Chapter 9

Perceived life course of Dutch women

9.1 Introduction

The previous three chapters focused on the perceived reproductive life course of women across older and younger generations in the cultural context of Bangalore, the state capital of Karnataka. The older and younger generations represent mothers’ and daughters’ generations respectively. The perceived reproductive life course is examined through the events of menarche, marriage and the birth of the first child. Perceived autonomy through women’s higher educational attainment and their working career have been illustrated for the younger generation of respondents in Bangalore. We also focus on the younger generations’ perception of autonomy according to Jejeebhoy’s (1995) classification of autonomy as a result of higher education. Intergenerational changes are distinctly observable in the perceived reproductive life course of women in Bangalore. While some of these changes have vastly changed across generations, we observe certain changes that are refined across time by adaptation to the changing times and needs of individuals. In addition to changes we also observe similarities that make their indomitable presence felt across generations of mothers and daughters in various aspects of the perceived life course of women in Bangalore.

This chapter focuses on the perceived reproductive life course of Dutch women by examining the events of menarche, union formation behaviour as cohabitation and marriage and birth of the first child. The chapter also discusses women’s perceived autonomy and the influence of higher education and working career. We use Jejeebhoy’s (1995) classification of autonomy, which has been applied in the study of the younger generation of women in Bangalore. This chapter answers two main research questions:

- How does women’s higher educational attainment influence their life course, as perceived by the women themselves, amongst daughter’s generation in the Netherlands and
- Which aspects of educational attainment in the perceived reproductive life course are universal and which aspects are context specific determined by the social and the cultural context of the Netherlands compared to the younger generation of women in Bangalore?

The chapter is divided into four broad sections. Section 9.2 deals with the event of menarche, which marks the onset of a woman’s fertile life years. Union formation behaviour broadly defined, as partnership behaviour is the focus of section 9.3. Birth of the first child that marks the beginning of motherhood is the third event that is focused on in section 9.4. Perceived autonomy of women and the classification of its types are discussed in section 9.5 and its subsections 9.5.1 to 9.5.5. In section 9.6 we present the conclusions of this chapter wherein we analyse respondents’ perception of changes across generations by comparing their generation to that of their mother’s.

9.2 Menarche: beginning of the reproductive life course

With the occurrence of this event a women begins the fertile years of her life as this event enables her physiologically to bear children. Thus education attainment of women has no impact on the timing of this event. Secondary literature and many findings from chapter 8 reveal that the event of menarche used to have a large impact on women’s educational career in India. In some instances the occurrence of menarche coincided with drop-out of girls from school and it symbolized their eligibility for marriage. In Chapters 6 and 8 we observe how menarche as an event is culturally constructed,
interwoven through customs and traditions, ceremony and restrictions that mark the event in Karnataka. However, cohort changes in timing of life events and perceptions of these changes are widely observed when comparing the older generation to that of the younger generation in Karnataka.

In this section we shall focus on the event of menarche in the Dutch cultural context. In order to facilitate cross-cultural comparison and universality of the event, the Dutch women were asked similar questions on menarche as the women in Bangalore. The profile of the Dutch respondents has been discussed in chapter 3 (see section 3.4.6). In the following subsections we shall elaborate more on this event based on respondents’ personal experiences of the event and how they perceive this event in the Dutch cultural context.

9.2.1 Perceived timing of the event

This subsection focuses on the timing of menarche and how women in the Dutch context perceive their age at menarche and the reasons for such perceptions. The age at menarche amongst the Dutch respondents ranged from 12-15 years. The median age is 13.6 years. Women perceived their age at menarche as early, late or on time. However, we do not find a fixed patterning of such ages. For instance, one respondent considered the age of 14 as an early age while another respondent considered the same age as a normal age. Most women compared their age at menarche to that of their friends and peer group to determine for themselves whether their age was early, late or on time. When age at first menarche was about the same age as friends in the peer group, it was considered as on time. While attaining menarche at a later age in comparison to friends was considered as a late age.

- "There were some friends who had it before me and some friends had it after me. So it was a normal age for me.' (Respondent whose age at menarche was 14 years)
- "When I compare my age to other girls I think I was not so early. I was one of the later ones.’ (Respondent whose age at menarche was 13 years)

Some respondents considered their age at menarche as on time according to knowledge obtained from books and their parents who found it to be the right age for girls to have their first menstruation.

- "I was 12 when I had my first menstruation I think it is a normal age as I read about it in a book. A lot of girls in my class also experienced it at the same time’
- "My parents told me that it was a normal age to have my first period’ (Respondent whose age at menarche was 14 years)

Another respondent said:

- "I was twelve years. I think it was on time because it was the beginning of teenage, I was mature enough to handle menstruation or body change. So I think 9 or 11 is too early but 12, 13 or more is okay, girls are mature enough to handle these and other changes. My sister was at a really early age, she was 10’

The preceding perceptions of the timing of first menarche reflect what individual respondents feel about their age at menarche. However, one respondent also stressed the normative age at first menarche in her community, which reveals the presence of age norms. This respondent is of a different ethnic community.
9.2.2 Ceremony: initiation to the transition

In the Dutch context there are no ceremonies to celebrate the advent of menarche, which is similar to the younger cohort of women in the Karnataka context. However, two Dutch respondents mentioned receiving small gifts from parents and aunt as felicitation. These respondents have also seen their friends receiving gifts when they had their first menstruation.

Amongst the young cohort of women in Karnataka, we observe such a similar trend of giving small gifts in order to make it is a special occasion for the girl who began her first menstruation and the absence of a ceremonial celebration which might cause embarrassment to her.

9.2.3 Knowledge and its sources

In this subsection we shall focus on women’s knowledge about menstruation before and after they attained menarche and what the sources of knowledge were. Knowledge and its types have been defined in chapter 6 (see section 6.2.4). Based on the responses knowledge is classified into instructions, advice and information. All respondents knew about menstruation and the menstrual cycle before attaining menarche. Knowledge about menarche came largely from friends in school and older sisters who had it earlier. Information from books and being told about menarche by their mother were other sources of knowledge before attaining menarche.

However, from the responses it is clear that the information acquired about menstruation before the event took place was not extensive. Thus, on the one hand such type of information prepared the respondents for menarche so that it was not a ‘surprise’. On the other hand is as one respondent put it:

More knowledge about personal hygiene, usage of sanitary napkins, safe sex, relationship with boys and fertility was gathered in the stage after the respondents had their first menstruation. Instructions on personal hygiene and the usage of sanitary napkins were followed during the days of the menstrual period. These instructions were imparted by mothers for most of the respondents. The instructions concerned personal hygiene and cleanliness, how to take care of oneself during menstruation and the
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use of sanitary napkins. In comparison to the cultural context of Karnataka where mothers were often embarrassed to discuss with their daughters about menstruation and the menstrual cycle, amongst the Dutch respondents we observe that explanations were forthcoming and detailed.

'Some of the knowledge was in the form on information which the respondents needed to follow after they attained menarche. Several respondents said that they were cautioned by their mother about relationships with boys and risk of pregnancy after a girl attains menarche. The younger generation of respondents in Bangalore have also mentioned about being warned about interaction with boys after they attained menarche. However for the Bangalore respondents, issues surrounding pregnancy were not explicitly discussed. For most of the Dutch respondents, knowledge about safe sex during this stage of life was mostly through the sex education in schools with the help of films and advertisement clippings. Sex education amongst the younger generation of respondents in Bangalore also served a similar purpose as has been mentioned by Dutch women.'

'My mother gave me the instructions. She told me how to use sanitary napkins (Ob maandverband). She said that I would have this every month, the duration, that it is normal for every girl, and that it is a part of womanhood'

'My mother went with me the first time to buy sanitary napkins and she told me what happened to her. She said that she also had stomach aches and headaches and that it was normal '

'I got some instructions from my mother about how to keep myself clean, which things to use, how can I take care of myself during the time that I am having my periods'

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'how it might be dangerous, because now that I was growing up and the chances of becoming pregnant if I had sexual contact with boys'

'In school there were some films and advertisements about menstruation and it was part of the sex education'

Most of the knowledge about safe sex was through sex education in school and rarely from parents or mother at that stage of life which seems to be universally prevalent cross cultures. Respondents revealed that as they were not sexually active during the age at which they attained menarche they were not told about it at home. However, such instructions from mother about safe sex and contraceptive usage coincided with the age at which respondents had their first relationship.

'When I started dating the discussion about fertility and pills came in. It was not that much of an issue when I was 13, 14 years old'

'When I was older, I think I was 18 or 19 then my mother said I need to use the pill or use something else for safe sex'

Across generations of mothers and daughters in Bangalore we observed that knowledge as regards to menarche was also in the form of restrictions prescribed through the various restrictions imposed on girls after they began their monthly menstrual cycles. This type of knowledge, that is restrictions, is absent amongst the Dutch younger generation.
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9.2.4 Expected behavioural change

Expected behavioural change is an outcome of instructions given to girls after they have had their first menstruation. As observed from Chapter 6, amongst the younger generation of women in Bangalore they were expected to behave in a different way after menarche. These were the social norms that guide behaviour of individuals in the society. Most of the expected behavioural changes were in the form of restrictions that were imposed on the respondents. The restrictions thus become the normative behaviour for the respondents after they attained menarche. Display of special type of behaviour and restrictions on the type of dress to be worn due to physical changes also influenced expected behavioural changes.

Amongst the Dutch respondents none of them mentioned being asked to behave in a different way in comparison to the times when they were not menstruating. Some younger respondents in Bangalore also enjoyed such freedom. There was also no mention of any special type of dress to be worn by girls who had begun menstruation and there were no restrictions of any kind.

However, two respondents talked about restrictions that they faced as regards the type of dress to be worn. These respondents belong to different cultures and they grew up in different countries. The colour and the type of dress to be worn were determined by the physical changes that followed the event of menarche:

‘No nothing changed, it was very normal’

‘I could not wear light coloured clothes. It was a kind of restriction from the country from which I come. It is not so open there, one cannot talk openly about periods, it is only among girls that we can talk and discuss about it’

‘In my country we have a different type of dress to be worn after a girl matures. They are not childish dresses with lots of beads on it but dresses in natural colour and with a simple design’

One respondent found her parents to be protective of her after she attained menarche:

‘I think my parents were rather protective of me, they warned me to be careful at that age. They instructed me to be home on time in the evening. They also told me to be careful with alcohol and drugs’

9.2.5 Perceived role change

The perceived role change is the interpretation of an individual’s own perception of her role change that has come about after the event of first menstruation. The perceived role change has been categorised into three types. They are role change perceived by the individual herself, for her parents and for others. By categorising the perceived role change into different categories, we are able to understand the importance of significant others in women’s reproductive life course.

Attaining menarche is a special stage of life in a woman’s reproductive life course. The event of menarche is also often synonymous with the transition from girlhood to adulthood. Societal expectation of being an adult related to being more matured, which is a switch from the girlish ways of life. This is observed to be universally present cross-culturally in Bangalore and Groningen.

‘But now I was more matured, different from very young girls’
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In one instance, menarche was also equated to womanhood as one respondent described what her mother told her when she attained menarche.

\[\text{‘It is very normal for every girl, and girls should have it, it is part of her womanhood’}\]

The perceived role changes in this stage of life are thus assumed to be those related to being matured and acting womanly. Other role changes expected could arise from the physical changes.

Role change perceived by respondent

Menarche was considered as a sign of growing up and most women perceived themselves as becoming mature as revealed also across generations of mothers and daughters in Bangalore. The feeling of being mature was associated with acting like a grown-up by not being childish, taking up one’s responsibility and wanting to be independent.

\[\text{‘I considered myself to be mature, you know not childish. My behaviour was more mature as well’}\]

\[\text{‘I had conflicts with my parents but that may be the growing-up phase and had more to do with age. At that age I wanted to be independent, take my own responsibility. I think that is more related to the age and not the fact that I had my first periods’}\]

Thus the ‘age-event’ conflict was largely apparent throughout the discussions. While some women perceived their role change for themselves as being a part of becoming older (age), several others attributed their role change to the advent of menarche in their life.

For many respondents growing up had also to do with physical changes during that stage. The physical changes are perceived to have caused restriction in behaviour such as playing and running. Respondents related these physical limitations to their being shy, conscious and uncomfortable about themselves during the days of the menstrual period.

\[\text{‘There are bodily changes like the breasts start growing, it is painful. That age was a playful age, so when I ran I would have pain. Thus I stopped running. I was also more conscious….so during my periods I used to sit and relax in a quiet place or in one place’}\]

While many respondents considered themselves as mature, for several others attaining menarche made them feel more like a woman:

\[\text{‘I became more of a woman. It is a big step in growing up. I came to know that I can have children and it is a little bit exciting. This made me feel special as well’}\]

Perceived role change for parents

Most respondents revealed that their parents began to become protective of them. The protectiveness is illustrated in the following sentences:

\[\text{‘My parents were rather protective of me. They always warned me to be careful. They did not forbid me to do things but they instructed me to be back home on time in the evening’}\]

The protectiveness often resulted in arguments and conflicts with parents, which was a typical characteristic of this age. Amongst some of the younger generation respondents in Bangalore we observe a similar type of behaviour. Here again we observe the ‘age-event’ debate as some
respondents related the protectiveness and the arguments with parents as part of growing up, while several others associated them with attaining menarche.

> "Arguments and conflicts with my mother were part of growing up"
> "My mother was more protective. Before I went to someone’s place or stayed home alone she briefed me on how to handle things myself. It was a type of extra protection"

We observe that women perceived growing up as being older in age which heightened their need for independence. Respondents also associated this stage of their life to conflicts between them and their mother largely due to the generational differences.

> "I wanted more independence and I didn’t like my parents’ behaviour about little things"

However, one respondent mentioned that the arguments and conflicts with her mother began at the same time when she had her first menstruation.

> "No I don’t know if it is related to the periods, but it started at the same time"

One respondent who was brought up in a different cultural context referred to her perceived change in her parents who treated her more like an adult. According to her:

> "My parents treated me differently; like my mother talked more with me, more adult things; she had a different way of talking with me. Also with my father I could notice he was careful. If he wanted to come into my bedroom he would ask me and knock before coming in"

For this respondent, she perceived a change in her mother after she attained menarche which was more of a friend in comparison to the hierarchical mother-daughter relationship that prevailed before she attained menarche. Amongst the younger generation respondents in Bangalore we also observe them mentioning about becoming closer to their mother after they reached menarche.

**Perceived role change for others**

Others here include everyone who is not a part of the family. But respondents largely discuss about their perceived role change for boys. They mentioned that they became interested in boys and had crushes and were infatuated with boys. The ‘age-event’ conflict is relevant here as well. Some respondents relate it to being a teenager while some others related it to the bodily changes that come about with the onset of menarche.

> "I had crushes on boys and it was to do with me being a teenager and not with me having my periods"
> "Boys became interesting at that time. I had boyfriends and it was at the same time that I had my first period. I was a bit shy when I went to the gym. Boys could see which girls had periods as we didn’t want to go to the shower after gym or for swimming lessons"

### 9.2.6 Perceived gains of the event

Here we focus on the perceived gains in the form of advantages and disadvantages of menarche, which are specific to the days of the menstrual period as well as to that stage of life.
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Advantages

Menstruation was considered as an advantage as it was often used as an excuse to not attend swimming, gymnastics and sports classes. Some respondents said that it was an advantage during the days of their menstrual cycle.

‘My friends and I used it as an excuse to not go to certain classes like gymnastics and sports’

For several other respondents attaining menarche enabled them to be a part of their peer group, brought about maturity and the realization that they were capable of bearing children.

‘I belonged to a group of friends where every one of them had periods. I also became mature’
‘I could bear a child’

Respondents also stressed about the importance they received on attaining menarche in the form of receiving small presents and special type of clothes.

‘I started getting pimples on my face and my mother bought me special creams. I got another type of dress than my younger sisters. The dresses were in natural colours and not flashy’

Being a part of the peer group enabled women to discuss about the physical and emotional problems which they faced during the days of menstruation.

‘At school it was nice. I was a part of the group of other girls who also got their periods so I felt a part of the group, we could talk about pimples and stomach aches’

Disadvantages

All the respondents referred to physical inconvenience and physical discomfort on the menstrual days as disadvantages of menarche. Some respondents also mentioned emotional problems and mood swings as a type of inconvenience faced.

‘It was not convenient at all, I suffer from stomach ache and headache’
‘I did not feel clean on the days of my periods and it also caused me physical and emotional discomfort’

All the interviewees discussed about the type of protection used during the days of the menstrual cycle. Most of them discussed the advantages and disadvantages of using napkins and tampons as protection.

All respondents said that they began using sanitary napkins when they first attained menarche but later changed to using tampons. This was because the tampons had the added advantage of being hygienic and convenient for swimming and other sports activities.

‘At first I used sanitary napkins as I was too small I think to use tampons. After I had my first sexual encounter I could use tampons. This happened when I was 18-19 years old’
‘I started with sanitary napkins at the age of 13 and after 2 years I started using tampons. It is convenient when I go swimming’
9.3 Partnership: union formation behaviour

This section focuses on the union formation behaviour of the Dutch women. Partnership behaviour was left undefined before we began interviewing the women. It was done in order to understand the respondent’s perspective of the event of union formation. Union formation behaviour as an intervening event in the reproductive life course has already been discussed in chapter 5 based on secondary data analysis of survey data. In this chapter we also study the impact of educational attainment on union formation behaviour in the Dutch context as perceived by the women themselves. While chapter 5 presented quantitative evidence, this section takes a qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions on union formation behaviour in the Dutch context.

9.3.1 Perceived timing of the event

Respondents largely distinguished their union formation behaviour into four distinct categories. They are: the age at which they had boyfriends, the age they had their first intimate relationship, age at living together or cohabitation and the age at marriage. The age at which these events occurred could be linked to other significant events like leaving the parental home in the individual life course. Most of the respondents said that they had their first boyfriend when they were still living in their parental home whereas the age at first intimate relationship was after they had left the parental home.

Most respondents mentioned having boyfriends by the age of 15. This age was considered as a normal age when most of their friends too had boyfriends.

“I had a few boyfriends when I was about 15, 16 and 17 even. It was a normal age as most of my friends also had boyfriends’

This age corresponds to the growing-up phase of life from a girl to that of a teenager and also a stage of life when girls develop interest in boys.

“I had crushes and was infatuated with boys at the age of 15 or 16. They were more related to growing up from a girl to a teenager’

However, respondents categorically distinguish this age from the age at which they had their first intimate relationship. The respondents have defined intimate relationship as the onset of their sexual relationship marked by the first sexual encounter. This age ranged from 17 to 20 years. Respondents viewed their age at first intimate relationship as early, late or on time, by comparing it with their friends’ age at first intimate relationship.

A respondent who began her first sexual relationship at the age of 17 considers her age to be ‘on time’ because

“The other girls were also talking about it. There were a few who had theirs a little bit earlier’

While another respondent who had her first sexual relationship at the age of 19 considered that age to be a late age because of the following reason.

‘Compared to my other friends it was quite late. I had a few boyfriends before but I was not intimate with them’
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However, some respondents termed their first intimate relationship as “serious”. In this case as well the yardstick of comparison was the age at which friends and members of the peer group had their first intimate relationship. The age ranged from 17 to 20 years for different respondents. While the age of 17 was perceived as an early age for a serious relationship, the age of 20 was a late age.

> 'Yes I was early with my first experience of sex. I was in VWO and the girls there did not begin that early. So I became friends with HAVO girls as they were free, wanted to go to the discos and dancing, etc’ (Respondent who was 17 at first sexual intercourse)

> 'It was a late age for me as my friends they were 18, 19 when they had their serious relationship’

Respondents who began a serious relationship at the age of 18 considered it as the right age personally in spite of their friends beginning their serious relationship at an early age.

> 'It was a right time for me even though I heard from a lot of friends that they started at 16, 17. It had also to do with the fact that I found the right person and I am still married to him. For a serious relationship I first needed to be on my own first (careerwise) and be ready to have a relationship. I think at that age I was ready’

The next category of union formation distinguished by the respondents themselves was the age at which they began living together with their partner or the age at cohabitation. Most of the respondents stated that they began living together at ages 25, 26 and 27. These ages were also perceived by the respondents as a normal age to begin living together with a partner. Respondents mention having completed their studies before beginning to live with their partner, which they consider to be proper timing.

> 'It was quite normal. I had almost finished my studies by then and I started my PhD. I had my student room and at the end of my studies it was quite normal to look for a house and live together with a partner’

Most of these respondents knew their partner for a longer time before they began living together. The delay in living together was attributed to partners having different jobs in different cities and the combination with education.

> 'We knew each other when I was 21 but started living together at age 26. So I knew him for 7 years. But we had jobs in different cities so that was the main reason why we weren’t living together’

> 'Both of us were studying here in Groningen and both had our own student room so we did not start living together right away. We began living together when I was 26’

One respondent, who began cohabitation at the age of 19, perceives of her age as being early. Both she and her boyfriend were students then and compared to her friends she was one of the first ones to begin living together. She says:

> ‘…well 19 to live together with a boyfriend? Early!! Because I was the first in my group of friends. Both me and my friend were still living at home and when we were studying we had a single room for ourselves. So it was quite unusual’

Marriage formed the fourth category of union formation behaviour. Out of the 10 respondents interviewed only one respondent was not married but continued living together with her partner. The
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majority of the women made their transition to marriage after living together for a long time with their
partners.

‘We lived together for 4 years before we got married when I was 31’
‘We lived for almost 2 and a half years before we got married’

The median age at marriage was 29.5 years. The marriage age amongst the respondents ranged from
26 years to 32 years. However, some of them married at ages 26 and 28 and there were some who
married at age 30 and above. We do not observe any strict age patterning. Some considered their age
as being the right age while some considered it to be late.

Respondents assessed their age at marriage both from their own perspective as early, late or on time as
well as from societal and cultural perspectives.

‘Age 28 was a late age for me but for Holland it is a normal age to marry’
‘Considering my own country it is somewhere in between. But for myself the age of 26 was quite
early. So I think maybe I should have waited for 2 to 4 years’

For those respondents who married at age 30 and above most of them perceived their age at marriage
as the right age in view of their career stability, future family options and an added advantage of
cohabiting for a long time before getting married.

‘it was a right age for me. I think it was good to live together for several years before getting
married. It was important to me that I first finish my studies and then get married and think about
having children’ (Respondent married at age 31)

9.3.2 Preference for cohabitation or marriage

Most of the respondents who were interviewed were married at the time of interview except one who
was living together with her partner (see Chapter 3; section 3.4.6). These respondents have also
mentioned living together with their partner for several years before getting married. We wanted to
know what prompted marriage for these respondents and what they personally prefer as a better option
and why.

Cohabitation and marriage were not considered as two very distinct events in the reproductive life
course of women in the Dutch context. For those respondents who preferred cohabitation to marriage
it was because of the non-differential status of a wife, that is no significant change in status as a
cohabiting or married woman. For most of the respondents these two events were distinct from each
other only because of a legal document which made no difference to their status of a live-in partner or
a wife as suggested by the following response.

‘Getting married and living together, the difference is one piece of paper. Nothing changed, it is
just the idea that you are someone’s wife’

‘I prefer living together to marriage because when we got married we knew each other for 5 years.
So what is new about marriage?’

‘Being married is nothing special. It is just the same as living together’
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These respondents considered cohabitation as an alternative to marriage but eventually got married before having children to avoid any complications arising from instances of a child born out of wedlock.

> "It was not my wish to marry because for me it does not make any difference. But I knew I wanted children and thus it was a good reason to marry. So that you don’t have to arrange a lot for the children like notary (notarys) and other things”

Marriage was based on convenience for another respondent who stated that it helped them to adopt a child and if it were not for adoption she would prefer living together with her partner.

> "Well I think if we had not adopted our child then we still would be living together waiting for a good opportunity to marry sometime. Marriage made it convenient for the adoption procedure”

While another respondent expressed her negative attitude towards marriage by saying:

> "I prefer living together. For me personally marriage is not a big thing. Living together and having children are much more important to me than some kind of paper that says you are married”

Some respondents considered cohabitation as a temporary phase before marriage. However marriage remains important for them. These respondents prefer cohabiting for a short time before being married to the person. In their view their phase of cohabitation enabled them to find out whether the partner was the right person and whether they both understood each other well. This is considered to be an important criterion before marriage and starting a family.

> "I prefer maybe a short time to live together with a person and then get married. Marriage is important for me though. Living together enabled me to really find out if the person I fell in love with is the right person with whom I can raise a family. You really get to know the good side and the bad side”

One respondent even said that:

> "It is not a guarantee that living together will work out. But I think that it helps a bit. I think marriage is more stable if you can choose after a few years”

Given the preference for cohabitation or marriage some respondents prefer marriage to cohabitation because of the emotional stability and security that marriage provides.

> "In a way I was more certain that the other person has really chosen me and that is more an emotional aspect. It also provides for emotional security’’

While another respondent preferred marriage to cohabitation because:

> "It gives stability to the relationship and helps in going forward with the relationship”

9.3.3 Transition from cohabitation to marriage

In this section we shall look at the factors that trigger the transition from cohabitation to marriage. As most of the interviewed respondents stated that they married their partner after living together for a couple of years, it is interesting to know why such a step was taken.
One of the most important criteria cited by most of the respondents that caused the transition from cohabitation to marriage was their decision to have children together with their partner.

‘We decided to marry once we decided we wanted to have children together. A lot of my friends and people that I know also go about it like this. I think it is one of the main reasons why people here want to get married’

Though these respondents did have the choice of having children out of wedlock, they refrained from doing so due to the legal issues involved. One respondent explained how it is legally easier to have children within marriage.

‘Yes it is legally easier because when you are not married then the father of the child has to go to the legal notary (notarys) and have to declare that the child is his. So there are a lot of problems having children when you are not married. So a lot of people say okay let’s get married because then we don’t have to arrange all the stuff around recognising the child’

However, as one respondent revealed, marriage is still not important for many people who decide to not marry and yet have children.

‘For a lot of my friends marriage is not important at all. They are not married but still have children. So I don’t think marriage is necessary for them. For the majority it isn’t important’

Another important criterion, which has been mentioned, by most of the respondents influencing their transition from living together to marriage was when they incurred big expenses such as buying a house.

‘Financial things when we wanted to buy a house or other big expenses’

Some respondents also mentioned of stability in the relationship derived from marriage and the emotional security that marriage offers as key factors that influenced them to marry. Some respondents also referred to the romantic nature of marriage giving status to their love relationship with their partner as an important criterion to marry.

‘Marriage gives security and stability to the relationship. With marriage you enter into a legal commitment, social commitment and family commitment. It helps the relationship to go forward’

‘Marriage gives a romantic flavour to the long-lasting relationship’

‘Decision to marry came when we decided to give each other more than just love’

**Required qualities in the man**

Most respondents mentioned having their criteria for an ideal partner but it did not act as a strict checklist. However, some basic criteria like intelligence, good-humored nature and being sociable were desired in the partner. Qualities such as honesty and openness and mental compatibility formed other basic criteria.

‘It was important for me that he was intelligent, he should have some humour and he should be a stable person’

‘Mental compatibility was my criterion’
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Some respondents said that they were very young when they met their partner and fell in love and thus did not have any criteria of a partner.

I was rather young I didn’t have many criteria. Because when you are young you are not looking for a guy to spend your life with, you are just looking for a nice guy to be with

We also observe how women’s educational enrolment and attending different levels of education have facilitated meeting people with the same educational background. None of the respondents mentioned the educational level of the partner as a criterion in their partner choice. For a majority of them, their educational career did not play any role in their partner choice. These respondents did not have similar level of education as their partner. While some respondents have a higher educational level than their partner, it is the reverse for other partners.

When we met he was less educated than me. I was going to HAVO and went further up while he just went to NTS. But I have never bothered about the educational level

My partner is a little bit more educated than me. But my education did not play any role in choosing a partner

However, some respondents did have the same educational level as their partners but they also said that they did specifically choose such a match. Thus on the one hand it was not a conscious decision to have a partner of the same educational level, on the other hand being in a similar educational domain facilitated them in meeting their partners.

Yes my husband is of the same educational background as me. But I didn’t specifically look for it. But being in the academic field helped me to meet him, know him and interact with him

No, I don’t think that I explicitly looked for a person with the same educational background as me. But it is one of the reasons that I found someone and he is at the same educational level and university as well. So I think it is easier to meet people in that category. Once you study you meet people that also study

Respondents reflected on the advantages of having a partner of the same educational level in comparison to those who had partners of a different educational level. Amongst women who had the same educational level as their partners they found that it facilitated better understanding and easier communication between partners.

When we are of the same educational level we can understand the same things and have more similar views on things

He has the same educational background as me and the same level of education. So it is easier to communicate with such a person than with one of a different background

One respondent who is more educated than her husband touched on the inequality in educational levels:

My husband does not bother much but sometimes he makes certain remarks as I knew things better. He remarks that I am higher educated and he does not like that. On the whole our relationship is very well balanced but when there are conflicts there seems to be imbalance and I don’t like that

The working environment is also considered as a probable place to meet and interact with potential partners. All respondents said that they met their partners long before they had a stable working career. None of the respondents met their partner at the workplace.
Irrespective of the non-existent role of working career in partner choice, respondents identified the advantages of both partners working. Most of the respondents said that their partners shared work both outside and in the household work.

However, as one respondent pointed out, it cannot be generalised that husbands of women who work share household tasks. She also referred to the Dutch context that in spite of men sharing household tasks, women do much more work than men.

One respondent said that both she and her husband work but he does not share in the household tasks a lot.

Some respondents stated that both high education and working career are not considered as essential for their relationship. It was other less tangible qualities such as:

9.3.4 Role change perceived by the respondent

In the previous sections we have already observed that union formation behaviour can be distinguished into cohabitation and marriage. Most of the respondents who have been interviewed made a transition from cohabitation to marriage. We intend to understand whether these respondents experienced any role change themselves in transition from the status of a partner to that of a married wife.

Opinions differed from respondent to respondent about their perceived role change. For some respondents, they considered both roles to be similar and hence there was no role change. One respondent found that the only change was the addition of her husband’s surname, while another considered buying a house together with her husband as the only difference between living together and being a wife.
Another respondent thought that her role change from partner to wife as something which brought about a more secure feeling of commitment, which was less evident when she was living together with her partner.

While some other respondents were undecided about their perceived role change from the stage of living together to that of marriage:

While most of the first births took place above the age of 30, some women were mothers at age 27 and 28. The median age at first birth amongst the women interviewed was 30.3 years. Sometimes they made a distinction between their own perception of their age at first birth and what was socially perceived in the Dutch context. This is how one respondent who had her first child at the age of 28 viewed her age at first birth:

We do not find a strict age patterning of the timing of first birth such as what we observed in the cultural context of Bangalore. This seems to indicate the prevalence of perceived standard biography in the cultural context of Karnataka, in comparison to the perceived individual biography in the Dutch cultural context. Those women who had their first child above age 30 regarded of their age as late. On the personal front they attribute it largely to ‘biological reasons’ of bearing a child after age 30 such as...
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an increased risk of birth defects. It is also perceived as a ‘late age’ in terms of planning for the second child.

'It is late because biologically 30 is rather late. At older ages there are risks of birth defects’

'I would like to have my second child now and I feel it is really very late’ (Respondent who had her first child at age 31)

The same group of women mentioned that motherhood after the age of 30 is normal in Dutch society because all their friends and most female acquaintances had their first child around the ages of 29, 30. Respondents also said that this age is a common age for first child birth amongst high educated and working women in the Dutch context.

'It is late because biologically 30 is a rather late age. But when I look at my friends, then 30 is average. A lot of working and high educated women start thinking about children when they are 30, 31 years old’

'Because most women I know had their first child around age 29, 30. Most of them were around 30’

One respondent, who had her first child at the age of 30, considered it to be a late age as compared to the women in her mother’s generation.

'It was rather late. But compared to say 30 years ago my mother’s generation 25 was more or less the time that they had their first child. But now it is 30 years on an average. So women are having children at a much older age than 20 years ago’

For some respondents later age at motherhood corresponded to more maturity and accomplishment in one’s career before becoming a mother. These respondents personally considered their age at first birth as being on time. They compared themselves to their friends who also had their first child at later ages after they had established themselves careerwise.

'I think it is on time or a normal age. But I know that it is not that early. Friends had their first child at more or less the same age. It also has to do with our world because we completed our studies and some of them did their PhD and worked a couple of years and then started to have kids’ (Respondent’s age at first birth was 34 years)

The same respondent also mentions stated:

'I would have liked to have my first child a couple of years earlier like at the age of 30 or 32’

Some respondents wanted to have their first child at earlier ages in order to avoid being ‘older parents’. They also considered childbirth at younger ages to be more advantageous. These respondents had their first child at age 28 and viewed of their age at first birth as ‘late’.

'At younger ages we have more energy and we are in a healthier shape to bear children’

'For me it was late. Now I am an older parent. So I hope that I can have that strong relationship with my children’

One respondent discussed the advantage of being able to spend more time with her husband before becoming a mother if first child birth is at a later age.
9.4.2 Perceived behavioural changes

In this subsection we shall focus on the different behavioural changes perceived by the respondents, which came about in their lives after they became a mother. Physical restriction was one of the most common behaviour change identified by most of the respondents. Such perceived behavioural changes are universal in nature and prevails across cultures.

For most of them it meant having less freedom to randomly plan activities as regards socialisation with friends, going to the movies and theatre. Respondents mentioned that they had to first arrange for a babysitter or nanny before planning any activity.

One respondent felt that the physical restrictions resulted in a ‘loss of spontaneity’, which came about with the birth of her child.

Respondents also said that such restricted behaviour leads to less socialising and sometimes socialising starts taking shape with a new group of people who are also parents.

Other behavioural changes were related to being responsible and becoming busy. Most women also felt tired and exhausted with the various changes that came about after the birth of their first child.
Some respondents also found that sooner or later the priorities of the child increase and he/she becomes the focus. Thus apart from socialising less with friends, some of them said that they had less time for their husbands.

> ‘My husband and I liked to go to the city centre to have dinner together or go to a pub. But in a way that is not important anymore after the baby arrived’

> ‘I have less time for my husband so that has also changed’

All respondents found that their life underwent great changes after they became a mother. The behavioural changes have already been mentioned in the previous subsection. The behavioural changes throw light on the great differences in the life of these women pertaining before and after the birth of their first child. One of the responses nicely summarised the differences before and after the birth of a child:

> ‘I did so much before my child was born. I went to India, I went to a lot of places, I would go out to the discos and pubs. I have had it all. Only the excitement of travelling that is still there. I want it but cannot always have it. A lot of times we go away but not too long distances because I do not want risk problem with my children’

Another respondent said that her relationship with her husband was enhanced with the birth of her child because of a stronger bond between her and her husband.

> ‘Also in our relationship we became closer to each other because we have something together and we have to take care of the child together. For us it was like we have more bonding with each other now’

Shift from full-time work to part-time work was one of the major differences that came about after the child was born. Most of the respondents who were interviewed mentioned this change.

> ‘I changed my working hours so I started to work a day less. I used to work full time before but now I work four days a week’

### 9.4.3 Perceived role change

The occurrence of different events shapes the reproductive life course of women. With these different events, women play increasingly multifaceted roles at the same time. Thus marriage confers the role of a wife and with the birth of her first child she takes on the role of a mother. In modern day society, women with children pursuing their working career are known as working mothers. We focus on the perceived role changes of motherhood in the following subsections. We have distinguished them into three types. They are role change perceived by the respondents themselves, for their parents and in-laws and role change perceived for others such as friends and working colleagues.

**Role change perceived by respondent**

Most respondents considered motherhood to have brought about maturity in them, a change in outlook from the carefree life before the birth of the child.
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Some respondents also found that they became adults and were sensitive. One respondent distinguished between the stages of her life when she attained menarche with her stage of life after becoming a mother. She felt that she became matured after she had her first menstruation. However after she had her first child she felt that she became an adult. While motherhood is observed to bring about transition to adulthood amongst women in the Dutch cultural context, in the cultural context of Bangalore amongst younger generation we observe that the event of marriage enabled the transition to womanhood.

Many Dutch respondents have also indicated role conflicts. We observe two types of role conflicts that might arise after the birth of the first child. They are role conflict as a mother and a wife or partner and the second type of role conflict is that between a mother and a working mother. In this subsection we shall focus on whether the interviewed respondents faced such role conflicts and their perspective of the conflicts.

Perceived Role change for parents and in-laws

Overall there were no major role changes for the parents and in-laws after the birth of the child. However, respondents revealed small changes in the form of greater concern and care, increase in the frequency of visits by the grandparents and the relationship taking on a new dimension after the birth of the child. This is also mentioned by the younger generation of respondents in Bangalore.

Some respondents said that they meant more to their in-laws and felt that they belonged more to their husband’s family. Here we observe a similarity in the daughters in Bangalore as regards their perceived role change in the eyes of their parents-in-law after becoming a mother.

One respondent also referred to changes in types of communication with her parents. Both mothers’ and daughters’ generation in Bangalore have mentioned that they were able to share and discuss many more things with their mother and other female members of the family, which they could not do when they were not mothers themselves.
Perceived Role change for others

We asked women whether their role in relation to friends and colleagues at work changed after they became mothers. Friends did not mention any changes after respondents became mothers. However, respondents talked about negative reactions in the workplace. Respondents discussed the support they got from their colleagues at their workplace as well as the gender expectations of becoming a mother and combining a working career. The following respondent nicely summed up her experience:

‘I am also a mother now so; I can have a different type of conversation with my mother, about motherhood, about how I feel, and about my delivery, also about raising kids. My father also respects me in a different way as I am having a family now’

In her opinion, gender becomes an issue where taking care of the children is concerned. She further went on to say:

‘Well it is a bit of both. Once you work and then have children and when you are a woman especially with a career you have a lot of pressure in your job. People always look at her with doubt, will she manage. It is a difficult combination working four days a week and having children. My husband also does the same, he works four days a week and he always gets a lot of positive reactions. Wow it is so good that the father takes care of the children one day a week. They never ask him whether it is going well, how do you cope, isn’t it too much pressure for you combining work with children. I think it is really different for women and men’

Another respondent discussed the negative reactions she got from her work colleagues after she gave birth to her child. She found that her boss at work seemed to cast doubts on her competency after she became a mother.

‘I was one of the first within my work group of girls to get a baby and I think for some of them it was a bit strange. It was not common to combine research work with motherhood. My boss was not so happy’

9.4.4 Perceived gains of the event

We now move on from the perceived role changes to the gains of motherhood. Gains have been discussed as the advantages and disadvantages of motherhood perceived by the respondents (see chapter 7, Section 7.2.7). We also focus on the impact of higher education and working career and how they contributed to the various advantages and disadvantages of motherhood as perceived by the respondents themselves.
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**Advantages**

For most respondents the advantage of motherhood is the pleasure and happiness of being a mother. Some women also perceived it as an enriching experience.

'It is pleasure and happiness at the emotional level’

'It brings a lot of joy and you realise that small things are very special and very important’

'It has enriched my life’

**Disadvantages**

The disadvantages of motherhood were elaborated as the loss of freedom and physical restriction to do many things. Most mothers experienced setbacks related with scarcity of time, being tired and exhausted, social life being hampered and spending less time with their partner.

'Part of freedom that I miss, going out and having some time for myself and my partner’

'I put part of my social life aside and I spend less time with my partner’

'I am tired. It restricts me a little bit in the things that I can do. I have to organise everything so that is quite an effort’

We can also observe the effects of higher education and working career on the perceived gains of motherhood. The effects have more to do with the advantages of motherhood rather than the disadvantages. Some women perceive that their higher education has enabled them to raise their children better because of knowledge gained from books on child development and interacting with people as part of their occupation. These respondents feel that their higher education has directly been beneficial in the following way:

'After my HAVO I went to the PABO to train as a teacher in elementary school. So I learned a lot about children from the ages of 4 till 12. I also learned about child development’

'I read many books on child development and now I am putting knowledge into practice in my daily life. I am a social worker so interacting with people also helps’

Some respondents mentioned that their higher education has helped them in raising their children by enabling them to decide what is right and wrong for the child.

'The way I raise my kids, what I consider to be important, and I think that has something to do with my educational level, what I feel is important for my kids’

However, some respondents feel that their education has been indirectly helpful in enhancing their knowledge.

'Maybe not my education directly but I think my view of the world, maybe my intellectual capabilities make it easier to oversee several things at the same time and put them into perspective. It helped me in coping with being a mother’
Some others believe that their educational attainment has had no effect on their motherhood and raising children. These respondents mention that there is no special training for raising children that benefits only the higher educated women. According to them raising children cannot be taught and low educated mother sometimes raise children much better than higher educated mothers do. They discussed this topic in the following way:

'I am convinced that the way I do it is the best but I think that every mother has that opinion whether you are higher educated or not'

'I don’t think that my high education has helped me. Well there is no training for being a mother or a father. I think that there are a lot of people with low education that are really good mothers and fathers and maybe sometimes even better when compared with people who have high education’

Most women stated that their working career has directly given them their economic independence. As both partners have a working career they are able to afford the comforts of life and provide a better life for their children.

'We are very satisfied about the money we have, we can buy most of the things we need’

'Our working career enabled us to buy a new house. It is a nice house and our daughter has a lot of room to play’

'Because we both are working we can afford things we otherwise couldn’t. The kids are very happy’

Some respondents talked about how expensive it is to bring up children in the Dutch context and how their own salary has enabled them not to be dependent on their husband.

'My working career has helped me because I think it is expensive to raise a child and it is easier if you have some money to give the child the right things. The money that my husband earns would also be enough. But then I would feel really dependent on him for that money and I don’t feel good if I am dependent’

For most respondents their working career has facilitated them in developing themselves, being proud of their achievements, being efficient and making proper use of time.

'Because I have some work experience and that helps me to develop myself (jezelf ontplooien), to grow. My salary every month helps me to decide for my children on my own’

'My work has helped me more personally because of the fact that I have a job and it is easier to be a mother because you are more than a mother. When I did not have a job my main role was to be a mother and I had very little left of my own self. Now I have a different role to play apart from taking care of my children’

'I have learnt to manage a lot of things and I learnt that in my job. It has made me efficient and taught me to use time well’

9.5 Perceived autonomy

Educational attainment of women and their labour force participation enable them to gain status both outside and inside the house, which indirectly influences women’s autonomy. Autonomy and its types have been similarly categorised as in the in-depth interviews in Bangalore (see chapter 7, section 7.3).
Autonomy has been differentiated into knowledge autonomy, decision-making autonomy, physical autonomy, emotional autonomy and economic and social autonomy. In the following subsections we shall elaborate how women themselves perceive their autonomy and how their educational and working career facilitates different types of autonomy.

9.5.1 Perceived knowledge autonomy

This type of autonomy focuses on how higher education and working career of women have provided exposure to the outside world. All respondents mentioned that their exposure to the outside world was largely through the mass media such as newspapers and books, television and radio. Most respondents also identified the internet as a form of mass media, which has enabled them to gather knowledge about the outside world.

Interaction with friends by meeting them and discussing various issues has also enabled some of the respondents to know more about the outside world.

A working career has enhanced knowledge autonomy through interaction with colleagues at the workplace and meeting different people.

Respondents mentioned that their education and working career have enabled them to learn new facts and information and which they relate together to synthesis new knowledge.

9.5.2 Perceived decision-making autonomy

Higher education and workforce participation of women bring about greater decision-making autonomy in matters both outside and inside the household (Jejeebhoy 1995). According to her, higher educated, working women have a greater say in decision making in comparison to women with less education. The former are also confident of the decisions that they make. In our research, respondents were asked how decisions are taken in their family and whether they or their partner decide on different aspects. Matters of decision making were divided into three different categories: taking care of the children, cooking, inviting guests and friends at home, big expenditures such as buying a television, deciding on holidays and long-term investment for the children. From the responses, we found that Dutch partners/husbands shared much more when compared to their counterparts’ involvement and cooperation amongst the younger generation of respondents in Bangalore.

Respondents mentioned that all the important decisions in the household are largely taken together.
Two distinct domains emerge from the interviews. They are the woman’s domain and the man’s domain. The woman herself largely decides on the woman’s domain, which includes mostly taking care of the child, inviting guests and friends at home and planning for a holiday. Buying television, computers and other electronic and technical gadgets is the man’s domain, which is a common factor in the cross-cultural context of this research.

“Taking care of the children I do more, buying a TV my husband does. Planning a holiday I do. I plan most of the things like going to family and friends, inviting guests and friends at home. He decides more in matters like to buy a camera, computer etc, the male things”

Most of the respondents stated that they take care of the child/children more than their husband/partner while for some of them childcare is equally shared by their partners.

‘Taking care of the child we do that together’

Decisions on the daily day-to-day cooking are based more on availability of time and resources and there is no strict division between the man and the woman in this activity. Here we observe more involvement of men in household work when compared to the husbands of the younger generation in Bangalore. Most women also stated that they are the ones who decide on what has to be cooked and also do the cooking every time.

‘Cooking depends on what we have at home and also how much time we have. Either me or my husband decides’

‘I decide on what to cook. Sometimes in the weekend I ask what he would like to eat but the answer is that it does not matter (maakt niet uit)’

Long-term goals of the family, buying expensive things and big investments are matters which are mutually discussed and decided upon as reported by all the respondents.

‘Long-term goals for our daughter we do that together. We discuss about it and then decide together’

‘If we want to buy something that is more expensive we always discuss about it. We do it together’

9.5.3 Perceived physical autonomy

Indicators of physical autonomy largely deal with questions such as ‘can you move around alone, walking or cycling after it is dark’ or ‘is the ability to move around alone in the dark attributed to the respondent’s personality or has it to do with the place being safe?’ All respondents who were interviewed mentioned cycling alone in the neighbourhood or to the city centre when it is dark. Some of them attributed it to their personality whilst some attributed it to the place being safe and that unsafe neighbourhoods and streets were avoided.

‘I usually go by bike and also after dark to the city centre. I avoid certain neighbourhoods as I do not consider those places safe. I consider myself a bold person’

One respondent also stated that cycling alone in the dark is a normal part of most women’s life in the Netherlands.
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Another respondent reflected on her moving around alone after dark as risky behaviour, which she does not like because she is a mother now.

"I don’t feel safe at night after dark. Before I had my children I would probably take more risks. But it is not so now."

9.5.4 Perceived emotional autonomy

Jejeebhoy (1995) refers to emotional autonomy as enabling intimacy between the husband and the wife and interspousal communication leading to close familial bonding. It has been operationalised by asking respondents how much time they spend on an daily average with their children and husband and about the activities that they engage in together as a whole family. The emotional autonomy of women can be indirectly related to their high education and working career. The women who have been interviewed are working woman and hence enquiring about the kind of activities these women do together with their husband and children would indicate how work is shared between modern working couples and the family bonds of closeness.

Most of the respondents said that they spend 3 to 4 hours on an average on a working day with their child/children. On the days when the respondents are not working or on weekends the time spent with the children is much more. It also depends on how many days of part-time work that the respondents put in.

"It depends on whether it is a working day or not. On a working day most of the time we get up at seven and then at half past 8 we bring her to the day care centre. So that is one and a half hours. Then I have my working day and then I come home at about six and we go to bed at 8. So it is 3 and half hours on an average. On Thursdays I am at home and during the weekend I spend the whole day with them."

As both the husband and wife go out to work, most respondents stated that they spend 3 waking hours on a daily average with their husband/partner.

"It is usually an hour in the morning between getting up and taking our daughter to the crèche and then in the evening that’s about 2 hours."

In the weekends and holidays they indulge in activities such as visiting family and friends, going to the children’s farm (kinderboerderij), playground and amusement parks. Respondents also said that the holidays are also children-centred and different from the holidays that they used to have before the children were born.

"Weekends we visit family and friends, go to a children’s farm or playground. Our holidays changed as well. Before we used to go with backpacks and camp. But now it is more of family outings."

Hence we observe how women’s educational attainment and working career enable being together in a close-knit conjugal family and how they facilitate on egalitarian conjugal relationship between the husband and the wife as a result of more interspousal interaction.
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9.5.5 Perceived economic and social autonomy

Higher education enhances women’s participation in the workforce and thereby their control over financial resources, which gives them enhanced economic autonomy. Most of the respondents considered themselves as being economically independent because they work full-time or part-time. They relate their higher educational attainment to their working career, which has enabled them the economic independence.

> 'Yes I am economically independent because I have my own income and I can live from that'

> 'Education has been an advantage. Because of that I have a well-paid job. If I were not well educated I would have a job which would be less paid. So I wouldn't be economically independent. Now with my job I could walk out the door and say buy a house for myself or rent a place to live in’

Although the working career of women gives them economic independence, it is more essential whether the woman herself has any say in how she would like to spend her money. Jejeebhoy (1995) showed that in highly gender-stratified societies participation of women in the labour force enables them economic autonomy. However, they are expected to give away their entire pay packet either to their husband or an elder member of the household. Thus in this case even though a woman is economically autonomous she has little opportunity to spend her money as she wishes. In our in-depth interviews we asked women who decides on their spending behaviour and whether they consider themselves to be self-reliant. Self-reliance allows them to decide on their own as regards small expenditure. Most respondents also said that they were able to live on their own on their present income. However, they also stressed the importance of discussing with their partner on issues concerning big expenditure.

> 'Yes I consider myself self-reliant. I can decide but not on major decisions’

> 'No, not really self-reliant. I can do a lot of things by myself and for some things I rely on my husband’

Women also view their educational attainment as making them confident in their life enabling them to pursue parallel careers of motherhood and work.

> 'My educational background gives me the confidence to go out and work, to have children and a job together. My working career has given me the freedom to spend’

9.6 Perceived changes as compared to mother

In this section we shall present respondents’ perceptions of their own generation and the perceived changes that have taken place when they compare themselves to their mother’s generation. Respondents were asked how they would characterise their own generation and how their generation is similar or different from their mother’s generation. Hence the perceived changes indicate the similarities and differences that exist across generations of mothers and daughters. As we have not separately interviewed the older generation of women, these perceived changes by the younger generation of women may be symptomatic if some of the generational changes prevalent in the Dutch society.

Some of the terms used by the respondents to characterise their own generation are ‘busy generation’, ‘spoilt generation’. They viewed themselves as a busy generation largely because motherhood and
working career are combined, managing too many things at the same time such as work, motherhood, household duties and being a wife. Most respondents expressed opinions along lines such as ‘I am strong and I can do things on my own’. Some of the respondents characterised their generation as being spoilt because of the availability of all luxuries. Respondents also felt that they had everything since their childhood and did not have to struggle for anything, be it financial support, love and equality of opportunities and thus were spoilt. Other kinds of characterization of their own generation were ‘sexually liberated’, ‘greater exposure to higher education’, and ‘having freedom of thought and action’.

The perceived changes across generations mentioned by the respondents are later age at first child birth termed as ‘old new parents’, the changing institution of marriage because of the practice of cohabitation as an alternative form of marriage, and increase in women’s participation in the labour force. Some of the respondents compared themselves to their mothers and perceive themselves to be better educated and more independent than their mothers. Most of the respondents have mentioned two important factors – women’s higher educational attainment and the workforce participation of women – that have revolutionised generational changes. Women found that their higher education has paved the way to better jobs that have made them less dependent on their husbands/partners financially. One respondent mentioned the prevalence of gender discrimination that dissuaded women in the older generations to pursue higher education. Very few women worked in the older generation and amongst those who worked, as soon as they were mothers, they normally quit their job, a trend which is totally different from the younger generation who largely combine motherhood and working career. Another respondent shared the experience of her mother who worked for a few years as a teacher. But when she got married she lost her job largely because during that time marriage was one of the reasons why women were asked to quit jobs in schools. This example reveals that even if women in the older generation wanted to work they did not have the opportunity to work, a situation which also forced them to choose between pursuing a working career and raising a family. Respondents in the younger generation perceive this to be a major generational change where they do not have to choose between working careers and a family as combining the two is a normal practice amongst the younger generation. Respondents also linked their working careers to economic independence and independence in a number of domains such as relationships, decision on childbearing and number of children to be borne. Respondents also perceive generational changes in the role of men which have arisen because of women’s participation in the workforce and stable working careers. Some of the respondents said that as women in the older generation did not work outside the home men in the family usually made all the financial decisions, as they were the breadwinners of the family. The traditional role of men across generations has also undergone change as is revealed from some of the responses. Respondents stated that their husband/partner share in the household tasks, taking care of the children; hence it is no longer solely the job of the mother to look after the children, a belief which was prevalent in the older generation. Some of the respondents have also mentioned that men in the younger generations too combine fatherhood and working careers in a way which is similar to women who combine motherhood and working careers. Some of the other generational changes in the role of men perceived by the younger generation of respondents are that men were less ‘macho’ and more able to emotionally express themselves. Another perceived change across generations is that while respondents in the younger generation could choose whether or not to have children and use contraceptives to postpone childbearing, in their mother’s generation, the pill was not considered an option in spite of its availability and it was thought to be completely normal to not delay childbearing. The interviewed respondents characterised their generation as sexually liberated which was not the case in their mother’s generation. They said that in the older generation long-term relationships without being married were not acceptable in the family and children before marriage were not permissible. Marriage was the only means by which living together with a partner was possible in the older generation while in the younger generation cohabitation as an alternative form of marriage is widely prevalent. One respondent said that her mother got married because she
became pregnant which reveals the limitations that were imposed on pre-marital relationships in the older generations.