

Status of women in highly literate societies: the case of Kerala and Finland

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Abstract

Both Kerala and Finland have made notable achievements in the realm of literacy: Kerala has one of the highest rates in the developing world and Finland ranks first in literacy among developed countries. Both also share a cultural history of granting women a high status in their respective societies. Using Kerala and Finland as examples, this paper explores the status of women in highly literate societies in both the developing and developed worlds, looking not only at the historical circumstances in which these conditions developed but also at the outcomes associated with them. This paper argues that literacy rates and female status are interconnected: each impacts on the other, as high female status contributes to improved literacy rates and educational and life opportunities, while high female literacy rates result in increased social standing for women. Such synergy produces outcomes beneficial to a society, regardless of its developmental status.

Key words: literacy, education, gender, Kerala, Finland

Literate men have literate sons; literate women have literate children

Old Kerala Wisdom.

Introduction

There does not appear to be very much in common between Kerala, a state in Southern India, and Finland, an advanced Scandinavian country. Both, however, have made notable achievements in the realm of literacy, with Kerala having one of the highest literacy rates in the developing world and Finland ranking first in literacy among developed countries. Another shared characteristic is a cultural history of granting women a high status in society. Given this, it is argued that there exists an association between the status of women and literacy rates. Each impacts on the other, with high female status leading to improved literacy and high literacy rates among females resulting in increased social standing. Although it is unclear which is the prerequisite and which the outcome, what is relevant is that the interconnectedness of the two results in improved overall societal conditions, regard-

less of developmental status. This paper, using Kerala and Finland as case examples, will explore the status of women in highly literate societies in both the developing and developed worlds, looking not only at historical circumstances but also the outcomes associated with those conditions.

Current situation in Kerala

It is helpful to look first at the accomplishments of Kerala and Finland in the context of similar states and countries. In the case of Kerala, it is worth noting that "even though Kerala is merely a state rather than a country, with its population close to 30 million, it is larger than the majority of countries in the world" (Sen, 1999, p. 302). Finland's population, as a comparative example, is just over 5 million. Thus, Kerala is not too small to be included in international comparisons. Formed in November 1956 by the amalgamation of the linguistically similar Indian states of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar, Kerala has made impressive advances and, in particular, ranks highly among Indian states on both human and gender development indexes. For example, as Table 1 shows, some specific comparisons between Kerala and greater India concern rates of birth, death and infant mortality.

Table 1: Selected demographic indicators, Kerala and India, 1997

Indicator	Kerala	India
Birth rate per 1000	17.9	27.2
Death rate per 1000	6.2	8.9
Infant mortality rate per 1000 live births	12.0	71.0

Source: Chandrasekhar (2001, p. 7).

Another important human development indicator is life expectancy. On this measure, Kerala generally outperforms countries in the South-East Asian region, as is evident in Table 2.

Furthermore, in terms of sex ratio, Kerala is unique among Indian states in that females in Kerala have, over the last century, consistently outnumbered males. For example, a 2001 census reported that Kerala had

Table 2: Life expectancy in the SEA region, 2000

Country	Life expectancy at birth (years)	
	Males	Females
Bangladesh	60.4	60.8
Bhutan	60.4	62.5
DPR Korea	64.5	67.2
India	59.8	62.7
Indonesia	63.4	67.4
Kerala	69.0	74.0
Maldives	64.6	64.4
Myanmar	56.2	61.1
Nepal	58.5	58.0
Sri Lanka	67.6	75.3
Thailand	66.0	72.4

Source: WHO Geneva, World Health Report (2001), Department of EIP.

Note: Kerala information taken from Dreze (1996).

1058 females per 1000 males (Census of India, 2001). Some explanations for this include a decline in the overall female infant mortality rate, including a marked absence of female infanticide, equal immunisation rates, access to health care for both males and females and an overall increase in life expectancy for women. This is important because, as was pointed out in a paper on Kerala's development achievements, "the ratio of men to women in the population is characteristic of a society where there is not a systematic bias against the survival of girls and women in the population" (Ramachandran, 1997, p. 225). In short, the fact that women have consistently outnumbered men is indicative of Kerala's progress in the realm of overall female well-being.

The comparatively high status of females in Kerala stems from a variety of factors, beyond relatively good overall health. For example, a traditional matriarchal system existed among several Hindu castes in the state, which contributed to a higher status for women, as compared with the rest of India. Women in Kerala also have a history of education, which plays an important role in the state's impressive literacy rates. In fact, Keralite women, at 87.86%, have the highest rates of literacy among women in India and, at 90.92%, Kerala also boasts the highest overall literacy rate in the country (Census of India, 2001). The assessment is based on the self-declaration of the respondent, which forms part of the census process. As Rao (2002, p. 10) points out, this involves an enumerator asking "Are you literate? Can you read and write?" No formal test is given to verify the claim. (Of course, this is very different from the formal test of functional literacy involved in the PISA assessments, used to measure literacy rates in OECD countries, including Finland.)

A notable fact is that Kerala has attained these statistics with very little financial resources. In 1997, for

example, Kerala's per capita income was \$324, or 1.3% of the US average income (Franke, 1999). Even with limited funds, Kerala has managed to achieve impressive literacy rates and, as mentioned above, also notable results on other measures of social well-being.

Current situation in Finland

Finland's human development indicators, on the other hand, are on a level broadly similar to those of other developed countries. The 2003 Human Development Report (UNDP, 2003) ranked Finland with a Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.93, or 14th out of 175 countries (UNDP, 2003, p. 237). Finland's ranking on this index, which measures average achievement in human development, based on a healthy and long life, knowledge and standard of living, is on a par with other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, whose average HDI is 0.905 (UNDP, 2003, p. 240). Furthermore, Finland, along with the other Scandinavian countries, tops the Human Development Report's rankings on the Gender Empowerment Measure, which assesses the degree of participation of women in economic, political and professional activities (Devi, 2002, pp. 60–61).

Like Kerala, compared with developing countries, Finland is set apart from those with a similar economic profile (in this case other OECD countries) by the consistently high ranking that it achieves in terms of mean scores on literacy assessments. The Finnish assessments, which cover both children and adults, derive from international studies. These include the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), which surveyed 10-year-olds in 1991, and the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) of 1994–1998. More recently, in 2000, Finland topped the PISA ranking, in terms of mean scores, on a test of reading literacy for 15-year-olds. As many readers will be aware, PISA is the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment, an internationally standardised evaluation developed jointly by the participating countries. The 2000 PISA rankings are shown in Table 3.

Given the deep recession in which Finland found itself in the 1990s, its ability to outscore the other OECD countries may seem rather surprising. However, a number of factors help to explain the country's success in reading literacy. These include demographic variables (e.g. population density and homogeneity), the education system, government policies, societal attitudes and expectations and the overall availability of resources. Although these attributes will be addressed, the primary focus in this paper is the fact that the Finns, like the Keralites, have historically viewed women as having a high status and have extended an education to everyone, regardless of gender.

Table 3: Mean performance in reading literacy, OECD countries

Country	Mean	SD	Significantly above the OECD average	Not significantly different from the OECD average	Significantly below the OECD average
Finland	546	89	x		
Canada	534	95	x		
New Zealand	529	106	x		
Australia	528	102	x		
Ireland	527	94	x		
Korea	526	70	x		
United Kingdom	523	100	x		
Japan	522	86	x		
Sweden	516	92	x		
Austria	507	93	x		
Belgium	507	107	x		
Iceland	507	92	x		
France	505	92		x	
Norway	505	104		x	
United States	504	105		x	
OECD Average	500	100		x	
Denmark	497	98		x	
Switzerland	494	102		x	
Spain	493	85			x
Czech Republic	492	96			x
Italy	487	91			x
Germany	484	111			x
Hungary	480	94			x
Poland	479	100			x
Greece	474	97			x
Portugal	470	97			x
Luxembourg	441	100			x
Mexico	422	86			x

Source: Valijarvi et al. (2000).

History of women and literacy in Kerala

To understand how these gains were accomplished and under what circumstances education was made available to the general populace, it is useful to examine the historical status of women in each of the two societies. In the case of Kerala, it can be argued that three factors were particularly instrumental in leading to the present day comparatively high status of women: the royal families who believed in the importance of education for the masses, a traditional matrilineal society and the influence of the early Christian missionaries. As to royal families, Kerala "had the good fortune of having royal families in Travancore and Cochin that happened to be atypically in favor of elementary education" (Sen, 1997, p. 16). This can be seen from the Royal Rescript, issued in 1817 by Rani Laxmi Parvathi Bai, the 15-year-old female ruler of Travancore.

The Rescript read:

"The state should defray the entire cost of the education of its people in order that there might be no backwardness in

the spread of enlightenment among them, that by diffusion of education they might become better subjects and public servants and that the reputation of the state might be enhanced thereby".

Although much progress remained to be made and the 1817 goals were not approached for many years, the Rescript "was remarkable because it declared universal education, paid for by the state, to be an objective of state policy" (Chandrasekhar, 2001, p. 10). In short, the royal families were forward thinking when it came to education, and their support of learning helped Keralites to make educational advances.

In India, issues of societal order and caste also have an impact upon services, including education, and are extremely relevant when discussing access to social provisions. In Kerala, the state "did not have a tradition of female seclusion, except among the Namboodiris and a section of Muslims" (Ramachandran, 1997, p. 271). Furthermore, matriliney gave the women of Kerala greater freedom and choice than women in other parts of the country. For example, when the centralised education system was established in the 1860s,

“the school system became the robing room where two or three generations of women shed aspects of the matrilineal culture that had allowed them to be there in the first place and put on skills that gave them economic value in the new world of salaried jobs and patriarchal monogamy” (Jeffrey, 1992, p. 157).

The state is known for providing educational services not only to women but also to those from varying social backgrounds. As Franke pointed out in his paper on Kerala’s development, “Kerala stands far above the country as a whole in providing education across urban–rural, male–female, and high-caste–low-caste barriers” (Franke, 1994, p. 70). This is not only a result of the state’s history of education-friendly royal families and matriliney among certain castes, but is due also to the Christian missionaries who arrived in Kerala in the 19th century. Although these missionaries were certainly not the first Christians in the state, they were, acting on the missionary ethic of spreading Christianity, the first group to have a notable impact upon female education.

In the early 1800s, education in Kerala was far from universal, with access based on caste and gender. This resulted in only a small percentage of the female population being provided with a formal education. However, when the missionaries arrived, it was generally recognised that literacy was a precondition for religious studies. That is, the missionaries expressed the belief that a stable Christian community could only be successful under conditions in which women were competent to both read the Bible and teach the messages therein. Furthermore, as is stated in the Missionary Register of 1839, “all Christians who really aim at the advancement of the kingdom of Christ in India admit that, in pursuance of that object, female education is one of the chief things which ought to be promoted” (Joy, 1995, p. 103). Members from the London Missionary Society were the first significant group to arrive in Kerala, and they soon established both churches and schools, including the first girls’ school in 1819, in which women were also allowed to teach. In their quest to disseminate the Christian faith, the missionaries helped to lessen gradually the prejudices associated with gender and caste. Therefore, they played an important role in laying the foundation for the education of women in Kerala.

The growing importance of women’s education prompted the Travancore Government to take action as well. In 1864, the first government-run girls’ school in Kerala opened. In 1910, the Education and Inspection Code, which represented the beginning of the existing educational system, came into being and, importantly, “the observance of religious neutrality and equal rights for all classes of people were two features of the Code” (Joy, 1995, pp. 112–113). Equality was further emphasised, in 1911, by the formal abolition of caste restrictions in government schools. Then, in 1945, the government introduced free and

Table 4: Literacy Rates in Kerala, 1951–2001

Year	Overall	Males	Females
1951	47.18	58.35	36.43
1961	55.08	64.89	45.56
1971	69.75	77.13	62.53
1981	78.85	84.56	73.36
1991	89.81	93.62	86.17
2001	90.92	94.20	87.86

Source: <http://www.kerala.gov.in>

compulsory education to all children between 5 and 10 years of age. By the end of the 1950s, “87% of primary-aged girls in Kerala were estimated to attend school” (Jeffrey, 1992, p. 55). In present-day Kerala, slightly more than half of the students enrolled in colleges are women and the ideal of education for everyone, regardless of gender, remains at the forefront of current thinking. Public school education remains a high government priority, and “public expenditure in Kerala (which has risen consistently over the last four decades) is characterised by a rare commitment to school education” (Chandrasekhar, 2001, p. 16). This is essential for the success of mass schooling.

The high population density (819/km² in 2001) also facilitates the delivery of educational services to Kerala’s youth. Unusually for India, resources are fairly evenly distributed, a point made strongly in an article in *Atlantic Monthly*, which states that “perhaps more than anything else, the state’s high standard of living is a story about equal standards of living” (Kapur, 1998). This applies not only to education but also to land reform and the public distribution system, where Kerala is unique among Indian states in its near-universal rationing. In short, the relatively even distribution of resources, along with “the combination of free primary and secondary education, introduced in the early part of the 20th century, with female emancipation laid the foundation for high female literacy” (Black, 1999, p. 1771). Progress, however, has been slow. As can be seen in Table 4, even with Kerala’s relatively progressive social attitudes, its female-friendly environment and even distribution of resources, a high rate of literacy among women is a fairly recent phenomenon.

An important example of progressive action was the Total Literacy Campaign of 1989, which operated with the slogan “Sakshara Keralam, Sundara Keralam”, meaning “a literate Kerala is a beautiful Kerala”. Three years later, the campaign, begun in the Ernakulam district, reached the other 13 districts as well, teaching Keralites to read Malayalam, the language spoken by 97% of the population. Furthermore, in Kerala nearly every village has a public library. This extension of literacy to the masses, including women and members of different castes, has helped many to become more proactive, a factor in explaining why Kerala has the

highest per capita consumption of newspapers in India. It is also a reason behind Kerala's success in making "human development gains that are greater than those of other Indian states and of many developing nations" (Ramanathaiyer and MacPherson, 2000, p. 185). These gains have been of particular importance for women, but also for society as a whole since, as discussed below, female literacy levels can make an impact on a myriad of social indicators.

In Keralite society, it can be argued that "literacy – in particular, female literacy – is an essential (and is often regarded as *the* essential) facilitator of Kerala's achievements in the spheres of health and demographic change" (Chandrasekhar, 2001, p. 2). General consensus dictates that there are strong correlations between a literate population and life expectancy. For example, because of their high levels of education, mothers in Kerala are likely to breastfeed their children during the first 6 months after birth and are more likely than their counterparts to have a higher level of health information and to use health care facilities. As a result of such practices, children in Kerala have a high survival rate, as compared with those in other developing states and countries. The belief that "literate women care for their babies more successfully than illiterate mothers" is certainly borne out in Kerala (Jeffrey, 1992, p. 150). Female education is also arguably the most effective way of lowering birth rates. Family planning methods are more successful when females are literate, as this leads to improved personal understanding of family planning options and potential phobias associated with various birth control methods are reduced. Consequently, a typical family in Kerala consists of only two children, comparable with an average-sized family in the developed, rather than developing, world.

When discussing the status of women in Kerala, it is important to look at their involvement not only in education but also in politics. Kerala itself has a rather complicated political history (Travancore, Cochin and Malabar had separate governments until 1956, and since then Kerala has alternated between mostly Communist and Congress-led governments), but women have had a role to play. The Women's Suffrage Movement began in India in the 1920s and Travancore was one of the first Indian states to extend political enfranchisement to women. Kerala was also the first state to have a woman cabinet minister.

In modern-day Kerala, where improved literacy rates have increased women's participation in public life, and where "women's literacy is supported by society and the state", there is also a general acceptance of a woman's right to education and work, although the latter may prove difficult due to high levels of unemployment (Ramachandran, 1997, p. 317). Given this, it is not surprising that, in comparison with other Indian states, Kerala ranks first in terms of the Gender Empowerment Measure, discussed above. In short,

women in Kerala have evidently taken steps forward in both the educational and, to a lesser but still significant degree, political arena. However, despite these gains, women in Kerala have further progress to make towards establishing a societal foothold equivalent to that held by women in developed countries.

History of women and literacy in Finland

In order to better understand the disparities between the two worlds of developing and developed countries, it is interesting to also examine the status of women in Finland. As argued by Singleton (1998, p. 162), "The position of women in Finnish society is as near to the ideal as can be found in any developed industrial country". This position stems from a cultural history in which women have consistently held a high societal status. For example, Finnish folklore describes women as "strong, independent and active, and not dominated by men" (Nykänen). Furthermore, for most of its history Finland has been a largely agricultural society, and "in an agrarian society, men and women do not lead such different lives" (Manninen, 2004). Paradoxically, the fact that Finland lagged behind other European countries in terms of industrialisation is an important reason for the relative equality among genders and helps to explain why the model of the male breadwinner was never able to establish strong roots. Women worked alongside their husbands, were economically equal to males and, as Manninen observes, demonstrated that Finland was "not fertile ground for the concept of the non-working woman".

This mentality was prevalent in the 1880s, when many organisations were formed, including workers' associations, youth clubs and women's societies. Many of these women's organizations (such as the Martha Association, founded in 1900, and the National Council of Women's Organisations, founded in 1911) remain active today. In addition to the fact that "men and women were more or less equally active in the organisation progress, absence of sex discrimination within the newly established organisations was a particular characteristic of the situation in Finland" (Sulkunen, 1989, p. 187). These notions of equality have carried over to the present day, where "men and women participate in working life in equal numbers and more than 80% of the women with at least one child under 18 years of age are wage earners" (Koskiahio, 1995, p. 4). A high level of equality among the sexes in Finland has, not surprisingly, had consequences for women in the realms of education and politics.

As a literate populace has always been a cultural priority in Finland, Finnish women have traditionally learned to read at the same time as men. This mentality has been expressed in different ways throughout

Finland's history. For example, although Finland did not have a missionary influence comparable with that in Kerala, the church did play an important role in promoting literacy. The Church Law of 1686 gave the Lutheran Church (of which 89% of the population are members) responsibility for spreading literacy among the masses, which it did by refusing to marry those who could not read a catechism. This "helps to explain why the Finns became one of the most literate nations in the world long before mass literacy became the norm in the late nineteenth century western Europe" (Singleton, 1998, p. 177). Finland is also known for its expansive community library network, indicative of the Finnish cultural high prioritisation and reinforcement of literacy. Furthermore, in the 19th century, the formal education of young girls was expanded. This happened not only because of the church's influence and accompanying societal expectations concerning literacy but also because of "the problems faced by unmarried middle class women in earning a living" (Manninen, 2004). A decent education helped young women to secure what were considered to be more appropriate jobs.

With time came further progress. In 1883, Finnish women were able to attend university, although they were required to apply for a dispensation. In 1901, the requirement for this dispensation was removed. Today, education in Finland is considered a fundamental right, and all children receive a 9-year basic education. These services are provided almost exclusively by the public sector and are financed mostly through taxes. As the 2005 Human Development Report shows, between the years 2000 and 2002, Finland spent 12.7% (of total government expenditure) on education (UNDP, 2005, p. 254). However, the Finnish educational system, well funded though it may be, is considered unconventional as compared with those in other OECD countries.

For example, in the Finnish system, children do not start school until the age of 7. There are also no programmes for gifted children, the curriculum is extremely flexible and classes may have as many as 30 students. A recent *New York Times* article referred to such features of the education system as "a prescription for failure, no doubt, in the eyes of many experts, but in this case [it is] a description of Finnish schools, which were recently ranked the world's best" (Alvarez, 2004, p. 4). An important reason, perhaps, for the system's success is the high regard in which teachers are held in Finland. All Finnish teachers must, at the very least, have a master's degree, and "of all applicants for teachers' programs provided at universities, only 10% are admitted, which implies that those who are accepted are highly motivated and talented" (Valijarvi et al., 2000, p. 42).

As Timonen observes, excellence is widespread: "these [educational] services are of almost uniform high quality and in many areas represent global best

practice as defined by the OECD" (Timonen, 2003, p. 113). This even allocation of high-quality provision has an economic base: in Finland not only is the school system well financed but, as is the case in Kerala, its resources are fairly evenly distributed. This promotes social equality and gives women opportunities to excel. For example, women "under 40 years of age entered the 1990s with higher education levels than those of men, and over 60% of those with university degrees are women" (Tyyska, 1995, p. 47). In fact, today it is claimed that in Finland "women in every age group are more highly educated than men" (Manninen, 2004, web document). In short, Finnish women have certainly made notable strides in the realm of education.

These educational advances have led to progress by Finnish women in the political sphere. Singleton writes, "women play a part in Finnish public life which is far more important than it is in most other countries" (1998, p. 163). An important milestone came in 1906, when Finnish women became the first in Europe to receive universal and equal franchise. This development took place comparatively early in Finland as "women's right to vote was not analysed or presented as a specific issue within the demands of organisations, but simply seemed as natural as the right of men to participate in the legislative system" (Sulkunen, 1989, p. 190). Finnish women were also the first in the world eligible to stand for parliamentary elections. In 1907, in the first elections for the unicameral Parliament, 19 of the 200 newly elected members were women. In 2000, Tarja Halonen was elected as Finland's first woman president. By 2003, 8 of the 17 elected ministers, and 74 of the 200 members of parliament were women. In short, the advances made by Finnish women in the public sphere are impressive, even by the standards of developed countries.

Public participation in the two societies

An important outcome of their high rate of literacy is the high level of public participation displayed by those in both Finland and Kerala. Being literate instils a sense of empowerment and presents an avenue through which everyone, regardless of gender, may better participate in the workings of society. For example, the 2001 IEA Civic Educational Study showed that, with the exception of Poland, Finnish students of both genders outperformed their counterparts, in all 27 comparison countries, on a scale of civic knowledge (Torney-Purta et al., 2001, p. 64). Similarly, in Kerala, due in part to the high levels of literacy in the state, "the dissemination of information by means of the written word goes much deeper in Kerala than elsewhere in India; this has important implications for the quality and depth of public opinion and of participatory democracy in the state" (Ramachandran,

1997, p. 260). As a recent *New York Times* article stated, in reference to the citizens of Kerala, "They speak Malayalam, a language little known in other parts of India, but the regional newspaper, the *Malayala Manorama*, is read by 8 million people a day, making it the nation's second most popular daily, after *The Times of India*" (Apple, 2004).

In short, a literate population is a better informed population, and an informed population is able to take a more effective part in the decision-making processes leading to outcomes that will ultimately have an impact on society. Furthermore, when gender does not impede political participation, policies promoting better overall societal well-being are more likely to be implemented. There are, however, barriers in both Kerala and Finland to free and equal participation by men and women: high rates of literacy and a high overall status of females do not guarantee these freedoms. Kerala, for instance, suffers from an extremely high rate of unemployment and low spending on higher education. In Finland, some issues include job segregation (women tend to be employed in lower skill/lower-paying jobs), the wage gap (where men are paid more than women, even if they share similar work and responsibilities) and, with more immigrants entering the country, increased heterogeneity in Finnish society. This last issue could prove a particular challenge to the smooth functioning of Finland's system of education, made possible in part by the small and homogeneous population to which it caters. Details of these barriers, however, are not the present focus and remain to be discussed in a forthcoming paper.

Conclusion

Although Kerala and Finland are very different places and consequently face different barriers to societal advancement, they do have in common the important characteristics of being highly literate societies in which women have a comparatively high social status. Given the marked differences between Kerala, a state in the developing world, and Finland, a developed country, it is interesting to compare the impact of their shared attributes on the two societies. As was pointed out in a 2001 paper on social change, past research has reached the consensus that "schooling, particularly that of females, has beneficial effects, and more schooling brings more benefits to individuals, families and society large" (Levine et al., 2001, p. 2). This research has endorsed this view, showing that female literacy and education are hugely important in promoting social development. Both Finland and Kerala place a high value on literacy and education, but many of their advances have been made possible through not only a high investment in education but also the underlying belief that women should have access as well. The resulting educated female popula-

tion has, in turn, been demonstrated to bring about outcomes beneficial to society as a whole.

This study of Kerala and Finland demonstrates an association between the status of women on the one hand, and literacy rates and education on the other. Each impacts on the other, as a high female status contributes to improved literacy rates, educational and life opportunities, and high female literacy rates result in an increased social standing for women. The interconnectedness of the two, each playing off and building on the other, leads to improved societal conditions. In conclusion, this paper supports the view that improvements in both literacy rates and female societal standing result in outcomes beneficial to society, regardless of developmental status.

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