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ATTITUDE TOWARDS FAMILY SIZE, SEX PREFERENCE, DECISION-MAKING AND FAMILY PLANNING IN SRI LANKA

by

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Abstract

A research was carried out to test the assumption that parents dimensions of values for wanted and ideal number of children depend on their attitudes born of their socio-economic status and conditions. The subjects were fifty four rural couples in Ratnapura District and fourty eight urban couples in Colombo district. The family size of the Sri Lankan couples is determined by their socio-economic conditions and the sex preference and decision making was affected by the country's cultural background. The present study was supported by findings of similar studies carried out in Sri Lanka.

One section of this article is devoted to explain the theories of attitude which would be relevant to the analysis of the responses given, in the study.

1.1 Theoretical framework of attitude

Attitude has been defined in number of ways. Each of the traditional definitions emphasises some aspect of an attitude and is therefore slightly different from another. G. W. Allport (1935) proposed that "an attitude is a mental and neural stage of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's responses to all objects and situations with which it is related". He saw an attitude primarily as a behavioural factor.

In contrast Doob (1947) defined an attitude as "an implicit, drive-producing responses considered socially significant in the individual society. He emphasized what an attitude is, rather than its implications. His statement did not include overt behaviour, although it contained a clear assumption than how an attitude would affect an individuals acts. This definition was derived from a learning or stimuls responses tradition and it conceptualized an attitude as simply another response, an implicit rather than an explicit one.

Today a third definition is very commonly accepted, to some extent incorporating the other two. An attitude toward any given object, idea or person is an enduring system with a cognitive component, a feeling component and an action tendency. The cognitive component consists of the belief about the attitude object and the feeling component is equalent to Doob's affective component, which is to say that there is some emotional feeling,

connected with the belief ; and the action tendency is what Allport referred to as the readiness to respond in a particular way. For example parent's attitude towards children might include the knowledge that they would be of benefit, during their old age ; there is an associated feeling of attraction and liking, and a behavioural tendency to be sincere to him and pay much attention etc. This is the definition with which most social psychologists today seem to be moderately content.

We regard an attitude as a collection of thoughts, beliefs and knowledge. (congnitive component), and as including positive and negative evaluations of feelings (affective components) and relating to and describing a central theme or object–the subject of the attitude. This cluster of knowledge and feeling tends to produce certain pattern of behaviour, which is the outcome of the attitude of any individual.

The totality of behaviour could be evaluated in the light of these attitudes But we do not expect to expand further the theoretical framework here, because the above description gives a sufficiently clear view of what an attitude is. As mentioned earlier, this paper would examine the respondent's attitudes towards their family size, sex preferences and their awareness of family planning methods.

Knowledge-attitude-practice (KAP) studies have shown a wide gap between what couples perceive as the optimal number of children what they would like to have and what they actually do have.

In most Asian countries, surveys have revealed not the whole of what the actual situation is, and our present study is not dis-similar in outcome.

The ideal number of children as conceived by our respondents is also less than the actual number of children living.

This has led to varied interpretations, and one of the most popularly accepted is that the household lacked the affective ability to control fertility because the couples were unaware of the methods. To a considerable extent this may be true, but other possible mediating variables have not been adequately-examined. In case the ideal family size is less than the actual, several explanations may be put forward : inability to control family size through contraception. 'Ideal' could refer simply to the number of children, without regard to sex composition. Thus, it is different from the actual size which according to opinion of many families should have a certain number of male children. In traditional Asian societies, as found in most Sri Lankan rural areas, sons are highly desired as they are associated with the values. Continuation of family name, economic assets and symbol of a husband's virility.

A study in India (Wyan and Gordon 1971) for instance, revealed that families that like sons or that have a high propotion of daughters tend, other things being equal, to have more children ; and families that have a high proportion of sons tend to have lower fertility. Documentation of superstitious beliefs in some Asian countries (China, Japan, Korea) showed that a number of them were conceived in association with the desire to have male children (Castra, 1972).

Another possible explanation for the disparity between the ideal and the actual is that, generally the subject of sex is still "taboo" as a conversational topic, especially among women, there being a prevalent impression of it being unclear and offensive. Consequently, a small ideal family size may be reported to an interviewer to prevent any inference on his part, of over indulging in the sex act. Still another possibility is the propensity of the Asian couple to please, to the extent that it would say what it perceives as that which the interviewer would like to hear. In the case of the ideal being the same as actual it has been suggested to rationalize the existing situation.

Now we can summarize our results regarding the particular section in the present study. It is obvious that the number of children people consider to be the ideal and the number they actually have is likely to depend upon values ascribed to children by their society and its stages of development. More over, certain discrepancies can be expected, due to the reasons mentioned, between the ideal and the actual number of children, especially, in the less developed countries like Sri Lanka. As a country modernizes and its living standard levels rise, such discrepanceies tend to diminish gradually.

In Sri Lanka, the mean ideal number of children for the urban family was about 2.8 and for the rural family it was about 3.8, and it was found that the average family size in Sri Lanka was about 3 in our samples. The two-child family is somewhat less favoured, for the reason, that if one would die only the other will remain, and single-child family is considered unfortunate for the parents as well as the child and preferred to have sex ratio in the family, that is the probability of having children in both sexes. This factor was greatly emphasized by the respondents in both socio-economic groups

2. Family size and sex preference

It is suprizing that family size has not often been treated as an important variable in research on child development. What is the effect of the number of siblings of an individual child ? Or, more important, what are the effect of the sex and age of the others on him ? This issue is dealt with in part in the research on birth order, but few studies have been designed to permit an assessment of family size.

Thompson (1970) and Clausen and Clausen (1973) provide excellent reviews of the effects of family size on parents and children. Both reviews after examining the existing evidence, stressed the need for better research designs to achieve more conclusive results. It appears that children from smaller families generally perform better in a variety of areas related to verbal ability, perhaps, because of more frequent interaction with adults. Measured I. Q. for instance, tend to be higher in smaller families, even when they are controlled by other variables such as socio-economic status are controlled. Findings on other aspects, such as the effect of family size on social adjustment, are much less clear, although the weight of evidence points to more favourable outcomes for children in smaller families. A particular difficulity in revealing interpretations of the findings in this area is that, the observed effect on children can be attributed either to the difference in the number of sibilngs or to the differences in the type of parents who chose to have large or small families. Most of the psychological research on family size has been conducted in the United States and Europe. It seems reasonable to suppose, that effects might be quite different in societies with different type of family structure of different child-rearing practices of family size.

Lieberman (1970) wrote a more selective review of the effect of family size with a psychiatric orientation. A review from the pediatric viewpoint, dealing with physical and intellectual development of the child as well as maternal health and family welfare, has been provided by Wray (1971). These articles also concluded that, on balance, the effect of large number of children or close-spacing of children are undesirable, but again the research, can not be considered conclusive in so far as the effect of family size is concerned.

As shown earlier the ideal number of children that a family should have depends upon the values ascribed to children by each society and the wanted and desired number of children depend upon, the parent's age and the number of years they have been married. We found in previous studies (Bandaranayaka, 1980) that results are, highly significant for the wanted number of children and on the dimensions of values. There were significant differences between urban and rural groups about the values and the number of children they prefered to have. There were significant chi-square value for the ideal and wanted number of children they preferred to have. There were significant differences on various dimensions of values and the number of children preferred by the respondents of various socio-economic groups. Rural respondents, as opposite to the urban, thought that more children would be an economic and emotional asset. Urban respondents evaluated children for their contribution to family cohesiveness and development purposes than rural respondents and preferred to have small families. As reported in the present study, the mean number of living children for urban and rural was about 2.8 and 4 respectively. Respondents were asked about their expectations for another child and the number of children wanted. Results reflect different numbers of children wanted for different socio-economic groups, owing to various reasons

based on social changes that have taken place in the urban and rural social context. The results are shown in table 1.1. Most of the respondents desired to have more children. About 31 per cent of the total sample did not desire to have more children, and wives more than husbands desired to have more children than they do have.

The wanted number of children for urban is 3.3, it is 4.1 for rural and 3.6 for husbands and 3.8 for wives. The ideal number of children was less than the number of children wanted for both socio-economic groups. (2.8 and 3.8 respectively) ; for the total sample was 3.3. The difference between the ideal and wanted for urban group was more significant. (t = 16.96) than for the rural group (t = 10.3). Female responses are significantly different from the male group. (t = 13.25, and t = 9.8 respectively). It was

TABLE 1.1 : Measures of family size (mean of living, wanted, desired and ideal number of children for SES groups)

Measures	Urban	Rural	Male	Female	All
Number of living children or actual	2.8	4.0	3.4	3.4	3.4
Number of wanted children	3.3	4.1	3.6	3.8	3.7
Desired number of children	2.9	4.4	3.7	3.8	3.8
Ideal number of children (—)	2.8	3.8	3.3	3.4	3.3
Difference between ideal and wanted	0.5	0.3£	0.3£	0.4£	0.4£
Difference between living and wanted	0.5£	0.1^{+}	0.2^{+}	0.4£	0.3

Note : * 31 percent not answered
($^{+}$) 3 perecnt not answered
£ significant at zero level
$^{+}$ significant at .01 level

found significant also for the ideal and the wanted number of children for the total sample (t = 24.8). This difference might be due to the varying capability of rearing children and the values ascribed to children by parents. Some respondents have given an idealized number of children but owing to their

low economic conditions they wish to have a limited number of children. There were some rural respondents who have mentioned a comparatively large number of children as their ideal as opposed to urban respondents in general. That is associated with such value as continuation of family name and economic assets. This is suggestive of the fact that fertility motivations among the less affluent sub-groups were supressed by living conditions. That is, they wished to have large families but they rather unwillingly had to control the number of children due to their living conditions. This is much more applicable to urban respondents than the rural. Their dimensions of values were significantly different from the rural and they prefered to have small families due to the changes taking place in society.

There were significant differences among respondents for the living number and the wanted number of children. It was most significant for urban and female groups, than (at .01) for rural and male groups. ($t = 2.88$) and $t = 2.86$ respectively).

As far as sex preference is concerned it seems that, most of the respondents of rural and male groups preferred to have sons rather than daughters. But not so the urban respondents whose percentage preferences for girls equal that of boys. We found in early studies ; (Liberman 1972) that urban respondents wanted children for the happiness of the family more than for any other reason, recording no sex preference ; but as noted in the previous studies (Stiernborg, 1975), rural respondents belong to traditional social norms and culture and they preferred to have sons as their heirs as well as for the benefit and the welfare of the family. Table 1.2 shows the sex preferences of the respondents. Most of the socio-economic groups, anyway preferred to have sons (42) rather than daughters, 48 percent of the rural sample prefered sons like the male group. But it was found that most of the urban respondents were rather reluctant to state their preference for sons unlike the rural respondents who willingly stated that they would like to have daughters too.

TABLE 1.2 : Sex preference (percentage of respondents regarding preference for sons and daughters)

Preference	Urban	Rural	Male	Female	All
Daughters	30	13	17	25	21
Sons	35	48	48	36	42
No descrimination	34	37	34	38	36

These preferences are the outcome of beliefs or values ascribed to children. The dependence on children as a source of benefit to the parents, the emotional cognition or behavioural attitude towards them, individual object values, etc., have a bearing on the values for children.

Family size is also dependant on these attitude components. When there is a pattern in these values or a similarity among some of them, parents tend to share these value systems or attitudes. When they apply such values to the conduct of others they give expression to a social norm. The behaviour of any social group is determined by these norms, and hence their importance in the social processes. There is evidence that, urban respondents do not desire large families and that the rural respondents are not certain about the size of their family, although they favour larger families than the urban respondents.

1.3 Decision making and family planning

The decision making process with regard to fertility behaviour is not so far sufficiently well understood. Many family planning programmes have assumed that the wife is naturally the target audience, so that efforts at gaining family planning acceptance have been focussed on her. There is, however, increasing evidence on the pattern of communication between husband and wife that appears to warrant a reassessment of this assumption.

In a Korean study of the role of the husband is family planning behaviour (Kim and Leo, 1973), it was found that a husband's co-operation in the task of family planning, as perceived by his wife, is significantly interrelated with her contraceptive practice, her knowledge about and the attitude towards family planning, and the communication family planning activity co-operate in family planning were found to be more willing to have contraceptive experience, and has favourable attitude towards family planning. The study also revealed that women whose husbands strongly support family planning but whose own attitudes are unfavourable have higher adoption rates than women who are favourable, but those husbands show less co-operation.

Studies in other countries yielded similar results. This is not surprising becasue as mentioned earlier, the family structure has an authoritarian character, with the husband as the recognized head of the family. As previously indicated the desire for children is not only economically based, but could also stem from socio-psychological considerations such as male dominance and the image of manhood and prestige that it provides for the husband.

Significantly in many KAP studies conducted in Asian countries, the socio-culture prestige of husbands favouring family planning was often less than that of the wives. In a Phillippine survey, for instance, it was found that more females (85 percent) than males (63 percent) approved of family planning, with almost one third of the males expressing "no opinion" on the subject. (Francisco et al, 1970). In Indonesia, a study revealed a tendency for males to want more children than females. (Indonesia planned parenthood association, 1968).

Many Asian couples have what Rainwater (1965) has termed segregated conjugal role relationship in which the predominant pattern of marital life involves separate and different activities of husband and wife. Such couples tend to emphasize division of labour in the family rather than the solidarity based or inter-changeability of roles, activities, or the identification with and the empathy towards others activities and interests. Thus decision to have children has implications that fall within the framework of the husband's role in the family that of looking after its goals and economic well-being.

Kuthila (1970) referred to these very same factors when he identified three intervening variables in husband-wife communication. Traditionalism, dichotimizing of sex roles and authoritarianisms. Traditions have imposed an autocratic relaionship between the spouses and dichotomization of sex role which called for male dominance. All of these are related to the decision making processes.

One of the most recent studies on husband-wife relationship and family planning in Hong-Kong reveals that women who communicate frequently with their husbands about various matters have and desire fewer children than other women. Also, women who have more authority and those that make joint decisions with their husbands have a smaller number of children and also a smaller ideal family size than women whose husbands are the sole decision makers. (Mitchell, 1972)

In the present study the respondents were asked about their decision making and their knowledge and practice of family planning methods. Decision making categories were rather wider than limiting to the family planning and it was inquired about the social and economic matters relevent to their family life. In our sample, most of the decisions have been taken by both husband and wife as for example ,about the use of contıaceptives (82%, urban) and (68%, rural) and the number of children that they should have (87 percent urban and 75 percent rural). Other decisions regarding, for instance, jobs for husband-wife, construction or purchase of house and marketing are also similarly taken by both husband and wife. Our results are supported by the findings of Kim and Lee's (1973) study in Korea, and Mitchell's (1972) study in Hong Kong. Their results confirm the findings of the present study of urban results than rural responses, as the urban sample had joint decision as well as small families than rural sample. These results revealed that our respondents husband and wives were constantly in communication irrespective of their social conditions. (see table 1.3) In a categorization based on race and religion it was seen that in Sinhalese Buddhist families, the husband was the recognized head of the family, and his decisions carry a greater weight than those of the wife, although they were in constant communication, as in all groups. This does not imply that these prevailed an number of status between the husband and wife as far as all affairs were concerned.

Hence it can be said that the decisions of Sri Lankan families about the number of children fall with the framework of the husband-wife role of looking after the family goals and economic well-being. The previous studies (Clausen, 1973) reflected that both socio-economic groups and emphasized the various dimensions of values for having children. All respondents were motivated to have children in accordance with certain parental values. The findings of the family planning knowledge attitude towards the acceptance of such techniques, reports in their range of acceptance and it implied that their approval of such methods of family planning. It was seen that about 81% of urban and 75% of rural respondents knew about family planning and acceptance and the use of the various techniques prescribed. 83% of urban and 63% rural respondents agreed to accept those techniques. (see table 1.4) These findings reveal that all respondents had shown a favourable attitude towards family planning methods.

TABLE 1.3 : Decision making (percentage of respondents)

Type of decision	Indicator	Urban	Rural	Husband	Wife
Purchase of house hold requirement	Wife alone	02	03	01	03
	Husband alone	06	15	18	03
	Husband-wife	90	80	79	91
	Do not know	01	—	—	*
Job for wife husband	WA	07	05	02	09
	HA	35	08	04	32
	H+W	45	48	49	45
	D.K.	13	12	13	12
Use of contraceptives	WA	02	—	*	*
	HA	03	07	03	06
	H+W	82	68	81	68
	D.K.	12	24	13	23
Number of children desired	WA	06	05	02	08
	HA	02	04	05	*
	H+W	87	75	81	80
	D.K.	04	14	09	09
Purchase of a house	WA	05	01	04	01
	HA	03	16	09	10
	H+W	01	74	78	86
	D.K.	—	07	—	*

* less than one percent

These findings are confirmed by the Stiernborg study (1975). Even though the parents had a good knowledge about these techniques their acceptance of them in practice fall down due to some socio-psychological considerations such as male dominance, and image of manhood etc. These factors affecting to get the results such as whose husbands strongly support family planning but whose own attitudes are unfavourable have higher adoption rates than women who are unfavourable but whose husbands are less in co-operation.

TABLE 1.4 : Family planning-knowledge and acceptance (percentage of respondents who were aware of the techniques and the range of acceptance)

Knowledge	Urban	Rural	Male	Female	All
Yes	81	75	80	76	78
No	18	24	19	23	21
Acceptance					
in strong agreement	54	39	50	42	46
in moderate agreement	29	24	26	26	26
in moderate disagreement	08	12	11	08	10
in strong disagreement	07	16	06	17	12
Independent	01	07	03	04	04

Even the first report of world fertility survey (WFS) has been useful in providing some interpretations. This is superbly documented in a paper by Sir Maurice Kendall (1979). The success of family planning programmes in the Asia and the Pacific region can be seen in the wide-spread knowledge of contraceptive methods. The future fertility preferences also indicate that on the average more than half of the exposed women do not want and additional child. This is suggestive of potential demand for family planning services. A dramatic decline in fertility has already begun in many countries of the region. This is associated with the practice of family planning methods and attitude. These practice variables and their influence in the 9 surveyed countries of the region are summarized in figure 1.1. It is possible to get a visual view of the KAP gap and its associated level of fertility decline. It seems that our findings are supported by the WFS results related to Sri Lanka.

According to the findings, the percentage of all groups who have heard of contraceptive methods is about 78 percent from the total sample, and 80 percent of males and 76 percent of females in both socio-economic groups.

We can summarize the findings presented so far on family size, sex—preference, decision-making and attitude towards family planning. The following points deserve emphasis.

First, wanted family size ranged from 3.3 to 4.1 children per family among value of children respondents in Sri Lanka. Ideal family size was somewhat lower than wanted number of children especially among urban respondents and in all SES groups the differences between ideal and wanted number of children was 0.3. The findings of our samples thus in accordance with Stienborg's findings on the same factor. Ideal family size findings of his study (3.8 for rural) was the same for rural respondents in the present study. (rural 3.8) and (2.8 for urban). These results are identical due to the cognitive component of the attitude of our respondents and the various socio-economic status, were highly significant statistically between urban-rural respondents.

It should be understood that ideal family size refers to the number of children prefered, given ideal living conditions. The total number of children desired is in respect of the respondents current situation. If ideal family size is greater than wanted family size, then the latter is suppressed because of economic or other considerations. This, however, is different for urban and rural respondents which implies that they do not suppress their number of children for economic or other considerations. (see table 1.1) If the actual family size exceeds ideal family size, then children may have been desired for the sake of utility, which was salient for rural respondents in our study; The urban respondents did not record a difference here (actual 2.8, ideal 2.8), although the rural respondents did so. (actual 4.0, ideal 3.8). This reflects an utilitarian attitude towards children owing to different economic conditions. These findings were supported by the results discussed in earlier Studies.

Secondly, perhaps owing to the demands of modern life, in the value of children study, both urban and rural couples approved of contraception in general and almost all had a knowledge of family planning methods or modern techniques which they practice and follow.

Thirdly, the ideal number of children is based on a culturally sanctioned preference for male or female births. In such a situation parents are induced to go beyond their hypothetical limit in order to have a child or children of prefered sex. In Sri Lanka, as in most traditional societies, these appears to be a decided male preference. With higher percentage for rural respondents. This is confirmed by both psychological and sociological studies. The kinship group is based on an agnotic relationship. A set of brothers and their

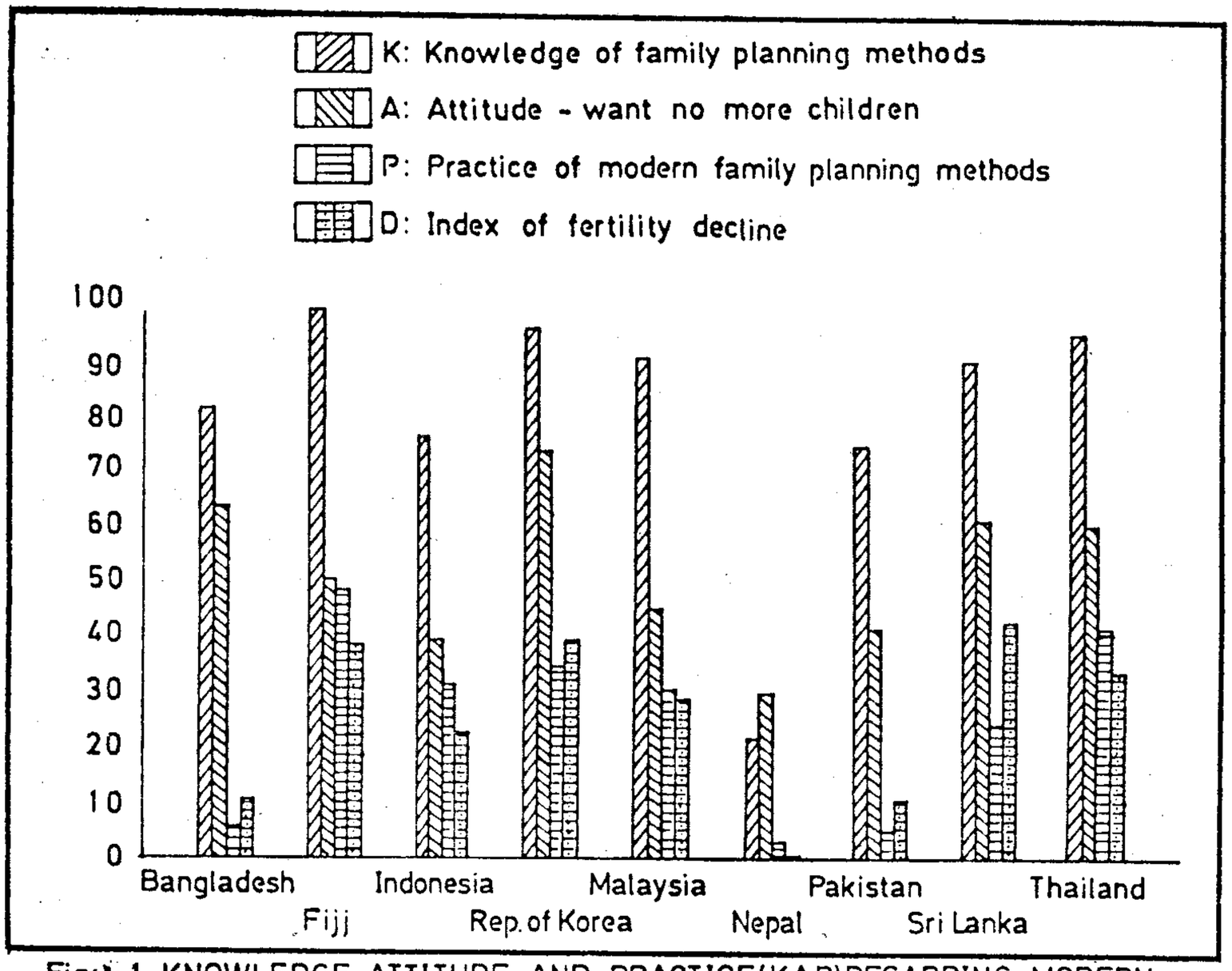

Fig: 7.1 KNOWLEDGE ATTITUDE AND PRACTICE(KAP)REGARDING MODERN FAMILY PLANNING METHODS AND INDEX OF FERTILITY DECLINE IN 9 COUNTRIES OF ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

progeny form the core of the kinship group. Obeysekara (1967) defines gama (village) as an estate, owned originally by a founder ancestor. Leach (1961) identifies variga of the north central province as patrilineage. Tambiah (1958) describes vasagama and gedara of the Kandyan area as inherited through the male line only. Males are required for the economic task of feudal, agrarian security, which was the cognition of rural respondents. Therefore rural respondents often prefered sons than daughters.

Finally, in both socio-economic groups there appears to prevail an equal standard of communication between husband and wife in decision making. This reflects a Sri Lankan cultural factors-the tendency of the wives to consult their husbands and arrive at a common decision on important matters. As Abeykoon (1980) declares, it is necessary to gurantee to both sexes the freedom to make a rational choice as regards family size, and to select the means for making this choice effectively.

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