Introduction

The status of women in a social group is a matter of utmost importance as it influences not only the interests of women themselves, but also that of the other members of the family. It also affects the developmental issues of the society and the direction of social change. For these various reasons, the theme for International Women’s Day of 2014 was aptly stated as “equality for women is progress for all”. These concerns and awareness regarding women’s status have led to studies that focus on women’s situation in different social contexts.

Certain attributes about the concept ‘status of women’ have been highlighted by authors who have studied the position of women in society. Firstly, status is a relative term; it can be the status of women in relation to men within the same social setup or the status of women in relation to another set of women across different social systems. Mason (1986) suggests that the term ‘status of women’ can be applied to refer to differences among women in power, prestige or resources. Secondly, the term status of women is also a multi-dimensional concept. This means that there are more than one dimension for measuring the status of women and a single dimension cannot provide a complete picture of the wellbeing of women nor can high scores in one dimension guarantee similar higher scores in other dimensions. Finally, status of women is also multi-locational, that is, it occurs in more than one location and it can vary across different social locations. It is therefore important to specify whether women acquire greater control over their lives within the family, neighborhood, society or in a political sphere.
According to Peplau et al. (1999:26), socio-cultural analysis of the status of women attempts to identify ways in which ‘specific features of a cultural context influence specific aspects of the lives of its women and men’. Hence, any assessment of the status has to start from the social frame work including social structure, cultural norms and value system and their influence on the behavior of both men and women. This will determine their roles in society and their patterned response to the expectations of the social institutions and ideologies.

Kinship system is an important social institution that can influence the status of women. Patrilineal and matrilineal communities are two ideal types, where the status of women can differ based on lineage, residence, inheritance and authority. The presence of matrilineal communities which follow a set of gender relations different from their patrilineal counterparts underlines the fact that the status of women is contextual and multi-locational and depends on cultural patterns, social institutions and economic structure of both family and society.

Dube (1988) observes that kinship systems are not merely a moral code, but they can influence the formation of family and household, residence at marriage, resource distribution including inheritance, and obligation and responsibilities of individual members of the group, including women. When compared to patrilineal women, there are a number of factors that act in favour of matrilineal women. In a patrilineal descent group, upon marriage a woman typically becomes a de facto member of her husband’s kin group. She does not belong to her father’s house, while her membership in the husband’s house is conditional to her proper behavior and at the same time she is
controlled by the family in every aspect of her life. In addition to this, the cultural norms of the patrilineal social system do not provide women a role in inheriting property.

In matrilineal case, however, a woman retains the membership in her natal kin group throughout her life and her children acquire their kinship status from her and not from their father. Women in matrilineal societies have a role in inheriting property, though it may not be actually in their control. As the lineage is traced through the female, her status in matrilineal system is more than merely symbolic. Finally, post-marital residence being matrilocal, the wife is embedded in a localised group of female kin, whose support she can expect at the time of crises.

For these reasons kinship system can be considered as a resource that can influence the status of women. Rae Lesser Blumberg’s (1984) ‘General Theory of Gender Startification’, while emphasising the importance of economic resources in determining the status of women, also considers kinship system as a condition that is crucial in explaining why women tend to have higher or lower economic power in different groups. Hyman Rodman’s (1972) ‘Theory of Resources in Cultural Context’ also states that the larger cultural context in which the marital relationship exists is as important as the economic contribution of the couples in influencing the marital power and sometimes even in overriding the effects of resources. These theories imply that in concert with economic factors, cultural and normative values of the society can act as mediating agents in shaping the status of women and determining how much or what kind of influence they can wield.
The status of women in Kerala has been of matter of interest among academicians and policy makers. The present scenario of Kerala, with high female literacy, better health status of women and involvement of women in social and political activities has been attributed to the women-friendly matrilineal kinship norms and property inheritance once enjoyed by the women in the state. This, in course of time, is believed to have created a favourable social attitude towards women’s issues. There were several matrilineal groups in Kerala, one among them being the Mappila Muslims of Malabar. Though several of the matrilineal groups have moved away from many of its characteristics such as matriloca lity and matrilineage, Mappilas of Malabar still adhere to it. With the main backbone of matrilineal system, i.e., the property inheritance, giving way to Sharia law or Islamic law of inheritance, it is a matter of curiosity as to how and why this system continues to survive among Mappilas of Malabar. At the same time both matriliny and patriliny co-exist among the Mappila Muslims of Malabar thereby providing an opportunity to study the status of women belonging to same religious, social and geographic backgrounds but from two different kinship systems.

The works on matrilineal Muslim women in Malabar and Muslim women in general in Kerala focus on one or other aspect of their status such as education, fertility performances, age at marriage, polygyny and other issues related to Muslim personal law and women. Nevertheless, studies that concentrate on the multi-dimensional nature of status of the Mappila women in Malabar are few and far between. It is significant to recognise the fact that women tend to fare differently with regard to various dimensions of the status of women. Therefore, the study acknowledges the need to look into the status of women separately at macro and micro levels. Apart from the issues related to the
status of women, the present research also made an attempt to analyse the perspective of matrilineal women towards their kinship systems with special focus on the causes of resilience and transformation of matriliny among matrilineal Mappilas.

Even in this age of modernisation, a patrilineal society is criticised for its treatment of women and their exclusion from social and economic resources. Under these circumstances it becomes utmost important to find out whether the existing matrilineal group is actually beneficial for its women members. The present research attempts to find answers to these questions by carrying out a comparative analysis of the socio-cultural status of Mappila Muslim women in the matrilineal and patrilineal families of Malabar and thereby find out whether the general assumption that matriliny favours women is a reality or myth.

**Objectives**

1. To find out the access to and control of economic resources by matrilineal and patrilineal women

2. To assess the macro level status of Muslim women in Malabar with special reference to kinship.

3. To evaluate and compare the micro level autonomy enjoyed by matrilineal and patrilineal women.

4. To examine the factors that can affect the life options available to matrilineal and patrilineal women.
5. To compare the matrilineal and patrilineal women’s culturally determined notion of the acceptance of girl child and thereby appraise their socio-cultural status.

6. To examine the reasons for resilience and transformation of matriliney among Mappilas of Malabar.

**Methodology**

Kinship system and its related customs and norms, play an important role in determining the status of women. The present research made an attempt to find out how kinship systems influenced the status of women, by carrying out a comparative analysis of socio-cultural status of married Muslim women from matrilineal and patrilineal families of Malabar. Based on this analysis, the study tried to illustrate the sensitivity of status variation within various social contexts and gender norms.

The universe of the study is the married Mappila Muslim women from the districts of Kozhikode and Kannur. In these districts, both matrility and patrility co-exist among Mappila Muslims. The sample consisted of 250 matrilineal women and 250 patrilineal women, who were married and were 25 to 54 years of age. The ICDS Survey Register 2009-2010 served as the sample frame for drawing the sample.

With the help of an interview schedule, data regarding the socio-cultural status of matrilineal and patrilineal women, at macro and micro levels, were collected. These findings were supplemented with informal talks, field observations, interviews with experts and secondary sources. The filled-in schedules were edited, coded, analysed and interpreted using SPSS. The theoretical frame work of the study were drawn from

**Findings**

The focus of the research was married Muslim women belonging to matrilineal and patrilineal families of Malabar. For the purpose of the study, the sample was grouped into three age groups 25 to 34 (younger), 35 to 44 (middle) and 45 to 54 (upper). The analysis showed that the respondents belonging to the three age groups were almost evenly distributed. The educational performance and participation in employment of married Mappila Muslim women among both the kinship groups was in line with the literature survey, which suggests the general backwardness of Muslims with respect to education and employment. With regard to the marital status, those belonging to the categories of ‘divorced’ ‘separated’ and ‘in polygynous marriage’ were less than 2%. About 92.8% of women were presently married and were in a monogamous relationship, while the rest were widows. A Standard of Living Index proposed by Roy, Jayachandran and Banerjee (1999) was used as a proxy measure for the economic status of women. The analysis revealed that out of the total sample, 42% belong to lower, 42.4% to middle and 15.6% to upper standard of living.

The study draws its main theoretical framework from Blumberg’s (1984) ‘A General Theory of Gender Stratification’, where she states that the key factor for determining the status of women is their economic power. The analysis in the present study showed that very few women had an opportunity for economic power through participation in
employment. Hence the present research focused on other sources of economic power that women in Kerala generally have access to such as the natal inheritance, dowry and economic gifts from husbands. It was found that, among the three forms of economic resources considered, it was access to dowry that was more evident than the other two forms of economic resources among both patrilineal and matrilineal samples. Chi square tests revealed that except in the case of gifts from husbands, there was a relation between kinship and access to resources, thereby supporting the hypothesis that there is a difference in the matrilineal and patrilineal women’s access to economic resources. However, the results also indicated that though the access to economic resources varied with kinship system, it was not as expected, with matrilineal women being in an advantageous position compared to patrilineal women. Only 23.6% of matrilineal respondents had inherited natal property, while 53.6% of patrilineal respondents had access to natal property. At the same time, 37.2% of matrilineal sample and 66.4% of patrilineal sample had received dowry at the time of marriage. The study also revealed that the higher reporting of natal inheritance among patrilineal sample was attributed to the practice of considering dowry as a pre-mortem inheritance among the patrilineal Mappilas of Malabar. At the same time, though dowry was also present among matrilineal Mappilas, it was not considered as a source of inheritance for women, but as a payment made to the husband and his family as a part of arranging a marriage. The level of inheritance from the husband was low among both matrilineal and patrilineal groups.

The status of women in the research was studied in relation to the ‘Life Options’ that were available to matrilineal and patrilineal Mappila Muslim women of Malabar. According to Blumberg (1984), ‘Life Options’ are a set of measurable opportunities and
freedom available to women as a result of relative economic power. As kinship system is considered as a source of economic and social resource, attempt was made to find out whether life options of women varied with their kinship system. Life options in this research have been operationalised to include women’s relative freedom in terms of marriage, control over fertility, access to higher education and employment and autonomy. Considering the multi-dimensional nature of the status of women, life options were analysed separately as macro level life options and micro level life options.

The analysis revealed that there was difference between matrilineal and patrilineal women with regard to various macro level life options. The mean age at marriage for the total sample was 17.10. At the same time, the mean age at marriage of matrilineal sample was 17.27, which was slightly higher than the total sample as well as that of patrilineal sample which was 16.94. Majority of the total sample was married between 15 to 18 years. All these figures point to the fact that the age at marriage for the total sample was below 18 years, which is considered as the legal age for marriage in the country. There was also a slight difference with regard to the age at first birth and number of surviving children. Matrilineal women also had a slightly higher mean age at first birth, i.e., 19.67, as compared to that of patrilineal women, whose mean age at first birth was 19.53. The mean number of surviving children for matrilineal sample was 2.92 which were more than that for the patrilineal sample with 2.83. With regard to contraceptive use, while almost half of the matrilineal sample agreed to using or having used some form of intervention, only 32.8% of patrilineal sample said the same.
The data regarding the level of education revealed that majority of the total sample (79.4%) have ‘below pre-degree’ or ‘plus-two’ level of education. The lack of enrolments for higher education is evident among both the kinship groups, though it is more matrilineal women than patrilineal women who have degree and above qualification. As employment status is considered as an important macro level status indicator, it was included in the hypothesis testing, despite the rate of employment being almost negligible among both the matrilineal and patrilineal women. The statistical analysis of all the six macro level variables showed that except for the contraceptive use, the difference in the macro level status of matrilineal and patrilineal women was not significant, and hence the hypothesis that there is difference in the macro level status of matrilineal and patrilineal women is rejected.

As there was no difference in the macro level status of Mappila Muslim women belonging to two different kinship systems, an attempt was made to find out whether there is a relationship between the micro level status of women and kinship system. Autonomy is a concept employed to assess women’s status at the micro level. This study made use of three important dimensions of autonomy that will possibly reflect the influence of kinship system, particularly the residence pattern. They include economic decision making autonomy, freedom of movement i.e., whether women need permission before going to various places and freedom from spousal violence, both psychological and physical.
The data disclosed that more matrilineal women had given positive answers regarding their household economic autonomy than patrilineal women. Women from the matrilineal group also enjoyed greater freedom of movement than those from the patrilineal group. Although the number of women reporting physical violence was low among both the groups, it was the patrilineal women who had experienced more spousal violence than matrilineal women. The analysis made it evident that the association between kinship and every indicator of micro level status or autonomy was statistically significant.

The status of women tends to be influenced by several variables such as present age, level of education of the respondents, standard of living and rural-urban settings. Hence an attempt was made to find out how the macro level and micro level (or autonomy) life options enjoyed by matrilineal and patrilineal women varied with regard to these aforementioned independent variables. For this purpose life option score was computed separately for macro level and micro level life options with the statistical procedure of data transformation.

Statistical analysis using ANOVA showed that there was a significant difference in the macro level life option score of matrilineal and patrilineal women based on their age and education. At the same time though there was variance in the macro level life option score with regard to standard of living and rural-urban difference, these differences were not statistically significant. With regard to micro level life options, statistical analysis of variance showed that both matrilineal and patrilineal women belonging to upper standard of living and those having higher level of education enjoyed higher level of autonomy. Age did not have much role in affecting micro level life options of matrilineal and
patrilineal women. Rural-urban difference on the other hand seemed to have an influence in the autonomy of matrilineal women; however its role in the autonomy of patrilineal women was not significant.

The influence of property inheritance on the autonomy of matrilineal and patrilineal women revealed that there was a difference in how property inheritance influenced the autonomy of women in two different cultural contexts. Among both the kinship groups, the mean score indicated that women who had inherited property were more autonomous than women who did not have any inherited property. However, despite more patrilineal women reporting natal property inheritance in the present study, the ‘t’ test revealed that, among the matrilineal group this difference was statistically significant and among the patrilineal sample, it was not significant. This again suggests the importance of cultural context in determining the influence of economic resources on status of women.

Among the various independent variables considered, education was the only variable that had a consistent variance with macro and micro level status of women within both the kinship. It was found that there is difference between matrilineal and patrilineal women in each educational group, with the former enjoying higher macro and micro life option score than the latter. A finding that needs to be highlighted is that patrilineal women who had ‘degree and above’ education, enjoyed the highest macro and micro life option score within the patrilineal sample.

The fact that the status of women in the society tends to influence the status and opportunities of the girl child made it essential to probe into the preference for girl child among the matrilineal and patrilineal Mappila Muslims of Malabar. In order to find out
this, respondents were asked about their view of gender preference in their community, their preference for their first born and finally a hypothetical question as to whether they will prefer a girl as their only child. The difference between matrilineal and patrilineal sample was evident with more patrilineal respondents expressing their opinion in favour of boy child. The chi-square tests for all the three questions showed $P<0.05$ and hence supported the hypothesis that there is an association between the kinship and preference for girl child among the Mappila Muslims of Malabar.

In order to probe further into the preference for a child of a particular sex as the only child, respondents were asked their reasons for their preference. The most important reason cited by matrilineal and patrilineal women for their preference for boy as their only child was the economic security they were looking forward from the sons and not expecting from the daughters. This finding is validated by Cain’s (1993) theoretical formulation for patriarchal societies where he observed that one of the main reasons for son preference is economic dependence of women over men. In such a situation sons were seen as potential risk insurance against calamities such as widowhood, divorce or even ill health of the husband. While it was his economic worth that favoured boy child, the girl child was preferred for her cultural worth. A girl child was valued by matrilineal women for her matrilocal residence and the role she plays in continuing the lineage. At the same time girl child was seen as a source of affection by patrilineal women. This falls in line with the conceptual frame work by Kishor (1993), which suggests that children are valued for their economical and cultural worth.
Apart from the issues related to the status of women, the present research also made an attempt to analyse the perspectives of matrilineal women towards their kinship systems, with the special focus on the causes of resilience and transformation of matriliny among matrilineal Mappilas.

According to Murdock (1949), the disintegration of matriliny is closely related to patrilocal residence as this involves social participation with father’s patrilineal kin. This in the long run can bring an end to matrilineal descent, another key feature that is keeping the matrilineal kinship system alive. Hence an attempt was made to find out whether there are any changes in the preference for endogamous marriages among Mappila women by asking the respondents whether they prefer exogamous marriages, i.e., whether they will marry off their children, both sons and daughters, outside their kinship group. Around 80% of matrilineal women said that they will not marry off their daughters to kinship system other than their own. Similarly, 67.2% of them also disagreed to marry off their sons to a patrilineal system. The main reason for not preferring exogamous marriages is that they were not accustomed to a kinship system other than their own. Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) ‘Doxa’ helps to comprehend how matrilineal women have internalized matrilineal culture to the extent that they choose not to move beyond it and hence facilitate the continuance of matriliny among Mappilas of Malabar.

About 90.4% of matrilineal women in the present study felt that their men do not resent matriliny and its features. However, men’s opinion towards matrilineal system varied according to age and socio-economic status. It was seen that while men who were heads of the extended matrilocal households and those who were living in the wives’ house
without any other co-brothers, did not have any complaints about their uxorilocality status. It was the men who were still residing in a traditional *taravad* system or in a household with several co-brothers, as well as those burdened by the economic issues related to matrilocality, who had troubles with adjusting with the system.

**Conclusion**

Kinship and family support can act as an important social resource for women to enhance her status. In the present scenario, where women confront patriarchal rules of the family and society, gender egalitarian norms and ideologies can prove beneficial to them. It is apparent that matrilineal Mappila Muslims of Malabar have realized this fact. Hence there is an attempt to bring about a harmonious blend of matrilineal principles and patriarchal Islam so that the features of matriliny like matrilocality can continue unhampered. In other words, matrilineal features have been adjusted with the requirements of religion and explained to fit into the religious framework of Islam.

The present study clearly points towards the fact that the status of women is multidimensional and varies with context. While there was not much difference with regard to macro level status indicators between matrilineal and patrilineal women, the analysis makes it evident that there is a clear association between kinship and micro level status indicators with, matrilineal Mappila Muslim women faring better than patrilineal Mappila Muslim women in Malabar. It can be suggested from these findings that there is some reality in the general assumption that ‘matriliny favours women’ and it is not totally a ‘myth’. This directly points towards the need to challenge the repressing gender norms of the society inorder to improve the status of women. The study also brings attention to the fact that more comprehensive strategies involving the community