as well as high literacy rates in comparison to the rest of the countries. Nevertheless, honour killing in Tehran and declining sex ratio in Chandigarh, are the particularly predominant features pertaining to status of women in the two cities. This reveals that development has not been accompanied by an equivalent increase in the status of women in either city.

In order to conduct the study, 200 married women, educated above graduation level, were selected from each city through simple random sampling. In addition, 50 married women, who were educated only upto high school, and 25 males were selected as control group from each city. Data was collected through a questionnaire containing both open-ended and close ended questions, and codified and tabulated through Statistical Package for Social Sciences. The correlation of the variables was tested through somers’d test and presented in the form of Tables.

Age-wise, a majority of the respondents were in the age group of 30 to 50 years and their spouses were also in the same age group. Education-wise, the respondents were all graduates and above, while the control group varied between illiteracy and high school. The male control group too was highly educated. Three-fourths of the respondents were employed, while the rest were home managers, while
among the control group, less than half of the Tehranians were employed while four-fifths of the Chandigarh control group were employed. Income-wise, they belonged to the middle income group. The Tehran respondents were all Muslims, while those from Chandigarh professed various religions, but majorities were Hindu. Further, the Chandigarh respondents were mostly from general castes, while the caste system is non-existent in Tehran. All the respondents from Tehran lived in nuclear families, while a majority of the Chandigarh respondents lived in nuclear families, but a significant proportion lived in joint and extended families. This was also true of the control groups, both female and male. The families, moreover, were small and the respondents had one or two children, with very few having more than two children.

A review of the available literature revealed that the family as an institution had attracted the attention of a large number of scholars in both India and Iran. Within the family, too, there were a large number of studies focusing upon the status and role of the women in regard to decision-making, violence, and other indicators. However, it was found that there were no studies on the impact of higher education on the status and role of the women in the family. Furthermore, no attempt had been made to compare this status and role of the women in the family in the context of two societies which reveal striking similarities in some aspects and significant differences in others. Therefore the present study is one of the first attempts to present a comparative picture of the impact of higher education on the status and role of women in the family in Tehran and Chandigarh and hence its significance.

Here it is pertinent to point out that although the family as an institution has been studied by a number of scholars, yet the theoretical underpinning of these studies has been sociological rather than feminist. The present study, however, attempts to analyse the family through a feminist framework of patriarchy, gender roles and gender division of labour.

The analysis of the status and role of women in the family was made through an inquiry into various indicators all of which impact women’s status. Thus, women’s status and role was analysed in the context of marriage, productive and reproductive roles within the family, control over monetary resources, experiences of discrimination, participation in decision-making, awareness of rights and responsibilities as well as experiences of violence.
The study revealed that higher educated women had more freedom in choosing their life partners as compared to the lower educated women, but the women from Tehran had relatively more freedom as compared to the women from Chandigarh. Yet a large proportion of women in both cities had an arranged marriage, and even those who did not have an arranged marriage had to contend with a number of objections raised as to their choice of spouse. Very little freedom was also revealed in the context of the number, timing and spacing of children. Nor did women show more empowerment in the minor matter of naming of children. However, the higher educated women revealed greater empowerment and ability to participate in these matters as compared to the lower educated control group.

Household chores continue to be women’s domain and there is very little sharing of responsibility by males in this aspect. However, it must be mentioned that where there is sharing, it is not sharing of responsibilities, but merely ‘helping out’. The primary onus continues to vest upon the women. The children too continue to be socialised into such gender roles and the burden of household tasks in more evidently placed upon the daughter, while the outside tasks are give to the son. Such gender role ascription continues in the matter of caring for small children, who again are a woman’s responsibility. Yet there is a considerable difference by level of education, with the lower educated control group revealing a greater burden of these tasks.

Within the family, women and girl children continue to face numerous discriminations in respect of nutrition, mobility, etc. Strangely, the highly educated women themselves continue to place restrictions on their daughter’s nutrition and mobility and also differentiate between sons and daughters in this respect. It is pertinent to point out, however, that restrictions on food were evident only in Chandigarh; no such restrictions were in place in Tehran. The reasons given were primarily religious. However, restrictions on mobility were more evident in Tehran as compared to Chandigarh. Significantly, perceptions of discrimination too varied with level of education. Thus, the higher educated women were better able to identify behaviour which may be regarded as discriminatory as compared to lower educated women.

Such discrimination also alludes to another reality in both societies, that of son preference. Son preference is definitely more evident in Chandigarh as compared to
Tehran and again is higher among the lower educated respondents as compared to the higher educated ones. Yet, it is noteworthy that the graduate respondents too admitted to desiring sons. However, in Chandigarh, son preference finds its realisation through the obnoxious practice of female foeticide, which is a rarity in Tehran. The males too revealed an overwhelming degree of son preference, particularly in Chandigarh. The reasons advanced were primarily socio-cultural, relating to lineage and honour.

Paradoxically, health care for themselves was not a priority for the women respondents from both cities and it was found that they avoided medical treatment, while the lower educated women received appropriate health care. Apart from this, the burden of care for both the respondents and the control group fell primarily upon the mothers and mothers-in-law, that is upon the female members of the family, thus reinforcing the gender role stereotypes of caring work being a female task. Health care during pregnancy and post-pregnancy was also not available to many of the respondents.

Continuation of education after marriage is a luxury, which few women can afford and this was validated in the present study. Nevertheless, it must be asserted that a higher proportion of those who were highly educated were able to continue their education after marriage as against the lower educated control group. However, the women themselves did not feel that their education as such had a positive impact on their status in the family.

Regardless of education, women continue to be bound by their traditional roles and lay more emphasis upon their duties as compared to their rights. Yet the desire for liberty, equality, respect and care within the family is revealed by an overwhelming number of respondents and these were asserted as women’s primary rights in the family.

Participation in decision-making is one of the most significant indicators of the status of women and forms the basis for access to resources, rights and opportunities in the family. In the present study, it was found that women’s participation in decision-making was very limited. Thus unilateral decisions on various issues were out of the question, but even in joint decision-making all of the respondents could not participate. This was particularly true of the lower educated control group, but even the higher educated ones were able to make unilateral
decisions only in respect to some minor affairs such as what to cook etc. As a matter of fact, even visiting their own parents was a decision taken by others or in consultation with the husband. However, it was found that women in Tehran could take more decisions independently as compared to the women in Chandigarh, who could take more decisions in consultation with the husband. Even going to various places is outside the purview of decision-making of a large number of women. It is significant to note that a large proportion of the males do not regard participation in decision making an inherent right of the woman, but rather believe that it is a favour bestowed upon her.

The employed women too need permission even for going out of town on a business trip. However, it was found that the husbands and other family members, particularly the mother-in-law and mother did extend a helping hand by sharing in the care of children while the women are out of town. The other chores relating to the household were also taken care of by family members. Education does lead to greater economic participation of women in the family. They have a greater share of the family resources at their disposal, are able to contribute to the family budget, save and invest on their own. They may also dispose off their savings and investments as they please. Sadly, this is not true of all employed and higher educated women and a significant proportion do not have these financial powers within the family. Likewise, women, whether higher educated or lower educated, generally do not have property in their name, be it the house they are living in or other family property.

Furthermore, the women continue to be subjected to various kinds of abuse, physical, mental and sexual in their marital household. Yet this abuse was higher for the lower educated control group as compared to the higher educated respondents. Interestingly, a significant proportion of the respondents continue to believe that the husband has a right to beat his wife under certain circumstances. These circumstances include not looking after the household, not looking after the children, not looking after the parents, etc. The lower educated control group too believes in this and to an even higher extent that the graduate women. Being patriarchal societies, the males are obviously in favour of beating the wives under certain circumstances. Dowry, the bane of Indian society since times immemorial also exists in Iran and it was found that its prevalence continues regardless of the level of education. Not only does dowry continue, but harassment for dowry is also very much a part of life of women in the two cities.
Thus, one could assert that the status and role of women in the family continues to be low. At the same time, higher education has had a definite positive impact in various spheres. On the whole, a majority of the hypothesis with which the study was conceived were validated, while some were rejected. In the first instance, it was found that higher education has had little or no impact in improving a woman’s status in the family in both Tehran and Chandigarh. However, a comparison between the two cities reveals a better impact of higher education on women in Tehran as compared to Chandigarh. Thus, increase in educational level has had more impact upon the attitude of people in Tehran towards women in comparison to Chandigarh. Yet society and males continue to be resistant to changes in the status of women within the family.

However higher education does significantly impact women’s roles within the family. This is obvious in their greater economic participation, participation in decision-making as well as greater liberty in various aspects of their lives. It equally impacts their expectations of the roles and status of others in the family in a positive manner. Thus with higher education, women expect others to perform more significant roles in the family. This was found to be true for Chandigarh, but not so for Tehran. However, women’s perception of their own roles and status within the family does change with higher education in both the cities as revealed by the present study.

Participation in family decision-making too improves with higher education and women are able to participate more effectively. Likewise, women are able to break the shackles of parochial factors of caste, class, religion, custom and tradition with higher education and emerge as independent actors within the family. Along with this, higher education enable more efficient handling of the multiple roles of women. Women have taken on multiple roles to adapt to changes in today’s society. They continue to meet household and family responsibilities, while at the same time working outside the home and trying to pursue personal interests.

However, it is significant to note that higher education does not bring about a change in the male attitude and men continue to behave in the same patriarchal manner towards women in the family. It does, however, impact the male perception of women’s roles in the family and women tend to be given greater responsibility.
Nevertheless, one can say that the impact of higher education on the status and roles of women in the family is ambiguous, to say the least. The impact is contingent upon a number of other factors, such as the attitude of the males in the family towards women’s status, roles and responsibilities, availability of other women in the family to help look after the household chores, as well as women’s own socialisation and their perceptions of their rights and responsibilities, all of which have little to do with women’s own higher education. Thus, on the whole women, regardless of level of education, continue to have a secondary status in the family. Their lives are controlled by others, their rights contingent upon the wishes of others and their empowerment, dependent upon goodwill of others in the family, be it husband or in-laws. Women, today have come a long way along the road to enjoying a better status within the family, but have “miles to go” as yet. Some suggestions may be offered in this context.

In the first place, there is a need to inculcate a changed mindset in the children, both boys and girls, from an early age. Family is the first and foremost institution of socialisation and mothers become the first agents of such socialisation. It is upon their shoulders that the primary responsibility for socialising the children into a changed mindset where gender equality is actively internalised, rests. However, such changed attitudes would be impossible to sustain in the absence of gender sensitive school teaching and environment. Gender equality must be included in the school curriculum and textbooks, it must be ensured, are free of gender bias.

Gender sensitization is incomplete in the absence of awareness and sensitisation to human rights, particularly women’s human rights. For this, it is essential to incorporate human rights training too in the school curriculum as well as hold human rights workshops for both men and women.

Taking up a job requires specialized coaching in a particular arena. However, entering family life requires no such coaching or counseling. Marriage, which is the most fundamental of all relations and the foundation for the family, which again is the most basic social unit, upon which rests the foundations for a strong society and state, is entered into by two individuals without the least information about the rights and responsibilities that it involves. In this context, it is essential to ensure that appropriate counselling is give before marriage to ensure, that the marriage is based upon equitable relations.
Furthermore, the mass media has a significant role to play in this respect. The media has constructed images of the ideal woman and wife, which impact the minds of the common persons. This social construction of an ideal woman imposes an extra burden upon the woman in the family, who has to act like a superwoman in order to fulfill these constructed images of a wife and a mother. It is essential that the media is sensitized to this issue and creates awareness both by changing the images it presents as well as ensuring that persistent gender role stereotyped norms are weakened and eventually broken.

Along with this, it is essential to make laws ensuring women’s rights in the family. Laws, however, are not enough, for failure to implement existing laws may result in a greater weakening of women’s status and roles in the family.

In the end, one can only say that changing the patriarchal mindset is of the utmost importance and without this change, women’s status and roles within the family cannot change. As the Indian women’s movement song goes, “tu khud ko badal, tu khud ko badal, tabhi to zamana badlega” (Change yourself, only then will the world change). In the end one could assert “Allah changeth not the condition of a folk until they (first) change that which is in their hearts” (Holy Quran, 13:11).