Impact of Family and Cultural Upbringing on Young Women's Perception of Motherhood: A Comparative Study among Sri Lankan and Indian Female College Students

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Abstract

Fertility rates in South Asia have declined significantly over the past four decades, with Sri Lanka and India leading this demographic transition. This study examines the impact of the socialization process experienced by young, unmarried female undergraduates in both Sri Lanka and India on their perceptions of motherhood and the declining fertility rate in contemporary times. Utilizing a mixed-method and pseudo-longitudinal design, the research compares students from the University of Colombo in Sri Lanka and the VET Institute of Arts and Science in Tamil Nadu, India. The results indicate that while traditional ideals around motherhood remain deeply rooted, young women in both countries are actively renegotiating these roles through educational pursuits, career aspirations, and broader exposure to global norms in varying degrees. Cultural expectations and family pressures all contribute to shaping their evolving perspectives. While Indian students exhibit greater confidence in balancing motherhood and career, Sri Lankan students encounter stronger patriarchal norms and more limited institutional support. Statistical data from over 500 participants reinforce these findings,

with distinct patterns emerging across academic disciplines, years of study, and socio-economic backgrounds. This study contributes to understanding the demographic shifts in Sri Lanka and India while providing policy-relevant insights into gender, education, and reproductive decision-making.

Introduction

Motherhood, historically idealized in South Asian societies, remains a critical marker of womanhood, familial duty, and cultural identity. However, in the context of rising female literacy, urbanization, and shifting economic landscapes, young women are increasingly questioning the inevitability and primacy of motherhood in their life trajectories. Accordingly, the main objective of this research was to examine how the processes of socialization, along with familial and cultural upbringing, influence the decision-making of young unmarried girls in Sri Lanka and India with regard to marriage and motherhood. Two sub-objectives further guided the research;

  I.   To explore cultural differences in the socialization process in Sri Lanka and India, particularly concerning the reinforcement of motherhood.
 II.   To examine culture-specific parenting practices that shape young girls' decision-making about marriage and motherhood in Sri Lanka and India.

In Sri Lanka and India, fertility rates have declined significantly over the past four decades. The World Bank (2022) reports that India's total fertility rate (TFR) has dropped from 4.5 in 1980 to 2.0 in 2020, and Sri Lanka's from 3.4 to 2.2 within the same timeframe. These figures suggest a broader socio-cultural shift in reproductive behavior, particularly among educated young women.

This study investigates how young female undergraduates in both countries perceive motherhood and how their perceptions intersect with broader themes such as their process of socialization and familial and cultural upbringing. The comparative approach enables the identification of country-specific nuances as well as regional trends that reflect broader transformations in South Asian gender roles and fertility behavior.

Literature Review

The social construction of motherhood has been a central theme in feminist and sociological literature. Scholars such as Adrienne Rich (1976)

distinguish between the "institution of motherhood" and the "experience of mothering," emphasizing how societal expectations shape the identity and role of mothers. In the South Asian contexts, motherhood is closely tied to religious duty, cultural continuity, and familial reputation (Dube, 2001). Patriarchal structures often reinforce the notion that a woman achieves full societal validation only through childbirth, particularly of male offspring (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Contemporary demographic studies highlight a marked decline in fertility rates in both India and Sri Lanka, driven by factors such as increased female education, urbanization, delayed marriage, and greater access to contraceptives (Bongaarts, 2017). Jayaraman, Mishra, and Arnold (2009) note that female literacy significantly correlates with reduced fertility, as educated women tend to marry later and are more likely to participate in the workforce. Moreover, they develop stronger autonomy in reproductive decisions.

Studies focused on South Asian youth (UNFPA, 2023) show a divergence in how traditional gender roles are internalized. Female students exposed to diverse educational environments are more likely to challenge conventional expectations and envision alternative life paths. Within Indian higher education, students in urban areas increasingly embrace egalitarian gender norms (Jeffery & Jeffery, 2006). In Sri Lanka, however, while educational attainment is high, cultural values surrounding motherhood remain relatively conservative, particularly in rural areas (Herath, 2015).

Sri Lankan-specific scholarship offers a nuanced understanding of how Buddhism, nationalism, and postcolonial identity shape gender expectations. Scholars such as Ranjini Obeyesekere (1990) and Kumari Jayawardena (1986) have examined the dual burden of cultural reverence and social control imposed on women through the idealization of motherhood. Jayawardena, in particular, identifies how nationalist discourse in Sri Lanka often co-opts women's reproductive roles to serve the interests of the state, linking fertility and moral citizenship.

More recent studies in Sri Lanka have also explored how maternal identities intersect with class and ethnicity. De Alwis (2002) critiques the way Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism frames motherhood as a patriotic duty, marginalizing Tamil and Muslim women's reproductive narratives. Meanwhile, work by Perera (2018) illustrates that urban Sri Lankan women are increasingly negotiating hybrid identities, balancing familial expectations with globalized feminist ideals.

Research by Dasgupta and Sharma (2019) suggests that the perception of motherhood is gradually shifting from a life-defining obligation to a personal choice influenced by socio-economic aspirations. This aligns with global feminist discourses that advocate for reproductive

autonomy and a decentering of motherhood from female identity (Ginsburg & Rapp, 1995). However, South Asian societies often exhibit a disjuncture between modern legal frameworks promoting gender equality and deep-seated cultural ideologies that valorize fertility.

The role of academic discipline as another form of socialization is another underexplored yet crucial variable. Students in social sciences tend to engage more critically with gender norms than those in technical or professional courses like STEM (Kabeer, 2005). Peer influence, access to gender-sensitive curricula, and participation in university forums and activism further reinforce this divergence. Literature also underscores the importance of family background and economic stability in shaping reproductive choices, with wealthier families affording their daughters greater freedom in delaying or even forgoing motherhood (Desai & Andrist, 2010).

This body of literature provides a strong foundation for the present research, which seeks to bridge demographic trends with lived experiences and sociocultural ideologies among young women in Sri Lanka and India. It contributes to the expanding field of youth reproductive studies by offering a comparative, empirical exploration grounded in both statistical evidence and cultural interpretation.

Methodology

Organized as a multi-sited research field, this study was conducted in arts, science, and management faculties in the University of Colombo in Sri Lanka and social science, computer science, and business administration faculties in the VET Institute of Arts and Sciences (Co-education) in Tamil Nadu, India.

This study has adopted a mixed-method design backed by a pseudo-longitudinal design. Following a random sampling method, quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered via Google Forms. The same Google form was distributed among the respondents in both countries. The target population included first- and fourth-year female undergraduates from both universities. In total, 300 students were surveyed in Sri Lanka and 248 in India. The survey included questions on the importance of motherhood, ideal age for childbirth, family and societal pressures, socialization process, reasons for delaying motherhood, career priorities, and the influence of educational environments. SPSS was employed for statistical analysis of survey responses.

Qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews with 20 students (12 from Sri Lanka and eight from India) and four focus group discussions (two in each country). Thematic analysis was used to interpret qualitative data.

The ethical clearance for the research was obtained through a committee established by the Centre for Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation in Social Policy (CEMRI) at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Results and Discussion

This comparative study investigated how young women in Sri Lanka and India navigate the complex interplay between familial and cultural upbringing and their evolving perceptions of motherhood in contexts of declining fertility. The findings show that while traditional cultural and religious frameworks continue to exert a strong influence, higher education, intergenerational negotiation, and career aspirations are reshaping reproductive attitudes in both societies. Importantly, these influences do not operate in isolation but intersect in ways that reveal both continuities and shifts in gender norms, reflecting the layered nature of social change in South Asia.

1. Cultural and Religious Influence on Motherhood Perceptions

Cultural and religious norms remain foundational in shaping motherhood ideals, embedding expectations within women's identities from early life. Across the sample, **75.3%** of Indian and **66%** of Sri Lankan respondents indicated that these factors influenced their perceptions of motherhood. In Sri Lanka, this was especially pronounced among students in Buddhist Studies and Sociology, where motherhood was framed as a moral and religious obligation tied to community respectability and even national identity (De Alwis, 2002; Jayawardena, 1986). As one participant explained, *"According to our religion, a woman has to become a mother. Otherwise, they will be excluded from society"* (In-depth interview data, 2025 – Sri Lanka).

In Tamil Nadu, Hindu traditions similarly frame motherhood as sacred, yet the narratives among urban and upper-middle-class students showed greater room for individual choice. This difference aligns with **modernization theory** (Inglehart & Baker, 2000), which predicts that education, urbanization, and exposure to global discourses reduce the normative rigidity of traditional gender roles. At the same time, **intersectionality** (Crenshaw, 1989) is crucial for understanding these differences: religious influence is not uniform for all but shaped by the intersection of caste, class, geography, and education.

These findings also resonate with the **Demographic Transition Model** (Bongaarts, 2017), which explains that fertility decline is accompanied by shifts in value systems. However, the persistence of cultural and religious ideals suggests that even in lower-fertility contexts, the symbolic value of motherhood remains deeply entrenched.

2. Education as an Influential Socialization Process

Higher education emerged as a critical site where perceptions of motherhood are either reinforced or challenged. In both contexts, university life not only delayed the timing of motherhood for many participants but also provided an arena for reinterpreting its meaning. The findings reflect **social constructionist perspectives** (Gergen, 1985), which conceptualize motherhood as an identity negotiated within institutional and cultural contexts, rather than an inevitable biological outcome.

Students pursuing advanced degrees frequently cited the difficulty of combining academic and maternal responsibilities. A Sri Lankan interviewee noted,

"If someone goes to MSc level and has a baby, it is very difficult to manage both" (In-depth interview data, 2025 – Sri Lanka).

For Arts and Social Sciences students in Sri Lanka, courses on gender, sociology, and critical cultural studies acted as catalysts for critical reflection.

"Sociology includes everything like religion, culture, gender. It has helped me understand issues related to motherhood more deeply" (In-depth interview data, 2025 – Sri Lanka).

Similarly, humanities students in India were more likely to question the centrality of motherhood, whereas students in business, science, and technology integrated it into longer-term life planning, often after establishing financial stability.

This disciplinary variation reflects **Bourdieu's habitus** (Bourdieu, 1984), whereby pre-existing dispositions shaped by family and culture interact with academic experiences to produce distinct orientations toward motherhood. Importantly, some participants emphasized that their views remained more strongly influenced by familial and cultural values than by educational content:

"Neither our disciplines nor our disciplinary specializations have discouraged us from becoming mothers" (FGD data, 2025 – Sri Lanka).

This highlights the limits of educational influence in contexts where familial and cultural norms are deeply internalized.

3. Familial Expectations and Intergenerational Dialogues

The family remains a central agent in shaping reproductive intentions, though the nature of this influence is highly variable. In India, **44.8%** of respondents reported experiencing direct family pressure to have children, compared to **33.3%** in Sri Lanka. This reflects broader patterns of family involvement in marriage and reproduction in South Asia (Uberoi, 2006).

In some households, especially in urban areas, intergenerational relationships have become sites of negotiation, with parents, particularly mothers, supporting delayed motherhood to prioritize education and career. One Sri Lankan participant recounted,

"My mother was forced into an early marriage, but she tells me to finish my studies first" (In-depth interview data, 2025 – Sri Lanka).

These narratives align with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991), which emphasizes how personal and intergenerational reflection can prompt individuals to reassess inherited norms.

However, in more conservative families, young women continue to navigate the **patriarchal bargain** (Kandiyoti, 1988), accepting traditional reproductive timelines in exchange for other forms of security and support. The **life course perspective** (Elder, 1994) is useful here, as it accounts for how familial influence shifts over time in response to both structural changes and individual life transitions.

4. Career Aspirations, Cultural Expectations, and Motherhood Decisions

Career ambitions play a decisive role in the timing and desirability of motherhood, often acting as a counterweight to traditional expectations. Consistent with **Rational Choice Theory** (Becker, 1981), many participants assessed motherhood in terms of opportunity costs, particularly in relation to professional advancement. In Sri Lanka, **53.2%** of respondents cited career as a primary reason for delaying motherhood, compared to **68.8%** in India. Workplace norms and gender discrimination amplified this trade-off in Sri Lanka, where participants frequently described structural incompatibility between career progression and motherhood:

"For me, career and financial independence take precedence over embracing motherhood" (In-depth interview data, 2025 – Sri Lanka).

Indian respondents, bolstered by more flexible family arrangements and growing urban employment opportunities, expressed greater confidence in balancing the two roles - **74.4%** believed they could do so successfully. However, even here, a majority (**62%**) preferred to establish careers before starting families.

These patterns reflect McDonald's Gender Equity Theory (2000), which posits that fertility declines when women enjoy greater educational and occupational opportunities but face limited institutional support for balancing work and family life. The absence of comprehensive childcare systems and flexible work policies in both countries reinforces delayed motherhood as a rational adaptation to existing structural constraints.

5. Emerging Narratives: Beyond Biological Motherhood and Redefining Care

A smaller but notable group of participants articulated alternative visions of care that moved beyond the expectation of biological motherhood. Some expressed a preference for caregiving in non-traditional forms, such as adoption.

These perspectives resonate with postmodern family theory (Stacey, 1996) and the ethics of care framework (Tronto, 1993), both of which acknowledge diverse forms of caregiving and challenge the tendency to conflate motherhood solely with biological reproduction. They also align with the **Second Demographic Transition** (Lesthaeghe, 2010), which associates delayed or foregone childbearing with post-materialist values emphasizing autonomy and self-fulfillment. The emergence of such narratives in both Sri Lanka and India indicates that the redefinition of care and kinship is no longer confined to Western contexts but is becoming a part of South Asia's evolving demographic landscape.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that socialization processes, familial guidance, and cultural upbringing strongly shape young women's perceptions of motherhood and decisions regarding marriage and childbearing in Sri Lanka and India. Cultural and religious norms continue to position motherhood as a central marker of womanhood; however, higher education, career aspirations, and exposure to globalized ideals are enabling young women to reinterpret these expectations and exercise greater autonomy in their reproductive choices.

The research highlights cultural variations in socialization: Indian students, particularly in urban and educated contexts, show greater flexibility in balancing motherhood with personal and professional goals, whereas Sri Lankan students encounter stronger patriarchal norms and more limited institutional support, reinforcing traditional timelines. Further, culture-specific parenting practices, ranging from intergenerational guidance to direct familial pressure, significantly influence young women's reproductive decisions. Supportive parental attitudes, especially of mothers who experienced early marriage, encourage delayed motherhood, while conservative households maintain expectations for earlier childbearing.

Overall, the findings reveal a dynamic negotiation between inherited cultural ideals and individual aspirations. Career priorities, educational experiences, and peer influences intersect with familial and cultural expectations, resulting in diverse reproductive intentions, including delayed, reduced, or non-biological forms of caregiving. This study contributes to understanding fertility decline in Sri Lanka and India by illustrating how

socialization and cultural upbringing continue to shape, yet are increasingly mediated by, young women's agency, providing important insights for policies supporting reproductive autonomy and gender equality.

Declaration for Human Participants: This study has been approved by the University of Colombo Ethics Review Committee, and the principles of the Helsinki Declaration were followed.

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