Chapter 10
Conclusions

10.1 Introduction

The main objective of this research was to understand the impact of women’s higher educational attainment on the changing lives of women as well as their changing position in the society. This was studied in the cross-cultural context of Karnataka and the Netherlands. Individual lives of women have been focused on by distinguishing women’s life course as the lived life course and the perceived life course. Changes in these life courses relate to changes in the lives of women which are examined through the impact of women’s higher education on their lived and the perceived life courses focusing especially on the events of first union formation and first birth across cohorts in the cross-cultural context of Karnataka and the Netherlands. The impact of education is assessed according to different levels of education and the duration of education – the number of years spent enrolled in education. The lived life course views life as the occurrence and timing of events when individuals transit from one stage to the other. The perceived life course views life from the emic standpoint and individual background based on personal endowments such as higher education. In other words the perceived life course is meaning given to the lived life course based on perceptions of the respondents themselves. The lived life course studies the impact of higher educational attainment on the timing of events of first union formation and first birth. The perceived life course studies the impact of women’s educational attainment on multiple roles and parallel careers as negotiated careers, as perceived by the women themselves. The event of first union has taken into account first unions by marriage in Karnataka while in the Netherlands it includes both marriage and cohabitation as types of first union formation. Change across time in the lived life course is observed as cohort changes in Karnataka and the Netherlands highlighted through secondary data analysis of national surveys–NFHS-2, 1998-99, Karnataka and OG 98, the Netherlands. In the lived life course we focus on one attribute i.e. women’s educational attainment. In the perceived life course we focus on attributes of higher educational attainment and workforce participation of women. Unlike the lived life course that is studied through secondary survey data, the perceived life course is studied through the use of qualitative data derived from in-depth interviews of urban, high educated, working women in Bangalore and Groningen. Bangalore is a city in Karnataka and Groningen is located in the Netherlands. Change across time in the perceived life course is observed as cohort changes termed as generational changes. We study generational changes between mothers and daughters in Bangalore while only the daughters’ generation is focused at in Groningen. The research settings of Bangalore, the state capital of Karnataka and Groningen, one of the provinces of Netherlands, can be taken to be representative of Karnataka and the Netherlands respectively.

In the following sections below we first give a brief overview of the theoretical framework adopted and the data and methods used in the research to understand the impact of higher educational attainment on the lived and perceived life courses of women in Karnataka and the Netherlands. We then summarise and discuss the main findings with reference to the research questions that were framed in the beginning of this research. Then we highlight the implications of this research in Karnataka and the Netherlands as well as the policy implications. Suggestions for further research and limitations of the study are discussed in the concluding section of this chapter.

The present research has evolved through a series of stages. The study began with the formulation of the research topic, framing the research questions and the research objectives, theoretical and the conceptual frameworks, methodology of the present study, data analysis of both the secondary data
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from national surveys and primary data in the form of qualitative in-depth interviews, all of which allowed conclusions to be drawn. This leads to the chapter on conclusion. The research questions that were framed will be reviewed in this chapter weaving a thread through the various outlined stages.

10.2 Brief theoretical overview

Here we shall first give a brief overview of the theoretical framework adopted to study the macro – and micro level – connotations of changing lives of women in Karnataka and the Netherlands. This is presented as a two-way relationship between social change at the macro level and behavioural change at the micro level. After giving a brief overview of the theoretical framework we summarise the data and the methods used.

In today’s contemporary society we observe increasing numbers of women pursuing higher education as well as an increase in working women. Workforce participation has enhanced women’s earning capability revealing a change in women’s traditional role as a homemaker and their standing at par with their male counterparts in the society who were the traditional breadwinners. How women’s personal lives have been affected because of such changes has been often the focus of attention in the media and newspaper articles. Hence the core of our research was to first understand change in the individual life course of women observed through the cohort changes in age at first union and first birth. At the macro level, it is represented through social change in the form of modernization and globalisation. Expansion of the educational system has resulted in higher levels of education and longer duration spent by women enrolled in the educational arena. Life events, their timing of occurrence and how these events are sequenced across cohorts in Karnataka and the Netherlands represent the micro level. Changes at the micro level are studied through the conceptualisation of generations thereby situating life in a historical context. Social change through the process of modernisation and globalisation enables us to understand the structuring impact of context on individual behaviour. The macro-micro linkages are not only studied as one-way relationships but also as a reciprocal relationship between structure and agency by emphasising the importance of modality (Giddens 1984). Human agency is typically where individual behaviour takes place, which is organised around goals and human agents strive towards achievement of these goals (Giele and Elder 1998). Giddens (1984) considers human agents to be knowledgeable and capable of adopting innovative behaviour. The cultural norms and the cultural meaning system prevalent in specific cultural contexts have a structuring impact on individual behaviour and goals (D’Andrade 1984). Thus structures relate to institutions in the society that provide rules and resources both enabling and constraining behaviour of human actors (Giddens 1984). D’Andrade (1992) relates institutions in society through norms and sanctions which direct individual behaviour. These rules in the cognitive approach are related to schemas. D’Andrade (1984) observes how schemas are culturally oriented, having their roots in the cultural meaning system. A schema is a ‘conceptual structure that makes identification of objects and events possible’ and it forms the ‘person’s internal representation of his/her environment’ (D’Andrade 1992: 28, 33). Hence for schemas to motivate behaviour and initiate action, individuals first attribute meaning to facts around them. These schemas function as goals which motivate and instigate actions (D’Andrade 1992,1995). Rules are also termed as normative and interpretative – directing, regulating and ascribing meaning to individual behaviour (Hargreaves 1980). Thus in comparison to the lived life course that views life based on occurrence and timing of events as life progresses, the perceived life course views life from the emic and cultural standpoint and individual background based on personal endowments such as higher education. Hence the perceived life course focuses on the mental processes and cognitive schemes based on cultural background. These cognitive schemes work within the framework of needs, goals, opportunities and constraints allowing individuals to interpret and construct reality depending on the cultural context in which these individuals are located. In order to understand changes in individual lives across time, individual behaviour is observed across different birth cohorts and generations. Birth cohorts are taken as an
indicator of generations both in the quantitative and qualitative data analyses. Hence generations are defined in our research as a cluster of adjacent birth cohorts.

10.3 Main findings

- Influence of educational attainment on the timing of first birth and first union in Karnataka and the Netherlands

In order to study the impact of educational attainment on the timing of union formation and first birth, two types of analyses were undertaken. The first analysis studied how the timing of first union and first birth is influenced by the level of educational attainment of women in Karnataka and the Netherlands. The second analysis focuses on the influence of age at graduation on ages at first union formation and first birth amongst women in Karnataka and the Netherlands across birth cohorts. By focusing on the age at graduation we emphasise the importance of educational thresholds on the timing of first union and first birth.

Results from chapters 4 and 5 reveal that the proportion of unmarried women by ages 18, 20 and 22 has substantially increased from older to the younger birth cohorts in Karnataka. This increase is striking amongst women in the cohort 1971-1976 in comparison to the older cohorts suggesting that women in the younger cohorts delay marriage much more than women in the older cohorts. This increase is also a reminder of the ongoing changes taking place in Karnataka in contemporary times. We also observe that marriage and first childbearing are closely related to each other in Karnataka. A delay in marriage leads to delay in the birth of the first child. In Karnataka we observe an early age pattern of first child birth and marriage in comparison to the late age pattern in the Netherlands. However, in the cohort 1971-1976 in Karnataka, we observe innovative patterns of later ages at marriage and first child birth.

The strategising role of higher education is visible when we study the age at graduation in relation to the events of first marriage and first birth in Karnataka. The shorter duration between age at graduation and age at marriage amongst the high educated women indicates how the event of marriage is planned to take place only after a woman completes her highest educational level. We also observe the cultural significance of motherhood prevalent in Karnataka. Higher educated women begin childbearing at later ages than other educational categories of women. However this delay takes place only until the age of 25 after which the cultural norms of motherhood take over and thus no more delay is observed. The low proportion of women remaining childless across all educational levels seems to suggest the importance of age-related norms as regards first birth and the social status derived from being a mother. From the survival curves we see that the proportion of higher educated women without first child at any age is always more than women of other educational levels at that age. This explains how the timing of first birth is influenced by the increase in the number of years a woman has spent in her educational career. For example, at age 22, most of the low educated women are already mothers and only 16 percent of them are without first child, while for the high educated women about 40 percent were childless at the same age.

In addition to the educational levels, we also studied the impact of age at graduation on first birth. From Table 4.10 we inferred that for each educational level there is no clear pattern in the median duration between completion of graduation and the event of first birth across various cohorts. However, for each cohort, this median duration shows a marked decline as the educational level increases. In the Karnataka cohort 1971-1976, low educated women had a median duration of 7.7 years to first birth after completion of their highest level of education. This median duration decreases
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to 4.6 years, amongst the high educated ones which is a decline by 4.1 years. We observe a certain shift taking place in the age at graduation from low to the high education level and as the shift occurs more towards the right the gap between age at graduation and first birth becomes less. Also, women with low and incomplete middle education form distinctly different categories in this cohort, while women with middle complete and high education women behave more or less similarly. The difference in the median duration to first birth since the completion of highest educational level between low and the middle incomplete educated group of women is 1.8 years, the middle complete and the high educated women differ by just 0.4 years.

In the Netherlands, the age-specific first birth rates by birth cohorts depict a substantial change from the oldest to the younger cohorts. This change is also very significantly distinct from the cohort changes taking place in the Karnataka context. It is also evident that as compared to their counterparts in Karnataka, not only do Dutch women have their first child at later ages, a large proportion of women have their first child after the age of 30. We observe that after age 30 most of the delayed births are caught up with. According to Coleman and Garssen (2002: 447) the ‘population of the Netherlands has postponed its births more than any other European country but has also had the strongest ‘catching up’ or recuperation of births to mothers over age 30’. We also observe a fast and steady postponement of first births followed by a strong catching up after the age of 30. However, this behaviour is not a recent phenomenon in the Dutch context as it is considerably pronounced even in the cohort 1961-1965. At ages above 28, the curves of age-specific rates of first birth decline across various birth cohorts. Moreover, after age 30, the age-specific rate of first birth decreases much more in the younger cohorts than the older cohort of women. By age 32 we observe that the proportion of childless women has increased from 21.3 percent in the cohort 1945-1960 to 29.5 percent in the youngest cohort i.e. 1966-1970 (see Table 4.4).

When studying the impact of educational level on age at first birth in the Dutch context we see that the median age at first birth increased from 23 years amongst the low educated women to 29 years amongst the high educated ones. Unlike the case of Karnataka, we observe that in the Dutch context, as women graduate at later ages, the duration from graduation to first birth does not substantially change because of the corresponding delay in the age at first birth.

In Karnataka, union formation is restricted to the event of marriage. Union formation by marriage is noteworthy as childbearing is legally sanctioned only within the precincts of marriage. A consistent decrease in the proportion of married women at specific ages is noticeable from the older to younger cohorts (Figure 5.3 and Table 5.2). In fact, the cohort 1971-1976 reveals a distinct delay in the timing of marriage in comparison to the older cohorts at various ages. However, the unexpected decrease in the median age at marriage for this cohort in Table 5.5 is due to data limitation because only married women have been included in the sample of the survey. In this table the increase in the age at marriage with increase in educational level is also evident.

For the case of the Netherlands, when observing age-specific first union rates we observe that entry into first union has been delayed from the oldest to the youngest cohort. Some of the Dutch respondents in the in-depth interviews indicated that search for a suitable partner and career options sometimes caused this delay. Higher educational attainment of women in the younger cohorts is also another factor which influences the delay in first union formation behaviour (Figure 5.20). The influence of this factor has also been revealed in several studies (Liefbroer 1991, Blossfeld and Huink 1991). When categorising first union formation into marriage and cohabitation, the findings reveal that marriage as first union has declined from the older to the younger cohorts and this has been counterbalanced by a simultaneous rise in cohabitation. Manting (1994) in her study mentions that the rise in cohabitation perfectly compensates for the decline in marriage across cohorts 1950-1969. This period also coincides with shifts in individual preferences due to individualisation and secularisation (van de Kaa 1987 1988, Lesthaeghe 1983, 1991).
Unlike the close link between marriage and first birth in Karnataka, we observe that in the Netherlands the gradual shift in first union formation from marriage to cohabitation has no implication on first births, because childbearing is not restricted only to marital unions. In the Dutch context we have distinguished first union into cohabitation and marriage to study the differential influence that age at graduation has on the timing of these events. While the women with low and middle education women in the older cohort 1945-1960 were less inclined to begin first union by cohabitation, it was practised by the higher educated women of that cohort. Marriage was still a highly preferred form of first union in the oldest cohort. However, we observe that as cohorts became younger, the percentage of women marrying to begin their first union formation declined. This decline was not only amongst the high educated ones but also amongst the middle and the low educated women.

While the increase in the educational level of women influenced a delay in marriage, in the Netherlands, it has worked towards both delay as well as decline in marriage because of the counterbalancing effect of cohabitation as explained in the preceding section. However, keeping in mind the data limitation, due to the inclusion of only ever-married women in the sample for Karnataka, we cannot verify whether the delayed marriages by the high-educated women in Karnataka were totally forgone or not. Across birth cohorts and educational levels in Karnataka, educational expansion is coupled with the marriage transition in the sense that there is a simultaneous increase in educational levels and age at marriage as we move from older cohorts to younger cohorts.

The pattern of delay in first births in the Netherlands is very unlike the delay in Karnataka. The percentage of women giving birth to their first child later than age 30 is much lower in Karnataka as compared to the Netherlands. We also observe the presence of age-related norms as regards the timing of first birth being prevalent only in the Karnataka context. However, the delay in first childbearing in the younger cohorts in Karnataka suggests that these age-related norms are diminishing. These are also corroborated through in depth interviews. Thus one sees the phenomenon of choice biography amongst the Dutch women and the younger cohorts in Karnataka in relation to the standard biography of the older cohorts of Karnataka. In the Netherlands women across all educational levels begin their first childbearing at later ages (in comparison to Karnataka). And by the age of 27, while only 30 percent and 50 percent of the low and the middle educated women had still to begin their first childbearing, 82 percent of the high educated women were still without first birth at that age. Thus 18 percent of the high educated women had their first child by age 27. We also observe the proportion of women in Karnataka and the Netherlands who eventually remain childless by level of education. For Karnataka this proportion is extremely low hovering around 0.5 percent of the women. Further, amongst the high educated women in Karnataka substantial delay in the age at first birth is clearly evident, but only until around age 34. However, after this age the proportion of women who remain childless is slightly less than the proportions of childless women of other educational levels. This is noticeably dissimilar in the case of the Netherlands where, the proportion of women remaining eventually childless is higher as compared to Karnataka across educational levels and cohorts. Further, for the Dutch women, this proportion increases with rise in educational level. While only 10 percent of the women with low education did not have their first child by age 37, the percentage increased to nearly 30 percent amongst the high educated women. However, after age 37, 25 percent of the high educated women eventually remain childless. The Karnataka women seem to follow a normative and standardised pattern as regards first birth as an event in a woman’s life course. In the Netherlands, the substantial proportion of childless women across all educational levels depicts the volitional characteristics of first childbearing. There is significant delay in age at first birth and higher level of eventual childlessness amongst the high educated women as compared to the low and the middle educated women.

Comparing the median ages at first birth across educational levels, Tables 4.5 and 4.6 show the close similarity of the influence of educational level on age at first child birth between Karnataka and the
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Netherlands. This similarity exists even though the number of years of schooling that constitutes low and high education is different in Karnataka and the Netherlands.

The Karnataka high educated women when compared with the Dutch high educated ones differ in their behaviour patterns. In both the contexts, high-educated women delay their first birth, but while the Karnataka high-educated women eventually become mothers at later ages, the Dutch high-educated ones delay motherhood to a larger extent and often forgo motherhood altogether.

In chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 we studied how educational attainment influences the lived life course, as perceived by women, amongst the older and the younger generations in Bangalore and the younger generation in Groningen. Thus chapters 6 and 7 illustrated the perceived life course of the young cohort of women in Bangalore, while in Chapter 8 we described how the older women in Bangalore perceive their life course. In the same chapter we also compared the perceived life course across generations of older and women in Bangalore. The perceived life course of younger women in Groningen has been covered in chapter 9. In these chapters we also discussed the respondents’ perspective of the perceived changes across generations wherein the respondents compared themselves to the generation of their mother. Next we shall first compare the older cohort with the younger one in Bangalore after which, we shall discuss our findings based on the similarities and differences between the younger cohorts in Bangalore and Groningen.

Vast generational changes in the ages at marriage and first child birth are observed among women included in the in-depth interviews. This confirms our findings based on the results of the secondary data analysis mentioned earlier. We also observe generational change in the perceived ideal age at the occurrence of these events. The perceived timing of the events of marriage and first child birth in the older generation is in cognizance with the cultural norms of right age. The younger generation related the perceived timing of these events to completion of highest education, workforce participation and mental maturity to become a mother. Thus amongst the younger generation we find liberalised age norms of marriage and first childbearing in comparison to the standardised age norms in the older generation. Across generations of mothers and daughters we observe the event of menarche taking on less severe cultural overtones and becoming less significant in a woman’s life. The negative connotation of the event is evident from the responses of some of the older Karnataka women who have mentioned being treated like an ‘untouchable’ during the days of menstruation. The ceremony to celebrate the onset of menarche is no longer considered to be important in the younger generation, which is a significant generational change. By contrast in the older generation the ceremony was largely considered to be a rite of passage into adulthood for girls who were regarded eligible for marriage with the onset of the event. This was observed to be one of the reasons why amongst some of the older respondents, their age at marriage is close to their age at menarche.

Based on the responses, about knowledge regarding dos and don’ts that need to be followed with the occurrence of menarche, marriage and first birth can be categorised into instructions, restrictions, advice and information. These types of knowledge differed across generations and so did the sources of such knowledge. We find that amongst younger women, mothers played an important role in imparting knowledge about the dos and don’ts to be followed, while in the older generation, mothers were shy and embarrassed to discuss about menstruation. Knowledge among the older generation was termed as being ‘half truths’ and ‘hidden facts’; their main source of knowledge was derived from books. In the younger generation, some of the respondents mentioned that their mother had imparted information on the physical and hormonal changes during menstruation and on ways of coping with the changes. However, some of the young respondents also said that their mothers were shy and embarrassed to discuss about such issues. For the younger women sex education in schools was an important source of knowledge on menarche and the menstrual cycle.
Segregated lifestyle, ideas about pollution, and confinement inside the house during menstrual days formed important restrictions in the older generation, which were not so strictly followed by women in the younger generation. Thus irrespective of the event of menarche, women in the younger generation were allowed to pursue higher education. We observe that the restricted lifestyle in the older generation often resulted in school dropouts and disruption in education for them. Out of 15 respondents in the older generation, 2 of them were school dropouts while 7 of them mentioned that the event of menarche disrupted their education. We also observe differences in the type of protection used by the older and the younger generation during the days of the menstrual cycle. The older respondents have largely mentioned the use of cloth for sanitary purposes during menstruation, while in the younger generation, respondents mentioned the use of sanitary napkins. Differences in the types of dress to be worn after the event of menarche were also different amongst the older and the younger respondents. Amongst the older generation it involved a change from frocks and skirts to half-sarees, while in the younger generation respondents said that there were no restrictions in the type of dress to be worn. Perceived role change for the respondents themselves differed across older and younger respondents. The older respondents perceived themselves to be a ‘big girl’ or ‘grown-up girl’ with the event of menarche, while the younger respondents associated menarche as a transition from ‘girlhood to adulthood’ or ‘girlhood to womanhood’. Responses revealed that the older respondents were mostly docile and accepted the restrictions that were imposed on them unquestioningly following the event of menarche in their lives. However, we observe the younger respondents to be rebellious and argumentative about the restrictions imposed on them. While the older respondents said that they were happy at the advent of menarche that made them eligible for marriage which was perceived as a gain of the event, the younger respondents saw their transition to adulthood as a perceived gain of attaining menarche.

The responses of the older generation reveal that they were not allowed to pursue higher education as well as a working career. Thus these women felt that getting married was a better option. We also find that these respondents termed their marriage as being a new-found freedom. We observe that respondents in the older generation also did not have much say in the choice of their marriage partner in comparison to the younger generation of respondents who had a greater say in the choice of their marriage partner. We also observe that many love marriages took place in the younger generation in comparison to most of the marriages being arranged in the older cohorts. Out of the 15 respondents in the older cohort, only 2 said that their’s was a love marriage whereas in the younger cohort out of 16 respondents, 8 mentioned that they had a love marriage. Generational changes are also revealed in the criteria as regards the marriage partner. In the older generation, women upheld qualities such as good looks, a stable and secure job as the required criteria in the man whom they wanted to marry, while in the younger generation women looked for qualities such as mental compatibility, emotional maturity, similar hobbies and interests, and similar educational qualifications.

The effects of education and working career on role change, as perceived amongst the younger generation were manifested by the responsibilities that are equally shared, and getting more respect from their husband because of being highly educated and having a working career. These women also perceived their working career as a source of their financial independence that makes them more secure and less submissive to their husband. The role change as a wife at the event of marriage is perceived differently by the respondents of the older and younger generations. A wife in the older generation used to take care of the household and look after the husband while women in the younger generation discuss about perceived changes as being at a par with the husband and the absence of hierarchy in the relationship.

Evidence of the importance of cultural norms in the timing of motherhood is observed in the older cohorts of women in Bangalore. These women mentioned age deadlines from the social and cultural perspectives on age at first child birth. Amongst the younger generation we observe first child birth to
be largely planned and women being able to decide their age at motherhood. By comparison, we find instructions about motherhood in the older generation to be based mostly on local knowledge and community-specific ideas about motherhood. While women in the younger generation pointed out that their higher education and interaction with colleagues in their workplace has made them aware about aspects of childcare and brought up children. We observe that higher education is perceived as providing them with book knowledge while their working career provided them with practical experience in balancing work and motherhood. Role conflicts between work and motherhood were an important role change perceived by the respondents in the younger generation.

We also observe some similarities and differences in the perceived life course between the younger generation in Bangalore and the younger generation in Groningen. The similarities can be termed as universal features while the differences can be seen as the context-specific aspects. Some of the younger respondents in Bangalore said that their mothers were shy and embarrassed to discuss about the event of menarche with them although some did discuss the event, while we observe from the Dutch respondents that most of their mothers had explained the event of menarche descriptively to them. Some of the younger respondents in Bangalore followed certain restrictions during menstruation such as not entering into the pooja room while amongst the Dutch younger respondents there were no such restrictions. Amongst respondents in Bangalore they mentioned that their parents were more protective of them after they attained menarche, which was not the case amongst the respondents in Groningen.

The ‘age-event’ dilemma dominated the responses of the Dutch respondents. The age event dilemma is the inability of the respondents to attribute the changes in the perceived life course to the occurrence of the event or to the respondent’s age. For example, the Dutch respondents were unable to say whether their perceived role change was due to the event of menarche or a part of growing older. We do not observe the same from the responses in Bangalore.

In the Netherlands, first union formation is differentiated into cohabitation and marriage as two types of union formation. Both of these are legalised in the Netherlands and childbearing in either of the unions is legally recognised. However, based on the responses in the in-depth interviews, union formation can be divided into four categories. They are: age at which the respondents had their first boyfriend, the age they had their first intimate relationship, age at living together or cohabitation and the age at marriage. In response to what do women prefer – cohabitation or marriage – the four categories are discernible. The first is those who prefer cohabitation to marriage, because they felt that the status of wife brought a non-differential status. They prefer cohabitation because it gives stability to the relationship and helps the individuals in the relationship to grow with the relationship. Some respondents preferred cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. These respondents said that their marriage was a ‘marriage of convenience’ and the event of marriage usually took place when they decide to have a child. The third category of respondents perceived cohabitation as a temporary phase before marriage. They considered this phase of cohabitation as enabling them to decide whether their partner is suitable to marry and to begin a family with. The fourth category of respondents stated their preference for marriage because of the emotional stability and security that marriage provides. This concurs with the research findings of Manting (1994).

To the young Dutch respondents, their late motherhood gave them the opportunity to mature and to establish a career before becoming a mother. However, in Bangalore, respondents attributed their late motherhood to a late age at marriage. In their view, late motherhood resulted in a large age gap between the mother and child.

The emergence of cultural modernisation in coherence with structural modernisation is evident in the destandardisation of behaviour (choice perspective of the event rather than standard patterns in
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coherence with cultural norms), women modifying their traditional attitudes and behaviour (fewer restrictions of new orientations and lifestyles by defying the cultural norms to a large extent (participation in the workforce, role conflicts between work and motherhood). In the cross-cultural context we observe how the changing lives of women have transited from parallel careers to negotiating careers by balancing work and motherhood. In a modernised and globalised world, the personal needs of women have also become increasingly important. Some of the personal needs are the pursuit of higher education and workforce participation as prerequisites of career, financial independence and the need to be autonomous in all spheres of life. Hence the fulfilment of these personal needs reveals tendencies of individualisation. We also observe role shifts and role inventions to be preponderant amongst the younger generations of women in Bangalore and Groningen.

Universality in the perceived life course is also observed when we compare the younger generation of respondents in Bangalore and Groningen. Most of the respondents knew about menarche before they attained menarche which we observe to be vastly different in the older generation in Bangalore. Another similarity between the Dutch and the Indian younger generations under study was that no ceremony was performed to celebrate the event of menarche. However, some respondents mentioned receiving small gifts from elders such as their grandmother or aunt to mark it as a special occasion and the absence of ceremonies with cause embarrassment. With the advent of menarche respondents in both cultural contexts mentioned their mother cautioning about relationship and interaction with boys. However, issues related to risk of pregnancy were explicitly pointed out to the Dutch women by their mothers, whereas these were not discussed in detail amongst respondents in Bangalore. Both groups of respondents said that they did not undergo any behavioural change nor were there any restrictions on the types of dress to be worn following the onset of menarche. These respondents perceived menarche to be synonymous with transition from girlhood to adulthood. Respondents thought that they were much closer to their mother, discussing things which they never used to do before the advent of menarche. In both the groups respondents mentioned being interested in boys as a change after they began menstruation. Respondents in Bangalore and Groningen stressed on mental compatibility as a sought-after criteria in relationships with men. Respondents attributed their educational background as enabling them to meet like-minded people. Being physically restricted after the child/children were born was one of the most commonly perceived behavioural change that came about with the advent of motherhood. In Bangalore and Groningen, respondents have mentioned role conflicts as a working mother. Some of these role conflicts are perceived to be dilemmas arising from motherhood and the roles of a working woman, and between motherhood and a wife or a partner. We observe that relationships with parents and in-laws take on a new dimension after the birth of the first child. This is observed to be similar in Bangalore and Groningen.

In chapters 4 and 5 we also observe the universal impact of educational attainment on the delay in the timing of marriage and first birth across cohorts of women in Karnataka and the Netherlands. Higher educational attainment provides women with more choices and also enables women to decide. This is another universal feature of educational attainment observed in this research.

**Conclusions on women’s changing position in the society**

The aim of our research was to study the impact of higher educational attainment on the lived life course and the perceived impact on the perceived life course in relation to women’s changing position in society. Based on the cohort changes across levels of education in Karnataka and the generational changes we can draw conclusions on the changing lives of women at the micro level. These micro-level changes also underline women’s changing position in society through enhanced autonomy of women in various spheres. Autonomy can be related to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1970) where the
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satisfaction of the basic needs leads to the pursuit of higher needs. Autonomy can be related to the esteem needs and self-actualisation, which are higher order needs as conceptualised by Maslow.

We have not developed any concrete indicator to measure women’s position in society. The perceived status transition from ascribed status to achieved status for the younger generation of women in Bangalore their higher educational attainment and working career reveal their achieved status in the society. In the older generation women held a traditional status based on ascription. Marriage gave women the status of a wife, while the birth of children brought the status of a mother. Thus women in the older generation were ascribed such statuses while in the younger generation women not only enjoy such statuses but also the achieved status of being high educated and having a working career.

Perceived autonomy is another means by which we can assess women’s changing position in society. Autonomy has been categorised into five types based on Jejeebhoy (1995) namely: knowledge autonomy, decision making autonomy, physical autonomy, emotional autonomy and social autonomy. We observe that women’s higher education positively enhances their autonomy amongst the younger generation of respondents in Bangalore and Groningen. Knowledge autonomy, decision-making autonomy, physical mobility and access to economic resources are comparable in the cross-cultural context of this research. Jejeebhoy (1995) has shown that decision-making autonomy, physical mobility and access to economic resources are closely related in all settings irrespective of region and religion. The comparability of knowledge autonomy in the present research explains how technological innovation in modern times has brought about changes in the lives of women. Higher education has led to better jobs, which has enhanced women’s financial independence. Thus there is a significant interaction between the two factors which also enables us to study the effect of human capital formation due to women’s labour force participation enhancing their autonomy.

The perceived influence of higher educational attainment and working career on women’s perceived knowledge autonomy is studied by categorising the effects into direct and indirect effects. The direct effects enable us in understanding how women’s higher educational attainment and their working career are perceived by women as facilitating them greater exposure to the outside world. The indirect effects enable us in understanding how the two factors – higher educational attainment of women and women’s working career – are perceived to enhance certain qualities within the woman, like confidence, independence, and personality. We observe from the responses that a working career provides women with a direct link to the outside world whilst higher education enables women to realize and attain their individual goals. Further, we also observe how women’s working career is related to women’s economic autonomy through financial independence. Apart from the observed direct effects, the study reveals how the indirect effects influence women’s enhancement of knowledge as well as provide women greater exposure to the outside world. It is observed that higher education and workforce participation of women have enabled them greater decision-making autonomy in matters both outside and inside the house. On the one hand is the ability of women to take decisions on their own and often in cooperation with their husband, and on the other hand, husbands often consult their wives about certain decisions to be taken. Most women state that their educational career has facilitated a working career and also has given them financial independence. This independence has been perceived to give them a sense of security that helps them to be confident in taking decisions. They mention that their working career has made them less dependent on others and made it possible for them to contribute in financial matters of the household. We also observe that financially independent women perceive themselves to be taken more seriously in the household. Women suggested that their working career has resulted in them making quick decisions by prioritising their choices.

The study reveals that higher education and working career have influenced women’s perceived physical autonomy by which helps them move about freely and unaccompanied. Women feel that their
education and working career making them self-confident which indirectly makes it easy for them to move alone and unaccompanied after dark. Self-confidence makes women unafraid of situations and also encourages risk-taking behaviour. Findings from the in-depth interviews in Bangalore suggest that women are questioned less about coming back home late and going out alone after dark because of their status of a working woman which is otherwise not socially accepted for women who are housewives. In Bangalore, we also observe that women’s perceived physical autonomy has been facilitated through the status of a married woman and mother. Exhibiting the signs of a married woman i.e. the toe ring and mangalsutra were indicated as an advantage in the differential treatment to women as well as enabling their mobility alone and unaccompanied. Perceived emotional autonomy can be indirectly related to women’s higher education and working career. It has cultivated interspousal communication and greater intimacy between the husband and wife. Most of the respondents indicate that they share their emotional problems with their husband. These problems could range from problems in the workplace to personal problems. Most women also indicate the cooperation of their husband in various household chores on a daily level. We can conclude that higher education has enhanced women’s participation in the workforce and thereby their control over financial resources. This has influenced women’s perceived economic and social autonomy. A clear link with higher education enabling workforce participation of women is illustrated in the responses of the interviewees. Women also link it directly to their economic independence, which provides them the freedom to invest and contribute to the household income and enhances self-reliance on economic matters. Economic independence enhances women’s economic autonomy and also enables her to pursue their hobbies and interests. Economic independence also encourages women to be self-reliant in economic matters as they know how to spend, where to spend and what to spend on without the interference of others in such decisions. For most of the respondents their contribution to the household income along side their husband’s brought about greater equality in the relationship between spouses.

In addition to economic autonomy, amongst respondents in Bangalore we also observe how women strive for social autonomy. Social autonomy is operationalised by enquiring about how the status of being better educated and having a working career is accepted in the household. The responses reveal the perceived social status in the form of respect that is accorded to high educated and working women from husband’s and in-laws. We observe that the decisions that these women take are also respected and given importance, according to the respondents themselves. In addition to these factors, marriage and motherhood also provide a kind of social status that enables women’s physical autonomy in comparison to unmarried, childless women as perceived by the respondents.

10.4 Policy implications

In this section we outline the governmental policy implications that we suggest should be addressed to facilitate women’s changing lives in different societies. This research follows the change in paradigm in International Population Policies since 1994 towards reproductive health. The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo 1994 gave particular emphasis to women’s empowerment and stated that in addition to achieving the goal of universal primary education in all countries before the year 2015, the conference urges all countries to ensure the earliest and wider access by girls and women to secondary and higher levels of education (United Nations 1995). UNICEF’s State of the World’s Children Report (2004) proposes that girls’ education is the most effective means of combating many of the most profound challenges to human development. In India, the major policies related to higher education are made by the central government. The National Policy on Education implements and facilitates education policy and progress in India. This was first introduced in 1968 and later updated in 1986. The recent update of this policy was carried out in 1992. In the year 2003, the ‘Education for All’ initiative was developed that stressed the need for women’s education and empowerment. These policies and initiatives have played a role in the major shift in
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official policy because they acknowledge education as a prerequisite for gender equality (Rawat 2004).

The current research is situated amidst rapid ongoing changes in the Indian society. Education is a key factor in the overall development of the society. In this study we emphasise the importance of women’s education in bringing about change both at the individual level as well as the societal level. This research studies urban high-educated women with working careers who adopt a more individualised lifestyle. The dynamics and challenges of negotiating and combining multiple roles which this group of women experience illustrate recent changes in the lives of women as a global trend. Interaction with these women through in-depth interviews reveals that some of them find difficulty in combining work and motherhood. Hence policy measures should aim at addressing these needs as a priority. The state government of Karnataka should implement flexible working hours, more opportunities for part-time employment and crèche and day care facilities which are close to the workplace. Working men and women should be provided with adequate maternal and paternal leave.

This study reveals the importance of educational thresholds in Karnataka. The educational thresholds are the minimum level of education that a woman should have to enable her to take decisions on her own. Hence these thresholds also empower women to be autonomous. State policy measures in addition to the present goal of universal elementary education for all children irrespective of sex should also aim at equipping women with at least 10-11 years of education. Most women refrain from pursuing higher education because of privatization of the education sector in India (Rawat 2004). The cost of education in private colleges is much higher than the government colleges. But the quality of education is better in private colleges than in the governmental ones. Thus state policies should aim at improving the quality of education in government colleges.

Gender equity is still a much talked-about issue in the Indian context as the in-depth interviews of women in Bangalore reveal. State policies can exert influence on the propagation of gender equality that can mitigate the cultural influences. These cultural influences sometimes constrain women from making use of certain opportunities such as labour force participation. Hindu businessline.com (December 2000), it was estimated that women in India in the official workforce accounted for 31 percent. Nineteen percent of the women are employed in information technology in India, primarily within the software sector. Their median age at employment is 25.7 years according to the survey.

Based on the responses in the in-depth interviews of the younger generation in Bangalore, we observe that men’s role in sharing childcare and household tasks with their working wife is still not as common as reported by the women interviewed in Groningen. Out of 16 women interviewed in Bangalore, only 5 women said that their husbands shared the household tasks while all 10 women interviewed in Groningen said that their husband/partner shared the household tasks. Thus in order to make women’s contribution to the workforce more fruitful, cooperation of the husband in the household tasks is essential. Alongside women’s changed roles, men’s changed roles as reflected by the Dutch situation as caregivers and caretakers could serve as an example. Thus policy measures encouraging employers to provide options of paternity leave and flexible working hours for men should be introduced in India as well.

Most of the Dutch respondents in the in-depth interviews assessed mentioned their age at first child birth as a late age. However, they also said that such late ages are common by Dutch standards. Thus women consciously decide to postpone motherhood to later ages. Women do so but also keep in mind the possible health consequences of late motherhood. Thus women are required to be well informed about the consequences of late motherhood and possible adverse effects on health. Some of the Dutch studies focus on the possible consequences of late motherhood (Matsuo 2003) (cited by Beets and
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Verloove-Vanhorick 1992). In a similar way, state policy measures in Karnataka should not only focus on lowering fertility but also adequately inform women about the consequences of late motherhood.

10.4 Limitations of the present research and suggestions for future research

In this section we discuss some limitations and obstacles faced during the research process. While some of the shortcomings were overcome, others could not be overcome due to various reasons such as data constraints and time constraints. We also present some suggestions for future research.

We observe that India is changing really fast. High educated working women in India form an important category that reflects the present change. Thus more research should be focused on this group of women and their changing lifestyles. Responses of the mothers’ generation in Bangalore are influenced by recall errors and the time frame of the interviews. The respondents were asked to recall events that had taken place quite some time ago and relate how they perceived these events in their life course, for instance, regarding the ideal age at marriage perceived by the older respondents in Bangalore, some of them considered their age at marriage to be the right age in keeping with the cultural and societal norms prevalent in those olden days. They also relate their age at marriage to the current trends of marital age prevalent amongst girls and thus perceive their age to be an early age.

More in-depth interviews and surveys of women across generations of mothers and daughters in India and the Netherlands will throw more light on the generational changes and similarities observed in women’s lives. Interviews can also be restricted to mother-daughter pairs solely studying the generational changes that have come about. The impact of educational attainment can be examined by comparing two different groups of women i.e. career-oriented women and home-oriented women. By doing so, we can explain perceived gains of higher educational attainment from a different perspective than the approach employed in the present research.

Changing lives of women would not have been possible without the active support and cooperation of men in society. So, studies similar to the present one ought to be conducted among men too, because their changing lives eventually affect women’s lives.

The cultures of the two groups of women (i.e. of Karnataka and the Netherlands) being very diverse, and also the stages of demographic transition being fairly different, the issue arises about the extent of universality of the influence of women’s higher educational attainment on their lives. In spite of the diversity of the cultural contexts, in our research we have focused on the universality of the change, both in individual lives of women as well as women’s changing position in society.

Changing lives of women have been studied by making a distinction between the lived and the perceived reproductive life courses. There is a certain amount of subjectivity involved in making this distinction as we assume individual ‘actors’ to be natural units of social life and the individual actions and decisions are assumed implicitly depending on the cultural context, for instance, the assumption that a longer duration spent in educational arena leads to delay in the occurrence of events in the life course. This could be considered as a limitation. Thus, irrespective of the differing influences and opportunities that exist socially and culturally, we consider high educated women as a homogeneous group across cohorts in Karnataka and the Netherlands. Historical influences on each cohort that limit and constrain individual actions and decisions are also treated unvaryingly in this study. In the real life situation the historical influences differ across cohorts.

The lived life course was studied through analysis of secondary data; the paucity of certain information such as unmarried women in the NFHS-2 data set also posed a limitation. We observe from the household file that a large proportion of young women in Karnataka are delaying marriage.
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This could not be captured in the dataset as it contains only information on ever-married women thus neglecting these women who have set a trend in fast-changing India. Many of the women in the younger birth cohorts in both the data sets had not experienced the event of first birth at the time of the national surveys.