

Modernisation, Status of Women and Fertility

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Introduction

Status literally means position in relation to others. The status enjoyed by women in any society is an index of the standard of its social organisation. Traditionally, while women perform the major roles of reproduction, the household and so on, in recent times, many new roles have been added on. The term 'status of women' then would denote not only a conjunction of the rights and duties but also the degree of her subordination in the home, education, economic status, role in decision making in family affairs, and her self-perceived status in the home and in the community.

In recent years considerable attention has been focussed on the need for raising the status of women. This has been highlighted by the Chinese slogan 'break the thousand year old chains which have bound them by tradition and custom to an inferior role in society and reassure them that they too can hold up half of the heaven. According to the United Nations [1], the status of women in society can be determined by her composite status which can be ascertained by the extent of control that she has over her own life derived from access to knowledge, economic resources and the degree of autonomy enjoyed in the process of decision making and choice at crucial points in her life cycle.

Speaking of the 'special interest' which women's status has for demographers. Blake [2] explains that "the nature of women's position and the variations in its articulation with the status of men, influence important variables with which students of population are concerned in particular, to reproductive behaviour and the size and the quality of labour force". Weller [3] found that wives manifest lower fertility behaviour in wife-dominant and egalitarian families rather than in husband-dominant families. Most researchers define the status of women as a multidimensional concept to women's access to and control over valued material and social resources, and/or to women's power and autonomy, that is, women's ability to control important events in their lives on their freedom from control by others, especially others in the family or household [4-9].

Objectives

The present study makes an attempt to examine the impact of modernisation on the status of women and fertility behaviour using two indices- one for modernisation and another for women's status.

Sample and Methodology

The study was conducted in Nellore town in Andhra Pradesh. The population of Nellore was 2.36 lakhs in 1981 and its decennial growth rate during 1971-81 was 76.8 percent the highest in Andhra Pradesh state. The literacy for males was 63.35 percent and for females, 48.67 percent which is high compared to all other towns in the S.V. University area Tirupati.

The sample unit was the household having an eligible couple with one or more living children and the wife not exceeding 44 years of age at the time of survey. The survey was largely confined to the husband but the wife was also contacted for collecting information on certain items like pregnancy history and contraceptive practice. Thus, the couple as a unit was interviewed, which is an improvement in the methodology of fertility studies as most interview either males or females alone. The stratified proportionate, simple random sampling design was used. The study area was stratified on the basis of municipal wards existing at the time of survey. Lists of households satisfying the above criteria were prepared ward-wise based on eligible couple registers, and a total of 600 households were randomly selected from these lists by applying weights to give a fair representation to each ward, the weight having the ratio of the number of households in a given ward to the total number of households in the universe.

Operational Concepts

Any, given person may hold modern views on certain dimensions and traditional views on other dimensions of individual modernity. Hence, the modem and less modern were differentiated on the basis of the cumulative score of the respondents on selected dimensions of modernisation namely, faith in man's effort, openness to change, planning orientation, status of women, decision making and achievement [4]. The minimum score on these dimensions was 39 and the maximum score was 122. The respondents were divided into three groups based on their modernisation scores namely, less modem (39-71), intermediate (72-98) and modern (99-122), each representing approximately one-third of the total sample.

Status of woman index

In the present study, the status of women refers to the economic and social freedom enjoyed by the women in the family. An index was developed to measure the degree of status enjoyed by respondents within the family, based on the responses given by them to nine structured statements. The nine variables were: consulting the wife while making important decisions; discussing politics with the wife; talking to the wife about birth control measures; having property or land in the wife's name; having a bank account in the wife's name; maintenance of the household account by the wife; keeping cash with the wife for daily expenditure; restrictions imposed on the daughter-in-law; and freedom available to the wife to argue with the husband in case of a difference of opinion.

All the statements had three alternative responses namely, 'No', 'Sometimes' and 'Yes' with scores 1, 2 and 3 respectively. The respondents were asked to indicate their opinions by choosing the appropriate response to each statement. Thus, the minimum score on the status of women was 9 and the maximum score was 27. The total score of a respondent on the status of women would be the sum of the scores for the responses given to each of the nine statements. On this basis, the respondents' wives were divided into the low (9-14), moderately low (15-16), moderate high (17-21), and high (22-27) categories depending on the status enjoyed by them in the family.

Results and Discussion

The data presented in Table 1 show that a greater proportion - almost three-fourths or 75.2 percent of the 'more modern' respondents accorded high status to their wives compared to their "less modern" counterparts, none of whom accorded a high status to their womenfolk. Among the latter, 56.7 percent of the respondents had given a low status score to their wives compared to none in the 'more modern' group. Nearly one-fourth (24.1%) of the 'more modern' respondents accorded a moderately high status to their wives as against only 12 percent among the 'less modern' category. A negligible percentage (0.7%) of the wives of the 'more modern' respondents were accorded a moderately low status compared to nearly one-third (31.3%) in the 'less modern' category.

Table 1 : Percent distribution of respondents by level of modernisation and status accorded to women

Level of modernisation	Status accorded to women			
	Low	Moderately low	Moderately high	High
Less modern	56.7 (132)	31.3 (72)	12.0 --	-- (28)

Intermediate	8.7 (17)	25.8 (50)	55.7 (108)	9.8 (19)
More modern	-- --	0.7 (1)	24.1 (42)	75.2 (131)

Figures in brackets indicate the number of respondents.

From the above findings it can be concluded that a greater proportion of the wives of the 'more modern' respondents enjoyed a high status in the family, whereas the majority of the 'less modern' respondents accorded a low or moderately low status to their wives.

The data in Table 2 show a linear inverse relationship between status of women and fertility for the total as well as younger and older females. A sharp decline in fertility was observed with increase in status enjoyed by the females (wives).

Table 2 : Percent distribution by mean number of live births to women by status enjoyed by them in the family

Status enjoyed by women	Present age of wife (years)		Total
	≤ 29	30 +	
Low	3.07 (55)	4.62 (94)	4.50 (149)
Moderately low	2.56 (48)	3.93 (75)	3.39 (123)
Moderately high	2.41 (75)	3.51 (103)	3.05 (178)
High	1.91 (54)	2.78 (96)	2.47 (150)

Figures in brackets indicate the number of respondents.

Table 2 clearly indicates that women who enjoyed a high status in the family had 2.03 fewer live births than their counterparts who enjoyed a low status (significant at .01 level). Further, those who enjoyed a moderately high and moderately low status had an average of 3.05 and 3.39 live births respectively. A similar trend was observed among the younger and older age groups also. Younger wives (up to 29 years) who enjoyed a high status had 1.16 fewer live births than their low status counterparts (significant at .01 level). Younger women who enjoyed a moderately low and moderately high status had an average of 2.56 and 2.41 live births respectively. Among the older age group, wives with high status had 1.84 fewer live births than their counterparts enjoying a low status (significant at .01 level), with an average of 3.51 and 3.93 births among older wives of moderately high and moderately low status respectively.

The effect of the status of women on fertility behaviour cannot be assessed correctly when the different variables of status of women are examined together.

Hence, multiple regression analysis was carried out to estimate the amount of variance in fertility behaviour explained by each of the selected dimensions of women's status.

The total variance in fertility as explained by five of the nine variables considered for regression was 83.8 percent for the 'less modern' and 'more modern' respondents as a whole. Talking to the wife about birth control measures emerged as a powerful predictor of fertility accounting for 26.7 percent of the variance in fertility. Consulting the wife while making important decisions was the second important variable which explained as much as 21.4 percent of the variance, while the third variable namely, discussing politics with the wife, accounted for another 14.4 percent. Having property in the wife's name ranked fourth in order of importance, predicting 11.5 percent of the variance in the fertility of the total respondents, while maintenance of household accounts by the wife explained 9.3 percent of the variance in their fertility.

From these findings it can be concluded that fertility was significantly low among women who enjoyed a high status in the family.

Summary and Implications

The degree of status accorded to women in the family and society reflects the level of modernity of the people. In the present study more than half (56.7 percent) of the 'less modern' respondents accorded a low status to their wives and only 31.3 percent gave a moderately low status to their womenfolk. This trend was reversed in the case of 'more modern' respondents. Three-fourths of the 'more modern' respondents accorded a high status to their wives and the rest accorded a moderately high status. Women who enjoyed a high status in the family had 2.03 fewer live births than their counterparts who were accorded a low status. In the younger and older age groups, wives with high status in the family had 1.16 and 1.84 fewer live births than their counter with low status.

In the light of the above evidence showing low fertility among women enjoying a high status in the family, there is a need to raise female status. This is possible through their greater involvement in more modern occupations, which would provide them with greater economic freedom. This could be achieved by promoting higher levels of formal education and vocational education such as teacher training, nursing etc. The provision and effective implementation of reservations in educational institutions and work places for females as also giving them an equal right over property would raise their status and help in curtailing high fertility. Income generating schemes such as tailoring, carpet making, embroidery, poultry and dairy farming etc. should be promoted through vocational training and subsidised loans which would help women to

earn money and to free themselves from economic dependence on male members, thereby enabling them to gain a high status in the family and society.

References

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