Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Background

‘Here cometh the new age woman’, is the headline of a newspaper article in the Times of India (TOI 2004a), a leading Indian daily, which aptly describes women in the modern era. The New Age woman has evolved by renegotiating her role in society and moving out of the household into the workforce, which was traditionally the domain of men. A recent study by researchers at the Center for Future Studies, in London (2004), carried out among British women in their twenties, coined the term ‘contrasexual’ to describe the financially independent, confident woman of today. The contrasexual woman’s aspirations run counter-traditional, her career takes a higher priority than family, and she is usually not interested in having children. Though this study was conducted in the British context, the term has been widely adopted across societies to portray a global trend occurring in women’s lives today. All over the world we observe changes in the lives of women in several aspects: education, sexual behaviour, marriage, divorce, child-bearing, living arrangement, and labour force participation. Further, these changes are closely inter-related and culture-specific in spite of their occurrence across the globe. This indicates women’s rising ‘primacy’ in contemporary times.

Hence women’s traditional role as a homemaker, which was her predominant role, has given way to multiple roles; such as that of a career woman combining motherhood with household duties. These multiple roles evolve as women negotiate between dual-careers, opt for flexible working hours and part-time work options, make career switch-overs, and restructure events in the life course. To a large extent, women’s life courses used to be institutionalised and their roles standardised in ways dictated by the cultural context as a result of which women in different cultures act differently to achieve a primary position in society. However, the extent of institutionalised and standardised patterns has steadily been on the decline across cultures.

Women’s primary position in society has largely been both socially prescribed and normatively followed. In contemporary times, global trends in women’s innovative behaviour have brought about changes in women’s position in society that have become ‘established’. The innovative behavior is typically studied by the occurrence, timing, and ordering of life events in the life course. The structuration of the life course is culture-specific and individual behaviour is dominated by cultural norms. These norms are not solely responsible for individual behaviour, as the rules and resources prescribed by the social structure are also required for behaviour to be manifested. This leads us to two basic queries. The first is to understand what norms exist in a particular culture and the second is to understand the facilitating and constraining roles of the social structure. Thus on the one hand, the life course is culturally constructed and on the other it is reproduced by the rules guiding actions and the resources that empower these actions through social structure. When studying the life courses of individuals in a society, we observe gradual changes in the life courses. The dynamics in these changes are set in motion by time operating at four levels: historical events, role trajectories, changing social norms and continuity and change in individual development. In this study we analyse the impact of varying contextual circumstances on individual behaviour by differentiating women according to their year of birth, i.e. birth cohorts of women in a cross-cultural perspective. Ryder (1985: 12) introduced the cohort concept in the study of social change. He defined cohort as ‘the aggregate of individuals (within some population defined) who experienced the same event
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*within the same time interval*. The year of birth determines one’s future life course patterns to a great extent (Becker 1990). Time and the context-specific social conditioning explain how members of a particular cohort shape their lives and give meaning to their own biographies (Buchmann 1989). The biographies of every cohort are different from each other as they are based on the societal opportunities and constraints. In order to understand changes in the lives of women across time we make the link with the study of generations. Generations situate life in a historical context and focus on life course development of individuals across biographical and historical time. Mannheim (1928, cf. Becker 1990) identifies birth cohorts to be the foremost element in the formulation of the concept of generation. In our research birth cohorts are taken as an indicator of generations. Hence a generation in this study is defined as a cluster of adjacent birth cohorts. Older cohorts thus represent the generation of mothers while younger cohorts represent the generation of daughters.

Higher educational attainment of women has been assumed to be a trigger enabling and capacitating change in women’s lives. Moreover, the changes in the lives of women eventually have their consequences on all aspects of society both for the present and the future generations. For example, in traditional societies a decision about the precise timing of motherhood rarely put a woman in any dilemma since traditional societies have pre-defined roles set for a married woman. However, with the various changes in circumstances and opportunities, women these days are faced with situations in which the decision of child-bearing needs to be taken after a very careful evaluation of the circumstances. Giele (2004) uses the concept of ‘gender innovators’ to highlight the ‘new career-oriented’ roles of women and the ‘new care-oriented’ roles of men. She does so by bringing about a comparison between the traditional and the modern gender roles and female innovators in recent times are considered to have redefined womanhood.

An article in the Economic Times (a daily Indian newspaper also published by The Times of India) titled ‘Job or child? Tech couples face hard choice’ describes the present-day dilemmas that are commonly faced by many urban couples in India (TOI 2005a). Another article in the Indian Express (2005) mentions about a recent email survey among women college toppers in well-known universities in the United States on their aspirations after the completion of their studies. The survey found out that these women were looking forward to a future of stay-at-home moms for themselves in spite of their higher education and longer duration spent in the educational sphere. They mention that ‘they have already decided that they will put aside their careers in favour of raising children’. Such dilemmas about long-term career options and full-time motherhood continue to exist as role conflicts amongst many women.

It is important to note that though many of these decisions are to be taken primarily by women, the consequences of the decisions apply to the whole society. The extent to which women have a share in such decision-making depends on their position in the society as a whole, and specifically on factors such as educational levels and economic independence as a result of participation in the workforce. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the influence of each of these factors is very context-specific. For example, according to a research by Matsuo (2003) in a study of transition to motherhood in Japan and the Netherlands, there is a significant difference in the patterns of extramarital births in these two countries. Though these countries are in similar stages of economic development, the culturally excepted practices of cohabitation and extramarital births in the Netherlands is absent in Japan.

The social and the cultural developments influencing individual behavioural change are universal phenomena, but the pathways that have led to the behavioural change differ cross-culturally. However, in spite of the varying pathways, women’s higher educational attainment has been a feature bringing about
radical changes in the lives of women universally, i.e. across various cultures. Women’s higher educational attainment could be a strategy adopted by women to delay the occurrence of events in their life course. It is also perceived as a gain that allows women to do many more things, which would not be possible if they were less educated. The gain could be either in the form of improvement of women’s social status, achieved status or women’s autonomy. Universality of educational attainment can be established by studying the impact of higher education leading to postponement of events in the life course across cultures. These are mostly elaborated through the direct and the indirect effects of educational attainment on the occurrence, timing and sequencing of events in women’s life course. The direct effects of education are also known as the institutional effects of education which can be studied through the number of years of schooling attended by the woman and the age at graduation or the age at completion of highest educational level. The indirect effect is the effect of the increased opportunity costs and economic benefits of higher education that leads to the delay in the occurrence of events. The indirect effects are also known as the human capital effects which can be studied through the lens of various economic theories and the gains of these events are translated into human capital formation.

This research focuses on the impact of educational attainment on the lives of women, both at the individual level and the societal level, in the cross-cultural contexts of India and the Netherlands. At the individual level the study reveals the linkages between women’s higher educational attainment and women’s changing lives centered on the events of first union formation and first birth. We observe these changes through the lived and the perceived life courses of women across cohorts. Due to the large diversity in the cultures within India, we focus on a region within India called Karnataka, one of the states in South India. Further, to study the change that has come about in the lives of women, we analyze the impact of educational attainment in different cohorts, thus bringing in temporal aspects. The changes that are related to educational attainment are, for example, age at first birth and age at marriage.

In contemporary times, there has been an increase in women’s educational attainment in India and the Netherlands which has directly influenced women’s job opportunities in these societies. Hence women are now far less restricted to just the realms of the house and to the role of a ‘traditional homemaker’. Workforce participation has largely boosted women’s earning capacity, influencing their economic independence. These employment opportunities indirectly help in bridging the gap between the existing societal barriers to women’s participation in the labour market and at the same time project women as capable individuals who are no longer the weaker sex, a label that was commonly used in the past.

As a cross-cultural study this research focuses on the similarities and differences of the impact of women’s higher educational attainment on their changing reproductive lives. Cross-cultural research is a new mode of innovative, comparative and cross-disciplinary research. We do not focus on the contents of education but broadly on the impact of levels of education and duration of educational enrolment on women’s lives across cohorts in Karnataka and the Netherlands. For instance, with the increasing level of education there is a distinct pattern of delay in age at the event of first childbearing.

Changes in the sequential ordering of events in the lives of women are distinctly visible in today’s society and across cohorts. In the older cohorts sequential ordering usually comprised ‘completion of education, marriage and motherhood’, while in the younger cohorts it is ‘completion of education, embarking on a professional career for some years prior to marriage, continuation of work after marriage, motherhood, and back to work after maternity leave’. Hence marriage and motherhood, which confine women to home and childcare obligations, are lesser priorities in the younger generations in comparison to older generations which prioritized marriage and motherhood.
1.2 Rationale of this study

There are not many studies revealing the impact of higher education on the changing lives of women as a continuum across cultures and societies. Hence studying the Karnataka and the Dutch women in a cross-cultural perspective through this research introduces the continuum across time and space. Time is operationalised by birth cohorts and generations while space is signified by the socio-cultural contexts of Karnataka and the Netherlands.

Research and its applicability have always made a distinction between the developed and developing countries, Western societies and the highly industrialised societies. This distinction has more to do with the prevailing social, cultural, political and economic contexts of the different societies that might facilitate or constrain any particular type of behaviour. Demographic literature also makes a distinction positing countries based on their stages of demographic transition. One of the principal demographic features of the second demographic transition is the decline in fertility from slightly above the ‘replacement’ level of 2.1 births per woman to a level well below replacement (van de Kaa 1987). The changes in fertility precede and are related to other changes such as increasing empowerment of women, increase in women’s educational attainment, and rise in cohabitation as an alternative form of marriage. A good amount of research indicates that Netherlands is in the stage of second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa 1986, van de Kaa 1987, 1988). However, there is still an ongoing debate about which phase of the first demographic transition Karnataka is presently in. Studies by Rajan (2005) and Sekher et al. (2001) clearly show the changes in the fertility transition experienced by the state of Karnataka in recent times. There has been a considerable reduction in fertility, and results from the NFHS-1998-99 indicate that urban Karnataka has already attained replacement level fertility. Karnataka with a TFR of 2.13 (NFHS-1998-99) belongs to the late transition stage (Bongaarts 2003), while the Netherlands with a TFR of 1.72 (Council of Europe 2001) is in the post-transition stage.

In the present cross-cultural research we constantly face the issue of traditional versus modern, for example, whether Karnataka is a traditional or a modern society. According to van de Kaa (1988) the second demographic transition is a phenomenon of the post-industrial society. The societies in the Western world are largely termed as modern societies’ or ‘modern industrial societies’. Giddens (1999) makes a distinction between traditional and modern societies. According to him, in traditional societies, culture is handed down from generation to generation, which is accepted unquestioningly. Mouzelis (1991: 141) states that the concepts of modernity and modernisation are often criticised for their emphatically Eurocentric nature. For example, Giddens (1990) terms modernity as a Western phenomenon and an underlying characteristic of a modern society is that such a society should have adopted Western cultural values. According to Giddens (personal communication 2002), the structuration theory was developed in the 1980s and that nowadays, ‘notions like individualisation, plastic sexuality, etc. are very visibly becoming part of the middle-class world in the Indian cities’.

We also observe that across time the distinction between traditional and modern societies is gradually diminishing and women everywhere face similar conflicts between work and family. The different choices and decisions they make are irrespective of the society in which they are live. The commonality of the problem is an indication that it is a universal feature in the changing lives of women in different societies.

The present research attempts to examine the changes in women’s reproductive life course and the accompanying changes that result in their changing position in society. We study the reproductive life
course by distinguishing between the ‘lived’ life course and the ‘perceived’ life course. The ‘lived’ life course consists of occurrence, timing and ordering of events in an individual’s life and this can be observed objectively through ages at the occurrence of these events. The ‘perceived’ life course is the meaning given to the lived life course by the individual experiencing it, and this perception is subjective in nature. The lived life course is captured through secondary and factual data whereas the perceived life course is obtained through qualitative inputs from the individuals. This research investigates changes in the lived and the perceived reproductive life courses of women across cohorts of mothers and daughters in Karnataka and the Netherlands. The two societies are however at different stages of demographic transition which makes the comparison a challenge. Some questions arise, for example, about the similarities and differences between the changes in the lived and the perceived reproductive life courses across these two societies as a result of women’s educational attainment. Do the educational institutions have a bearing on the reproductive behaviour of women in these two societies? If so, how do they influence these processes over time?

1.3 Research Objectives

The main objectives of this research are as follows:
- To understand the linkages between higher educational attainment of women and the timing of events in the lived life course and to determine whether the timing is perceived to be on time, early or late in the perceived life course. The important life events that this research focuses on are first union formation and first birth.
- To get insight into the gains derived from higher education. The gains could be in the form of changes from ascribed to achieved status, role change, autonomy, changing schemas on wifehood and motherhood, combination of parallel careers and multiple roles of women.
- To obtain insight into the universal and the context-specific features by comparing different cohorts of women in Karnataka and the Netherlands.
- To form insight into the changing position of women in the society, which is also an indication of changing lives of women in Karnataka and the Netherlands.

1.4 Research Questions

This study has four important research questions:

1) How does educational attainment of women influence the timing of first birth and first union in Karnataka and the Netherlands across different generations?

2) How does women’s higher educational attainment influence their life course, as perceived by women themselves, across generations of daughters and mothers in Karnataka and daughters’ generation in the Netherlands?

   a) How is the timing of the events of menarche, first union, cohabitation, marriage and first birth perceived? Early, late or on time? Why is it perceived to be so?
   b) How are transitions from one stage to another with the occurrence of events in the reproductive life course initialised through ceremonies as rites of passage?
   c) What knowledge regarding the dos and the don’ts did women have before and after the occurrence of the event and what were their sources of information?
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d) How does transition from one stage to the other in the reproductive life course lead to expected
behavioural changes?
e) How do women themselves perceive their role changes with the occurrence of first menstruation,
cohabitation, marriage and birth of their first child?
f) What do women perceive as gains in the form of advantages and disadvantages of attaining first
menarche, cohabitation, marriage and birth of their first child?
g) How are these gains related to women’s educational background, as perceived by women?

3) How has women’s position in the society changed across generations of mothers and daughters?
   a) How does women’s higher education influence their autonomy and decision-making capability as
      perceived by the women themselves?
   b) How has women’s higher education influenced their status as perceived by the women
      themselves? (Ascribed versus Achieved status).

4) What features of educational attainment and the timing of first birth and first union are universal and
   which are context-specific?

1.5 Approach to the study

The issue of ‘changing lives of women’ in the cultural contexts of Karnataka and the Netherlands is the
central focus of this research. These changes are studied both at the individual level as behavioural
changes and at the societal level as changing position of women in the society. Behavioural changes are
portrayed through the events of first union formation and first birth, the timing of occurrence of these
events and how these events are sequenced across cohorts in coherence with the educational career.
Higher educational attainment facilitated by expansion of the education system is a key indicator at the
macro level that explains behavioural change at the individual level. Educational attainment is studied by
classifying it into two categories – levels of educational attainment and educational enrolment. Both these
categories enable us to understand the impact of educational attainment on events such as first union
formation and first birth in the cultural contexts of Karnataka and the Netherlands. In order to understand
changes in individual lives across time, women are differentiated into different cohorts based on their year
of birth and birth cohort has been interchangeably used with the concept of generation. These changes at
the micro level emerge as a social outcome revealed through the changing position of women in the
society in recent times. This also explains how distinct patterns of delay in union formation and first birth
are preponderant in the society as social outcomes. Such social outcomes could also be the result of
women’s transition from ascribed status of being a woman – a weaker sex – to achieved status whereby
higher education enables her to decide, choose and prioritise events in her life. The concept ‘position of
women in society’ encompasses the status of women, women’s control over resources compared to that of
men, the degree of their autonomy from men’s control, or other privileges and oppression that arise from
society’s institutions (Mason 1993: 20).

At the micro level we focus on the life course approach (Giele and Elder 1998) by which we situate the
events of first union formation and first birth by studying them as parallel careers along with the
educational career of women. We study how the educational career exerts an impact on the timing of first
union formation and the timing of first birth in a woman’s lived reproductive life course. Meaning that is
given to the events that have already taken place in a woman’s life is elaborated through an examination
of the perceived life course. As elaborated in the preceding sections above, changes at the micro level are
studied through the notion of birth cohorts. In order to study structural changes at the macro level we
focus on social change brought about by the processes of modernisation and globalisation in both the societies of Karnataka and the Netherlands. The social theory of Coleman (1990) enables us to study the structural impact of context on individual behaviour through individual background. This theory is also used as the background of the theoretical framework linking the macro and the micro levels. Gidden’s (1984) structuration theory explains the reciprocal relationship between the social structure and the individual agency across time and space in the individual life course. This theory deviates from the one-way relationship between the macro and the micro levels and stresses on duality of structure. The duality of structure suggests the interdependence between structure and agency and also studies their recursive nature. The structuration theory also emphasises the importance of modality in understanding the structure-agency linkages which are interpretative schemes, facility or resources and norms. These modalities are the linking blocks between the macro and the micro levels of society, the examination of which enables us to understand how these are used in our day-to-day lives.

Distinguishing the reproductive life course into lived and perceived life courses in the present cross-cultural research enables us to apprehend the impact of women’s higher educational attainment on the events of first union formation and first birth both from the ‘emic’ and the ‘etic’ perspectives (Pike 1967, cf. Harris 1975). The emic approach is subjective in nature based on how the respondents view their life. The etic approach is objective in nature and reflects on the lived life course as viewed from the researcher’s perspective. Hence in this research, the emic approach highlights the perceived reproductive life course of women in Karnataka and the Netherlands, while the etic approach highlights the lived reproductive life course. As already discussed earlier, the lived life course is studied with the help of secondary and factual data whereas the perceived life course is examined through the responses from the qualitative study.

1.6 Presentation of the thesis

The thesis has been organised into ten chapters. The second chapter deals with the background and theoretical framework. We first give a background to the changing lives of women in the cross-cultural contexts of Karnataka and the Netherlands and stress the commonality of women’s changed lives. The theories considered include the life course theory which studies individual behaviour through the events of first union and first birth. As discussed earlier, behaviour is influenced by structural changes at the macro level. Coleman’s social theory (1990) in accordance with methodological individualism categorises society into two levels – macro and micro – and it studies the interaction between the context and the individual as macro-micro linkages. Gidden’s (1984) structuration theory explains the reciprocal relationship between the social structure and individual agency across time and space in the individual life course. These theoretical perspectives inform the conceptual framework for the present research. In chapter 3, we again elaborate the research questions and discuss the conceptual models for quantitative and qualitative research to answer specific research questions. In this chapter we also discuss the two datasets National Family Health Survey-2, 1998-99, and the OG 98 (Onderzoek Gezinsvorming 1998), the Netherlands, that are analysed. Chapters 4 and 5 study the lived life course of women across cohorts in the cross-cultural contexts of Karnataka and the Netherlands with the help of secondary data analysis of the survey datasets. Chapter 4 studies the impact of educational attainment on the timing of first birth across cohorts in Karnataka and the Netherlands. Chapter 5 deals with the impact of educational attainment on first union formation across cohorts in Karnataka and the Netherlands. Chapters 6 to 9 focus on the perceived reproductive life course of women and present findings based on in-depth interviews in Bangalore in Karnataka and Groningen in the Netherlands. In chapter 6 we discuss the events of menarche and marriage as perceived by the younger generation of respondents in Bangalore. In chapter 7 we discuss
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the event of first birth and perceived autonomy amongst the younger generation of respondents in Bangalore. Chapter 8 deals with the responses of the older generation of women in Bangalore on their perceived reproductive life course. In this chapter we also draw a comparison between the older and the younger generations of women in Bangalore. Chapter 9 presents findings based on the responses of Dutch younger respondents on their perceived reproductive life course. In this chapter we compare the younger generation of respondents in Bangalore with that of the younger generation in Groningen. Chapter 10 presents the conclusions of this research with a detailed discussion of important findings, limitations of this research and policy implications of this research.